

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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BUSSY. D'AMBOIS. 1603-4
George Chapman. 1559-1634

About the financial life of Chapman we know less than about his work. The leitmotif of the biography centers relentlessly on his poverty. True it is, rumor maintained that Chapman was a student at Oxford, though apparently he did not take a degree from Oxford. He marched on into thickets of financial difficulty. Ambitious to step upward into the nobility, Chapman took out a loan sufficient to cover his expenses as a page in training in the household of Sir Rafe Sadler Knight, a kind of vertical move frequently adopted by aspiring young men of quality. As could easily happen, however, Chapman was stepping into a trap. He never received the money due him for the loan, yet was subsequently and for much of his life, plagued by his creditors. Though his financial situation long remained a burden to him, Chapman did, apparently, manage to spend substantial years in Sir Sadler Knight's household and to those years he owed the work of his splendid Homeric translations, both of Homer and of various poems from the Latin--Ovid always the favorite.

In the early 1590's Chapman saw military action in the Lowlands and wrote-obscure classical reference-texts of pretty erudite classical reference. Chapman's major creative period was bedeviled by the search for an appropriate patron, and for the persistent poverty he seemed unable to escape. Chapman died in London in 1634, his tomb adorned by a monument by Inigo Jpnnes.

His legacy is of major body of poetic work, dashingly impressive both in its sense of the line--robust and lyrical, and susceptible, like Shakespeare's line, to outbursts of daring lyricism. His reference toward such as Donne and Herbert-the Metaphysicals--will remind us of his daring with metaphor and his unusual sensitivity to line endings and line breaks, the verbal of what was to become modern poetry.

PLOT

One hovers over the opening of the play, in which the author, of whom we know of his perennial poverty, declares

Fortune, not reason, rules the state of things
Reward goes backwards, honor on his head,
Who is not poor is monstrous, only need
Gives form and worth to every human seed...

A strong hint lurks here, of the forthcoming curve of the play, the so-called late mediaeval *De casibus* type of drama, concerned with the ups and downs of fate. And so the play will indeed advance, as its bustling main driver, the Faust-like Bussy, insults and jokes and mocks his way through the highest echelons of the French court, finding himself maligned, taken up into friendship, and ultimately ambushed out of the life he loved. Starting at point zero of poverty, where he began, Bussy is condemned by fortune to see the love of his life tortured away from him.

From the start, when the feisty Bussy falls into conversation with Monsieur, the brother of the French King, Henry III, Bussy banters and expostulates with a variety of highborn and sassy members of the King's inner circle. His first dramatic encounter with the King's inner circle occurs as he resists in heavy flirting with the wife of the duc de Guise. The duc and his two best friends challenge Bussy to a duel, with the result that all but Bussy are killed, a violent act of bravado, for which all expect the King to condemn Bussy.

This tacit permission, provided by the King, emboldens Bussy to persist in his efforts at conquest, in which he becomes reckless and daring. He starts in with the wife of the duc de Guise, with whom his

freshness leads to her husband's fury, and to a devastating duel. He then turns his charms on Tamyra, the Countess of Montsurry, with whom Bussy has any case been on touchy terms.. After many contorted inter- exchanges of letters and innuendoes, accusations and denials, Montsurry finds his jealousy and suspicion driven to the boiling point. He directly accuses Tamyra of making him a cuckold, and most cruelly, on the rack, forces her to write in her own blood to her lover, Bossy, with the view to setting up an assignation. The assignation is the point, of course, at which Bussy becomes the tool of fortune, and in the end meets his death by ambush.

THEMES

Jealousy abounds around the court of France, helping give rise to the widely spread view that the French court is far riper with lust and flirtation than the British court. Bussy is very forward in the address he makes to the wife of the duc de Guise, and the affected husbands are reliably infuriated by this behavior.

Cruelty is not rare in the present play, or for that matter in the culture of its time in Europe. We are still a couple of centuries prior to either the Age of Sentimentality in Letters or the Age of Animal Rights in social philosophy. In the present play we tend to blink at the vicious cruelty of Montsurry, to his wife Tamyra, or at the savageness of the ambush of Bussy. Yet whoever goes to sleep at night watching 'I Survived' or 'True Crime' will agree to the abundant cruelty of contemporary entertainment.

Bravado makes an occasional appearance in world drama. For the Greeks this trait of mind might cloak itself as hybris, an unseemly boldness of thought or action, like the rash irascibility Oedipus gives expression to in so boldly presenting himself as the appropriate authority figure for interpreting the mystery of the illness of Thebes. Similar outbreaks of bravoura-make their appearance in great world drama--in Marlowe's *Tamburlane*, or in Goethe's *Goetz von Berlichingen*.

CHARACTERS

Henry III, King of France; a tepid figure, but an interesting ally of Bussy. Sper aware of the corrupt morals of his own court.

Monsieur, the King's brother, and the initial entry point .for Bussy into the royal ambience. He himself has contempt for Bussy's roughshod impulsiveness.

The Duke of Guise, bitter opponent of Bussy after charging him with brassy flirtation with Mme de Guise.

Bussy d'Ambois, from the start an unemployed soldier, stuck in poverty; his life, and the dangers of his life, are turned around by a chance encounter with Monsieur, the King's brother. From that point on he is drawn into royal circles, where he lands on his feet, confident and aggressive. He fights a deadly duel to defend his rather reckless honor, risks some dangerous affaires at court, and is in the end ambushed by Monsieur and his hired assassins. On the whole a brash and bravado hero, who 'does It his way,' Renaissance style. It goes with that territory that the man undergoes many ups downs of fortune.

Montsurry, the Count. Husband of Tamyra, aroused by court rumor to suspicion oh his wife's fidelity--she haa a reputation for sleeping around--and increasingly doubtful of his own wife's fidelity. He asks his wife to write to Bussy--the prime suspect--asking for an assignation. (This will be a way of outing her true feelings.) When she refuses, he stabs her, then puts her on the rack, until she finally gives in--to outrageous torture. Living proof, this, of the depravity reigning in the French court.

Barrisor, Enemy of d'Ambois; killed by him in the duel around the duc de Guise and Madame.

Lanou, Enemy of d'Ambois

Pyrhot, Enemy of d'Ambois, slain in the six person duel.

Prisac, friend of D'Ambois, his ally in the fatal duel

Melynell, friend of D'Ambois, killed in duel.

Comolet, a friar; supporter of Bussy, who warns him of the danger of pursuing Tamyra.

Nunciuss; reports to the King the results of the murder of Bussy. Lavish in his praise of Bussy

Murderers; led by Montsurry. The actual murder, it seems resulted from a shot fired from an offstage balcony.

Behemoth, devil, a spirit called up by the friar, to determine what is transpiring between Bussy and Tamyra. The magical forces of this spirit are in the air of Elizabethan culture, and make up no small part of the audience's delight in such plays as this.

Umbra of friar; ghost who appears regularly onstage, passing whispered information back and forth between Bussy and Tamyra. Like dumb shows and masques, no small element in Elizabethan stagecraft.

Elenor, Duchess of Guise
Beaupre, niece to Elinor, scornful of Bussy
Annable, maid to Elenor

Pero, maid to Tamyra; reports to Monsieur and the duc de Guise that Bussy had visited Tamyra's chamber.

Charlotte, maid to Beaupre

Pyra, a court lady among the entourage, present when Bussy defies the duc de Guise. A rich habitat of minor players characterizes the early modern British tragedy.

Pages; regular accompanists of all the major players onstage.

EVENTS

One might say that the language of this play is the first event to tumble over the reader. From Bussy's initial declaration, about poverty and his own pride, the main character is on top of the language. Not even Shakespeare shows more confidence in turning all the resources of the iambic pentameter line to effect. In Chapman the blessings of a deep classical education undergird a powerful imagination.

*Man is a torche borne in the wind, a dreame
But of a shadow, summ'd with all his substance...*

picks up an archaic Greek formula and adds it brilliantly to the characterization of Bussy.

The fire of the present language throws us directly into confrontation, for as Bussy wanders into talk with Monsieur we see how self-willed is this impecunious soldier, how feisty he is in rejecting the offer of money, and how likely he is to prove rebellious and defiant at court.

Action is destined to assemble itself around this man, and so no wonder that his entrance into court life, he brushes against established macho interest groups. His habit of flirtation leads him directly into conflict and bad blood. A bloody duel, in which he proves his virtue--last man standing, out of six-- heralds him in unmistakably as a fighting member of the royal team.

Flirtation--or is it unlimited desire to possess? Bussy leads farther down the path of involvement, until he presses his luck too far, flirting with Tamyra, the lady of Monsieur himself. Monsieur's natural jealousy is driven through the roof, with disastrous consequences for all involved. The high drama of the play is thus constricted around a short period in the lives of a few intensely interrelated members of the court elite.

The death of Bussy by ambush follows directly on his lecherous behavior, and to the end of what moral point? Daring. Chapman is far too bold to settle for a prudent conclusion, that one should strive for the mean, even for the tepid, in life. After all, Bussy's attraction for us is in his daring. One might say that his ebullient effrontery is what makes Bussy a kind of directing image for human attention. The Nietzschean of Elizabethan drama is the powerful seal of interest for us, in this early modern expression of human vivacity.

To use the expression 'early modern' for the world stance of the literary material we are now reviewing heralds a challenge, to define the sense in which the modern of our last two centuries has advanced beyond the senses of identity and imagination the Renaissance allowed into existence.