

George Chapman's "Oedipus Complex": Intertextual Patterns in *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*

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I have elsewhere argued for a reading of George Chapman's *Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron* in which this two-part play is seen to be imbricated within an anti-absolutist discourse.¹ My claim was that while relaying a series of historical events, the text betrays its anxiety about the absolutist tendencies of contemporary statecraft in its excessive rhetoric and in tell-tale discontinuities. A close comparative exploration of the discourses behind the text and the text itself, activating the interpretive potential of these links, seemed to corroborate this claim.

The double play is a self-willed adaptation of *A General Inventorie of the Historie of France*, translated by Chapman's cousin, Edward Grimeston, from Jean de Serres's *Inventaire Général* and its continuation by Pierre Matthieu and P.V. Cayet (Boas 1903: 51–52). More specifically, it is a condensation and dramatization of the events that led up to the beheading of Charles de Gontaut, duc de Biron (1562–1602). Claiming that his heroic feats in the French Civil War had not been duly rewarded and that he was losing his position as saviour of the nation he had conference with the enemies of Henri IV, the French king. The first part, the *Conspiracy*, turns on Biron's first attempt at insurrection and ends with his being pardoned by the king. The *Tragedy*, the second part, deals with his renewed opposition against the regime, interpreted by the king as treason and punished with death.

Biron's story would have been of interest to a contemporary audience not only because it dealt with recent events across the Channel, events that would have seemed especially relevant to the British public due to the joint war effort against Spain in which Biron played a part, but perhaps mainly because it presented a close parallel to a political scandal

¹ See Florby 2004.

closer to home, the earl of Essex's abortive attempt at a palace revolt and his subsequent beheading.²

The textual traces of the earl of Essex and the duke of Biron are intertwined. They were both victims of a courtly culture in which the zeal for individual glory clashed violently with the monarch's demand for absolute allegiance, and where a process of exclusion and a narrowing down of the customary rights of noble families was sensed to be in progress.³ It is evident that both the immediate subject matter of the play, the fractious duke of Biron, and the host of associations to English affairs that could be activated had quite some topicality. Besides the Essex uprising, which is alluded to a couple of times in the text, the closing years of Elizabeth's reign and James's first few years as king had seen a number of other risings and attempts at opposition. Considering the instability of the period, the shifting alliances and allegiances, the religious and political dissension, the play's thematization of opposition and insurrection was timely.

The *Conspiracy* consists largely of a series of conferences and dialogues, in which the idea of loyalty is pitted against that of insurrection. Such debates and attempts at persuasion are of course what one might expect in a dramatization of the fate of the rebellious duke of Biron, but what complicates the response of the auditor/reader is that behind the lines another kind of debate is going on. The figure of Byron, as imported from the pages of Grimestone's *General Inventorie*, is not an immediately engaging character. Chapman had given added emphasis to Byron's achievements and weeded out some of the most negative details supplied by the chroniclers, who were fired by pro-Henrician zeal, but even in Chapman's more positive version of Byron the hero's inordinate self-esteem and his complaints about his slighted merit seem tiresome to a reader in the 21st century. To compose a historical drama, keeping to the unpropitious facts relayed by the French chroniclers, while at the same time persuading the reader/auditor of the urgency and weight of the events rendered, Chapman turns to the ancient world. Resonating beneath the speeches are lines from classical texts, most notably

² Glen Mynott discusses the French connection in "We must not be more true to kings / Than Kings are to their subjects": France and the politics of the ancient constitution in Chapman's Byron plays" (Mynott 1995). For the link with Essex see for instance Braunmuller 1992: 23-24, 128, 133.

³ For this process see for instance Stone 1965 and James 1986.

Plutarch's *Moralia*, Homer's *Iliad*, and Seneca's *Oedipus*, giving a definite direction to the historiographical material, where threads from French and English near contemporary history are intertwined. The result is often an inordinately complex whole, as will appear from the following discussion of a brief scene from the *Conspiracy*. We are presented with a "double" dialogue in which the surface text is enriched and complicated by the Plutarchian and Senecan intertexts. Connected with this scene, and dependant upon it, a couple of lines from the *Tragedy* will also be commented on.

Torn between loyalty to his king and a vision of a new future for himself and his country, Byron visits an astrologer to seek guidance. Such a session was actually reported by Grimeston, but the inspiration for the scene comes from other sources, Plutarch's *Moralia* and Seneca's *Oedipus*. The encounter (3.3.20-36) starts with two soliloquies, indicating two opposing positions.⁴ Byron vents his fears that his present position as the king's favourite will not last:

... prosperity is at highest degree
 The fount and handle of calamity:
 Like dust before a whirlwind those men fly
 That prostrate on the grounds of Fortune lie ...

There is a certain catchiness to the first two lines; the mixed metaphor is conducive to concentration and condensation. They sound like fragments of an old apophthegm, advocating classical moderation, but seem in fact to be inspired by Plutarch's essay, "Chance" (100A): "For not only is it true, as Demosthenes has said, that 'undeserved success becomes a source of misconception for fools,' but undeserved good fortune also becomes a source of misery for the unthinking."⁵ The context behind the words gives a cue to the speaker's mind; those who think, and, by extension, plan and act, need not fear for their future. The following two lines also come from Plutarch's "Chance." In this essay Plutarch forcefully refutes the power of fortune, claiming that certain events come about, not because of chance but because people either exercise or refrain from exercising qualities such as justice, control, decorum and sagacity.

⁴ References to plays are to line, and, as appropriate, act and scene numbers.

⁵ For a survey of Chapman's quotations and adaptations from Plutarch, see Schoell 1926.

His ironic repudiation of fortune, "... let us abandon all our reasoning processes and resign ourselves to chance, to be driven and carried, as dust or rubbish, by a violent wind, hither and thither" (97F), forms the background to Byron's words.

Byron's speech, then, marks his refusal to be fortune's slave. This may not seem a plausible frame of mind for somebody who is about to solicit the services of a fortune-teller, but besides announcing the presence of an intertext, the speech serves to signal a stance opposite to that of La Brosse, the astrologer, who advocates total acquiescence to fate. Man cannot change what is written in the stars:

O the strange difference 'twixt us and the stars:
 They work with inclinations strong and fatal
 And nothing know, and we know all their working
 And nought can do, or nothing can prevent!
 (3.3.5-8)

Tamyra, the representative of weakness in *Bussy D'Ambois*, Chapman's previous tragedy, had some lines not unlike the astrologer's:

It is not I, but urgent destiny,
 That (as great statesmen for their general end
 In politic justice, make poor men offend)
 Enforceth my offence to make it just:
 What shall weak Dames do, when th'whole work of Nature
 Hath a strong finger in each one of us?
 (3.1.43-48)

In Tamyra's speech in 3.1, from which the above lines are taken, Chapman had planted a couple of intertextual pointers alerting the knowledgeable auditor/reader to the speciousness of her reasoning.⁶ A similar submerged warning system seems to operate here. In contrast to the astrologer's denial of human effort, the lines from "Chance" give a brief glimpse of another view of life, according to which man's sagacity and forethought are more powerful than the workings of chance. Plutarch, then, has provided the philosophical background against which

⁶ See Florby 1982: 83-85 and 116 for an account of the intertextual warning signals, such as Tamyra's perversion of an exemplum from Plutarch's essay, "How a Man May Become Aware of His Progress in Virtue."

the two speeches must be considered in order for their full meaning to unfold.

In view of Chapman's associative method of composition, one wonders whether the astrologer's bitter conclusion that soulless creatures that 'in their nostrils, and like beasts expire' (3.3.15) are better off than those who know, may not also be inspired by the same essay. Plutarch's related train of thought goes in the opposite direction, however: man is elevated above the beasts by reason of his intelligence and forethought (98C-F).

The ensuing verbal duel between Byron and the astrologer, between the seeker and the possessor of hidden knowledge, echoes that at the beginning of Act 3 in Seneca's *Oedipus* (Cunliffe 1983: 96-97). Readers and audiences in the 21st century are probably more familiar with Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (*Oedipus Tyrannus*), one of the most famous plays in world literature. However, Seneca's influence on Renaissance drama was more immediate, and in the case of Chapman incontrovertible. Seneca's rendering of the ancient Greek theme closely parallels that of Sophocles, but there was also an earlier version of the legend with which Chapman was familiar.⁷

In the scene under discussion Oedipus, distressed by the plague afflicting his country and as yet unwitting of his having committed patricide and incest, the two crimes reserved for him by fate, tries to persuade the fearful Creon to speak. Creon has just returned from Tiresias' necromantic rites, enjoined by Oedipus with the purpose of finding out who has caused this "fierce onslaught of fate," the foul pestilence destroying the country. Creon hesitates to reveal the horrible truth, which the investigation has brought to light. In the play Creon lends his voice to La Brosse, the astrologer, "Fari iubes tacere quae suadet metus" becoming, more or less verbatim, "You bid me speak what fear bids me conceal." The sequel, "You'll rather wish you had been ignorant / Than be instructed in a thing so ill," is almost as close to the original, even if it is not as succinct as Creon's "Nescisse cupies nosse quae nimium expetis." Byron adopts Oedipus' "Iners malorum remedium ignorantia est," "Ignorance is an idle salve for ill," and goes on to threaten his interlocutor, who refuses to disclose what he knows, in terms

⁷ Homer's *Iliad* 23.679f., and *Odyssey* 11, 271ff. Chapman's translations of the two works are of course well known.

that far surpass their source in graphic cruelty. Oedipus promises to send Creon to Hades, “vile pro cunctis caput,”⁸ if he persists in his silence. Chapman’s daring and inventive translation seizes on *caput*, “head,” in the original apparently used metonymically for “person,” envisaging it split open and subjected to a grotesque investigation: “I’ll lay thy brain / Here scattered at my feet and seek in that / What safely thou must utter with thy tongue, / If thou deny it” (3.3.62-65). The astrologer’s reply, however, “Will you not allow me / To hold my peace? What less can I desire?” is again quite faithful to the original “*Tacere liceat. ulla libertas minor ... petitur?*”.

There is no mistaking the background. For a while Byron *is* Oedipus. Thus when the astrologer claims that his importunate visitor “hath lately done / An action that will make him lose his head,” his prediction gains authoritativeness from the grim subtext.

Self-control is a kind of intelligence, claims Plutarch in “Chance” 97E, but Byron, being told of his impending death, bursts into imprecations. Chapman resorts to the old extinction-of-the-world topos and to mythical horrors (3.3.79-93) to represent his protagonist’s initial lack of decorum. However, the blustering belongs to Grimeston’s Biron. As already intimated, Chapman’s conception of his hero is more complex and considerably more positive than that in the chronicle. The hysterical bully fades out, and once more the greatness of the man is allowed to shine forth:

I am a nobler substance than the stars
 And shall the baser overrule the better?
 Or are they better, since they are the bigger?
 I have a will and faculties of choice,
 To do or not to do, and reason why
 I do or not do this; the stars have none,
 They know not why they shine, more than this taper,
 Nor how they work, nor what. I’ll change my course,
 I’ll piece-meal pull the frame of all my thoughts
 And cast my will into another mould:
 And where are all your *Caput Algols* then?
 (3.3.109-19)

⁸ In the Loeb translation, “a cheap sacrifice for all.”

Byron's effort of will is in accordance with the precepts pseudo-Plutarch lays down in "On Fate."⁹ Here it is made to seem all the greater when seen against the shadow of Oedipus, at the same time a personification of self-deception and the ultimate example of the impossibility of circumventing one's fate. Seneca's hero is trapped by the inevitable. Laius, king of Thebes, had been warned by an oracle that he would be slain by his son. When his wife Jocasta bore him a son, Laius had him exposed in the wilderness. The infant, Oedipus, was found by a shepherd, and he was adopted by the king of Corinth, Polybus. Visiting Delphi, he was told by the oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Fleeing from his supposed parents Oedipus, like his father before him, made a futile effort to escape the decrees of destiny. In Seneca's tragedy the power of fate is absolute and man's attempts at intervention are pointless. When Oedipus at last has seen the truth and gouged out his eyes, the chorus comments: "By fate are we driven; yield ye to fate. No anxious cares can change the threads of its inevitable spindle. ... All things move on in an appointed path, and our first day fixed our last" (Seneca, 980ff.).

The concluding lines of Byron's soliloquy are adapted from "On Fate" 574A. In so far as the treatise presents an argument for free will, against the Stoic notion that "everything conforms to fate," this is a suitable conclusion to Byron's defiance of the stars, but, again, the lines have been coloured by their new medium:

There is no danger to a man that knows
 What life and death is; there's not any law
 Exceeds his knowledge, neither is it lawful
 That he should stoop to any other law.
 He goes before them, and commands them all,
 That to himself is a law rational.
 (3.3.140-45)

The source, a quotation from Plato's *Laws*, has it:

Since if ever any man, gifted by nature, born under a divine dispensation, should be capable of apprehending this, he would need no laws to govern him, for no law or ordinance is mightier than understanding, nor is it permitted that intelligence should

⁹ According to the Loeb edition of Plutarch's *Moralia* "On Fate" has mistakenly been ascribed to Plutarch (Plutarch 1960-69: 7: 303).

be subject or slave to aught; it must rather be ruler in all things, if it be genuine and really free in conformity with its nature.

What is a hypothesis in “On Fate” becomes an assertion in Byron’s mouth. The subjunctive mood is lost in the translation, and the indefinite “any man,” has become “a man,” referring to the speaker. According to pseudo-Plutarch “scientia,” knowledge, philosophy, should rule over all things; the leadership that Byron is talking about appears to be his own.

In Chapman’s oeuvre a great deal of eloquence is expended on the issue whether on occasion a man may be a law unto himself, or whether he must place his whole trust in codified law. The debate never reaches a satisfactory conclusion, and of course it could not. Within the scheme of the Byron plays the issue of subversion is once again held up for contemplation, now more obviously linked with what I see as a major concern in Chapman’s tragedies, the conflict between an absolute monarchy and the old warrior nobility, represented in the text by the duke of Byron and allusively by the earl of Essex. The above passage from “On Fate” and its adaptation in the *Conspiracy* are, however, interesting not only from the point of view of legality or power relations. In the argument in “On Fate” the concept of law includes fate, which is seen as a kind of ordinance. When Byron speaks of his refusal to stoop to any law he is, by extension, refusing to give in to fate. Hence the two essays clinch the debate on fate that is conducted at an intertextual level.

While the adaptations from *Oedipus* speak of the utter uselessness of fighting against fate the other two underlying texts, “Chance” and “On Fate,” help to build up the opposite side of the argument, arguing for man’s agency and against astrological determinism. Together they create a special kind of tension, submerged under the surface text, influencing the response called forth by the dramatic events.

This erudite intertextual debate in which Plutarch is pitted against Seneca, free will and responsibility against the power of fate and forces mightier than man, is not merely a matter of antique ornamentation. That it was an issue with which a historian might be engaged even at the beginning of the 17th century is demonstrated by Sir Walter Raleigh. His universal history addresses the problem of virtue and fortune variously, even giving a brief survey of the history of the concept of fate. F. Smith Fussner comments:

Raleigh attempted to steer "the middle course" in discussing the paradox of God's foreknowledge and man's responsibility. Only his literary skill kept him from running aground on logical sandbars. ... In his digression on astrology he identified fate with the commonplace Elizabethan notion that the stars incline but do not compel the will. The condition of man and the course of his life on earth were plotted out for him, although he was free to choose another, better course (Fussner 1962: 198).

There is yet another aspect to the above scene in which Chapman has his hero speak in the voice of Oedipus. The immediate use to which the material is put is obviously to contribute to the running discussion of fortune versus virtue and the possibility of agency, a discussion that served to mediate between contemporary contingencies and classical values. At the same time the adaptation of Seneca's dialogue gives an added sense of dark foreboding. However, an aspect that should also be mentioned as it is important for the interpretation of this difficult play is the intertextual dynamic, the associations brought into play by Oedipus. He is not only a royal figure, he is a true hero. He guessed the riddle of the Sphinx, thus saving his people from her ravages. Oedipus is "great-souled"; it is Tiresias who addresses him with this epithet (Seneca, 294). He is also one in a line of great heroes whose valour or qualities as leaders of men are called up allusively and with whom Byron is indirectly compared throughout the double play. Thus, for instance, when Byron is first introduced in the Prologue, a Homeric hero, Diomedes, comes to mind. Byron is also associated with Hercules, the heroic benefactor of mankind. When the protagonist first enters in the play proper, it is the words of Hercules in Seneca's *Hercules furens* we are hearing. The *Iliad* tells us that Diomedes' rage led to impious deeds. Hercules slew his wife and children in his fury, which was caused by Juno. With these ill-boding intertexts as a background Byron's rebellion stands out as the ill-fated action of a great-souled man; this, then, is the context in which we should contemplate the Oedipus analogy.

In Seneca's tragedy the search for the truth is temporarily interrupted by a dithyramic strain in praise of Bacchus. As Tiresias and Creon leave the stage to perform the necromantic rites, the people's hymn calls up vernal scenes, frenzied bacchanals and strange metamorphoses in celebration of the god. The chorus finishes with a promise to worship him

[w]hile the bright stars of the ancient heavens shall run in their courses; while the ocean shall encircle the imprisoned earth with its waters; while the full moon shall gather again her lost radiance; while the Day Star shall herald the dawn of the morning and while the lofty Bears shall know naught of caerulean Nereus ... (Seneca, 504ff.).

Forming an intratextual link between the two parts of the double play, these lines are, somewhat surprisingly, alluded to in a speech by King Henry in the *Tragedy* 4.2.165-71:

It is resolved; a work shall now be done
Which, while learn'd Atlas shall with stars be crowned,
While th'Ocean walks in storms his wavy round,
While moons at full repair their broken rings,
While Lucifer foreshows Aurora's springs,
And Arctos sticks above the earth unmoved,
Shall make my realm be blest, and me beloved.

It is as if Henry had wandered out of the play and into an antique Bacchus festival. The lines are obviously not meant to contribute to our understanding of Henry's doings; instead they work on the reader in the same way as a dissonant musical theme can affect a cinema-goer. To those familiar with Seneca's tragedy the reappearance of the Oedipus theme here is disquieting.

In Seneca the choral passage that has been transposed and embedded within Henry's speech directly precedes the dialogue where Oedipus, as yet unwitting of the fact that he has slain his father and married his own mother, browbeats Creon—the dialogue on which Chapman modelled the exchange between Byron and the astrologer in the *Conspiracy*. Chapman has come back to the pages in Seneca that he had used to give a sense of dark foreboding in the preceding play to deploy their potential for horror once again. The reminder of Oedipus' fate spells out a premonition of fearful events.

The contrast between the paean to Bacchus and the awful knowledge of Oedipus' transgressions, which Creon is now in possession of, is reflected in the contrast that colours 4.4.165ff. in the *Tragedy*; the unmoved majesty of all the nightly heavenly manifestations is played off against the oncoming catastrophe.

Some fifty lines later Chapman again comes back to the same scene in *Oedipus*. Here it is Byron who addresses King Henry, using a couple of lines of Creon's. Henry has urged him to confess to having conferred

with the enemy, and Byron responds: "Kings hate to hear what they command men speak ... Where medicines loathe, it irks men to be healed" (4.4.226-28). The translation is so close that there can be no mistaking of the provenance of the words, but the contexts are patently different. In Seneca the still unknowing Oedipus urges Creon to reveal who had committed the heinous sins laying the kingdom waste. Creon, who is now aware of Oedipus' guilt, realizes that the sins must be expiated, but because he is frightened of Oedipus' reaction he holds back and says, "Kings hate the words whose speaking they compel" (Seneca, 520). King Henry, on the other hand, already knows about Byron's plot and has even promised to pardon Byron upon confessing. Byron shows no sense of wrongdoing but speaks of healing, implying that his rebellion is the bitter medicine that might make Henry leave the decadent ways of peace.

Discussing the effect of the insertions from Oedipus we have looked at factors such as weight, ominousness, and links between the *Conspiracy* and the *Tragedy*. Another effect of the surfacing of Seneca's drama in this context is, I submit, a reinforcing of the sense of illicit sexuality permeating Act 4. In the immediate context of the *Tragedy* it is the tragic sexual entanglement, the dark sense of sin, that is of relevance. Bursting through Henry's determined lines in 4.2.165-71, the transposed Senecan passage is a reminder of unspeakable relationships; it infuses the stately speech with horror. The intertextual evocation of illicit desire infiltrates the whole scene, and alerts us to how the whole of Act 4 is shot through with suggestive double entendres, ambivalent references to sports, pleasure, service, yielding and undoing.¹⁰ With its rash of references to unseemly desires Act 4 serves to criticize the sexual liberty at Henry's court and, by extension, homoerotic practices at King James's court. But these are themes that I have developed elsewhere; going further into the play's criticism of the present regime, submerged beneath the lines, would take us too far.

Moulding near contemporary history into a tragedy Chapman resorts to a dramaturgy that does not rely on suspense or on a forceful sequencing of narrative elements. The characters act on and negotiate with each other and with the auditor/reader, a negotiation which is

¹⁰ For Shakespeare's use of these and similar terms, see for instance Partridge 1968 or Colman 1974.

complicated by the dialogue between text and intertexts, or, at times, between different intertexts, and which is concluded only by the end of the play.

In the present context my concern has been to draw attention to the sense of process, the contrasting stances that complicate an interpretation of Chapman's *Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*. This study of his brief transpositions from Seneca's *Oedipus* can only give an idea of the dynamic interaction of positions and ideologies in the double play, whether these are actually articulated in the lines spoken by the actors or actualized by the intertexts. A line from Lever's book on Jacobean tragedy comes to mind: "This is a drama of adversity and stance, not of character and destiny" (1971: 10).

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