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"A Plague Will Come:" Art, Rape, and Venereal Disease in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*

The National Gallery, London, possesses a fascinating and disturbing painting by the official court painter to the Medici, Bronzino, which has for long presented a puzzle for interpreters and has been variously explicated. The *Allegory of Venus with Cupid* is believed to be a painting described and interpreted by Vasari in his *Lives of the most excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors* and to have been sent originally to France from Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Florence, as a present for Francois I. If it is, there is some indication that it was no longer in France in 1625. Gould states that it does not figure in the lists of paintings at Fontainebleau of 1625 or 1642, or in the *Inventoire Générale* of 1709, and there is no certainty about the painting's whereabouts until the mid-eighteenth century when it would appear to have been in the collection of Lord Spencer at Althorp.[1] It is possible the painting was already in England in the early seventeenth century, and may have been brought over with Henrietta Maria on her marriage to Charles I. This was also a time when the royal collection was being built up and when great courtiers, such as James I's favourites, Robert Carr, Earl of

Somerset, and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, became art collectors as an expression of their magnificence and power.

In the picture, naked figures of Cupid and Venus embrace and are about to kiss, as lovers rather than as mother and son it would appear, especially as Cupid, portrayed as adolescent rather than infant, has his hand prominently displayed on Venus's left breast. There is a lubricious allure in the display and postures of the naked bodies, not simply in the frontal presentation of the goddess but also in the homo-eroticism of Cupid's pose, buttocks provocatively thrust out at one side of the painting. At the other side a laughing child, sometimes interpreted as Foolish Pleasure, is shown about to scatter rose petals over the embracing couple. The eye is

level the play is also concerned with the figures of Venus and Cupid, and may have connections with the tradition of the "contaminating and polluting Venus," which Margaret Healy alludes to in her interpretation of the painting.

It was a common Renaissance procedure to allegorise classical myths to provide them with a moral interpretation, and thus to neutralise the subversive potential of stories from a pre-Christian era of sexual freedom. Bronzino's painting of *Venus and Cupid* is unusual in that it very explicitly contains within itself, through the mixture of naked classical figures with clothed personifications from a later morality tradition, an horrific warning about the consequences of the highly alluring physical behaviour of the foregrounded goddess and her son. Bronzino provides alternative perspectives within the same painting, erotic and moral, Classical and Christian; it may be read as a feast of Cupid or a vision of sin. It is also a prominent characteristic of Middleton's art that he offers the audience comparative perspectives, and this is certainly the case in *Women Beware Women.*

It is not simply in the "rape in the picture gallery scene," when Bianca is violated by the Duke, that allusion to painting and iconographic tradition is made.[6] Court art, both painting and masque, is a central concern of this anti-court play. But Act Two scene two is a good place to start a fuller investigation of the subject. In this scene Guardiano suggests that, while the Mother and Livia play chess, he should show Bianca the rooms and pictures. This is a means of bringing Bianca to the Duke, but it is evident that this is no fabricated excuse to take the young woman to another part of the house for Livia does indeed have a fine collection of paintings which visitors would be shown. Bianca and Guardiano's lines later in the scene indicate the quality of the collection:

Trust me, sir,
Mine eye ne'er met with fairer ornaments.
Guard. Nay, livelier, I'm persuaded, neither Florence
Nor Venice can produce.
(2.2.310-13)[7]

Whatever the original intentions of the artists who painted the "naked pictures" in Livia's gallery, Guardiano and Livia use them as a kind of pornography to condition Bianca into being receptive to, and compliant with, the will of the ruler. Guardiano says:

Yet to prepare her stomach by degrees
To Cupid's feast, because I saw 'twas queasy,
I showed her naked pictures by the way:
A bit to stay the appetite.
(2.2.401-04)

This statement suggests that the paintings in Livia's gallery present favourite mythological themes of the Renaissance such as those associated with Venus, Cupid, Mars, and Adonis, and possibly the rape of Lucretia, rather than religious themes. Guardiano tells Bianca that there is "a better piece / Yet than all these," and leaves her to the encounter with the Duke. His description of the ruler as a "better piece" suggests another painting for her to view so that the Duke becomes like one of the mythological gods stepping out from a picture on Livia's wall to possess the mortal woman. Indeed, during the "rape" he attempts to transform her into a figure from a painting, to idealise and construct her as a goddess, as if he would draw her back into the frame with him:

thou seem'st to me
A creature so composed of gentleness,
And delicate meekness—such as bless the faces
Of figures that are drawn for goddesses
And makes art proud to look upon her work.
(2.2.339-43)

Livia's final words in the "rape" scene draw attention to this deification, to the transformation from mortal woman to goddess, in her reference to nectar:

> Sin tastes at the first draught like wormwood water,
> But drunk again, 'tis nectar ever after.
> (2.2.476-7)

The point is picked up in the banquet scene which follows in the next act. The Duke proposes a toast "To the best beauty at this day in Florence," and tells Bianca that she should not drink to herself. Banteringly Bianca accuses him of wanting to stop her drinking, and he responds:

> Nay, then I will not offend Venus so much,
> Let Bacchus seek his 'mends in another court.
> Here's to thyself, Bianca.
> (3.3.84-86)

The Duke's refusal to "offend Venus" is also a refusal to offend Bianca by preventing her from drinking, so the lines directly link the two, and suggest Bianca as goddess, an idea which is reinforced a few lines later by the Duke:

> Methinks there is no spirit amongst us, gallants,
> But what divinely sparkles from the eyes
> Of bright Bianca; we sat all in darkness,
> But for that splendour.
> (3.3.97-100)[8]

Venus featured more than any other female figure in Renaissance mythological painting, and, as the inspirer of love in the Duke, Bianca as a goddess would have to be a Venus.[9]

That Bianca is made a Venus figure is perhaps not too controversial a suggestion to make, but to suggest that the fifty-five year old Duke could have any connection with Cupid might seem to be straining credulity too far. However, further

study of the text and iconographic traditions of the representation of Cupid make it possible to advance such a suggestion. When Guardiano in his aside tells how he prepared Bianca for her unexpected encounter with the Duke by showing her "naked pictures," he describes Bianca's rape as "Cupid's feast," a phrase which actually sounds as if it could be the title of a Renaissance painting. Such a description is that of the male gaze: Bianca has certainly not been "feasting" but the Duke has. It might at first seem fanciful in the extreme to suggest that he could be associated with Cupid, even if in the final scene of the play he is actually referred to as *Amor* when Ganymede, with the cups of wine for the Cardinal and the Duke, says, "Hebe, give that to innocence, I this to love" (5.2.58). As she descends from the picture gallery, Bianca gives a grotesque description of her ravisher:

> Now bless me from a blasting; I saw that now
> Fearful for any woman's eye to look on.
> Infectious mists and mildews hang at's eyes,
> The weather of a doomsday dwells upon him.
> (2.2.420-23)

This could not seem further in its diabolic suggestion from the familiar figure of the young Cupid. However, iconographic traditions suggest the possibility of connection. Panofsky indicates that at an early stage

eyes upon his body as my grey mare hath dapples.... This monster sat like a hangman upon a pair of gallows." There follow verses which tell how painters and poets "fill the world with strange but vain conceits," one of which is that of Cupid as young and blind. The verses go on to present him as half man and half beast:

> Thus half a man, with man he daily haunts,
> Cloth'd in the shape which soonest may deceive:
> Thus half a beast, each beastly vice he plants,
> In those weak hearts that his advice receive.
> He prowls each place still in new colours decked,
> Sucking one's ill, another to infect.
>
> To narrow breasts, he comes all wrapped in gain:
> To swelling hearts, he shines in honour's fire:
> To open eyes, all beauties he doth rain;
> Creeping to each with flattering of desire.
> But for that love is worst which rules the eyes,
> Thereon his name, there his chief triumph lies.[11]

This is a Cupid closer to Bianca's vision of the Duke. The mists which hang about his eyes bear a relationship to the bandage signifying blindness on images of Cupid, and also indicate iconographic links between Love and Error, a figure in Middleton's 1613 mayoral pageant, *The Triumphs of Truth*, the description of whom is close to Bianca's description of the Duke.[12] The demonic Cupid of this particular episode in *Arcadia* is linked to mediaeval pictures of the Devil, and stands in stark contrast to Renaissance images of the mischievous cherub or the handsome young god of Neoplatonism, and it may well be that Middleton is drawing just such a contrast between the court painting, the "better piece," from which the Duke steps and which makes him a Jove figure descending to make love to a human woman, transforming her into a goddess who may sit by his side, and the reality of the base rapist who will destroy her, which is what Bianca sees.

Such an effect is mirrored by the court masque in the last scene in which courtiers play mythological characters ostensibly in celebration of love in a work of art, which actually masks the reality of court faction, the lusts and vengeful hatreds that will destroy them all. Bianca in her final moments tries to construct the stage-picture as a *liebestod*, a final Cupid's feast, as she drinks the poisoned cup:

> Pride, greatness, honours, beauty, youth, ambition—
> You must all down together; there's no help for 't.
> Yet this my gladness is, that I remove,
> Tasting the same death in a cup of love.
> (5.2.216-19)

The Cardinal's lines, which follow immediately, however, construct the stage picture from a different perspective, as a Vision of Sin:

> Sin, what thou art these ruins show too piteously.
> Two kings on one throne cannot sit together,
> But one must needs down, for his title's wrong:
> So where lust reigns, that prince cannot rule long.
> (5.2.222-25)

The alternative realities presented in these closing moments remind us of the alternative realities in Bronzino's *Allegory of Venus with Cupid*, but, if Middleton's play5.2(l)TjT,3(, b,0019 Twn(l)TjT,3(, b))Tj-CtT4 1 (, c)4T*0.0006eJ.00rsinaoeg rn1.1(wiljT,3(, b,0019

leprous, why should I / Preserve that fair that caused the leprosy?" Leprosy is a familiar metaphor in the period for moral foulness, and is used elsewhere in the play (4.3.17; 5.2.205), so it does not constitute a direct reference to venereal disease. What it does is to increase the number of references to disease in the text which are set in direct contrast to the fleshly and indulgent pleasures of the court.

A direct reference to syphilis occurs in a scene between the Ward and Sordido when reference is made to one of its effects, to cause the bone structure of the nose to collapse:

> *Sord.* And for her nose, 'tis of a very good last.
> *Ward*. I have known as good as that has not lasted a year though.
> (3.4.74-5)

In *The Changeling* Middleton and Rowley use the double plot structure to make cross references: the literal madness of the sub-plot scenes reflects in comic mode the metaphorical moral madness of the tragic main plot. Direct reference to syphilis in this comic scene from *Women Beware Women* may well be placed to alert the audience to less explicit reference in the other plot. An important image of venereal disease occurs when Leantio returns home at the end of the week earlier in Act Three. He has a speech anticipating a joyful reunion with Bianca in which he contrasts honest wedlock and a pure wife with the perils of consorting with "a glorious dangerous strumpet," of whom he says:

> I do liken straight
> Her beautified body to a goodly temple
> That's built on vaults where carcasses lie rotting;
> (3.2.16-18)

there is clear association here of the prostitute with syphilis, the image of the temple vaults suggesting the vagina as a source of disease and death.

In Act Four scene one the association of the strumpet with disease is picked up and a context is created which signals the subject of syphilis to an audience. It begins with an encounter between Leantio and Bianca, he richly-dressed now that he is Livia's stallion, she in her finery as the Duke's mistress. As they exchange insults, the dialogue is full of sexual innuendo, and Leantio calls Bianca "a whore," "An

image may be suggestive of the spread of syphilitic contagion. When in 1615-1616 the Earl and Countess of Somerset and their accomplices were put on trial for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, the Countess, Frances Howard, was mocked and reviled in popular pamphlets and verses as giving her lovers syphilis. In the following verses, where she is described as a "lusty filly" ridden by Somerset, the connection of syphilis and fire is explicit:

> Resty she is; her tail was burn'd
> Come listen to me, and you shall hear
> With a hot iron cramm'd, as butter churn'd
> To serve her turn for other gear.
>
> Her dock and heels have mangie and scratches,
> Come listen to me and you shall hear
> Her tinderbox is full of French matches
> To serve to burn some other's gear.[14]

Metaphorical associations of fire with syphilis in this period mean that the Cardinal's fire image suggests another warning of contagion like Leantio's "A plague will come."

Despite a gap of nearly a hundred years, Middleton's play and Bronzino's painting share a common cultural aesthetic context and common techniques. Their relation to each other is not immediately obvious, but once the underlying references to Venus and Cupid, together with concerns about whoredom and disease, are recognised in the play, connections becomes clearer. Once they are recognised another point of close relation becomes immediately obvious. Livia, the procuress and underminer of marriage, in Middleton's play is clearly the dramatic embodiment of the figure of the woman in the painting who appears between the lovers and the laughing child holding out a honeycomb to them, but whose body, revealed on the other side of the child, is reptilian with a sting in its tail. This figure has been

interpreted as Deceit, or with biblical authority, as Whoredom, and Livia is a perfect representative of both. What characterises her is a smiling face, an appearance of concern for others and a preparedness to help them, while all the time she is actually serving her own ends and bringing them to destruction by encouraging immoral behaviour. A further connection might also be detected in the painting's suggestion of incest, and the incestuous second plot of the play.

The connections between the two works raise tantalising questions about whether Middleton had actually seen the painting, whether it was in England when he wrote his play and he knew of it, or whether it was a painting that was still in France but known perhaps because of the rather shocking nature of its subject matter. The evidence does not exist to answer such questions. What can be said is that *Women Beware Women* shows knowledge by the writer of iconographic traditions, aesthetic contexts, and a concern with court art at a time when many paintings were being brought into England for the royal collection and for those of great courtiers such as Arundel, Somerset, and Buckingham.

Notes

1

Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939; repr. Harper & Row, 1972), 86-91; C. Hope, "Bronzino's Allegory in the National Gallery," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982).

[4] J. F. Conway, "Syphilis and Bronzino's London Allegory," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1986), 250-55.

[5] Margaret Healy, "Bronzino's London *Allegory*," *The Oxford Art Journal* 20.1 (1997), 3-11.

[6] A. A. Bromham, "*Women Beware Women*, Danae, and Iconographic Tradition," forthcoming *Notes and Queries*, March 2003.

[7] Mention of Florence and Venice is appropriate to the play as the action takes place in the former city and Bianca had come from Venice, but these were the two main centres for Renaissance painting. All quotations from *Women Beware Women* are taken from the Revels edition, edited by J. R. Mulryne (London: Methuen, 1975).

[8] These lines also express the Neoplatonic idea of enlightenment through contemplation of woman whose beauty provides the viewer with a glimpse of divine or ideal beauty.

[9] Braunmuller indicates that the group of Italian pictures of which Somerset was due to take delivery at the time of his fall, included a Bacchus and Venus, and Titian's "molto raro" Venus, and that in the inventory of the Earl's possessions drawn up by order of Lord Treasurer Howard, the list for "the Bowling ally" alone includes paintings of Venus and Cupid, Venus and Adonis, and Bacchus, Ceres and Venus. See A. R. Braunmuller, "Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, as collector and patron," in Linda

[13] There is a significant piece of verbal reiteration in the Cardinal's fire image, which links it directly with Bianca and with the idea of the strumpet who appears beautiful to the view but brings death to her lover. He uses the noun "sparkles" ("The sparkles fly through cities") to denote the contagious nature of sin, and to suggest hell-fire. Earlier the word has been used as a verb by the Duke in connection with Bianca to suggest divine beauty: "what divinely sparkles from the eyes / Of bright Bianca" (3.3.98-99). The word is used again by the Duke in connection with Bianca in the last scene: "A goodness set in greatness; how it sparkles / Afar off, like pure diamonds set in gold" (5.2.8-9).

[14] Quoted by Alastair Bellany in *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 162.