

Golden foolery

George Chapman (c.1559–1634) is something of an enigma. Serious, learned and prolific, he is best known for his translations of Homer, but he also wrote a considerable body of verse and several plays. Unlucky with some of the patrons he attracted, and frequently impoverished, he served in the Low Countries and spent time in prison for debt. But Chapman was also successful and respected by his peers, his tragedies putting the terrifying drama of recent French history on the stage and his comedies, notably *Eastward Ho!*, written with Ben Jonson and John Marston, attracting attention for their biting satire.

Chapman's poetry is notoriously difficult and challenging, which is why he is sometimes touted as the rival poet in Shakespeare's sonnets, while his interest in esoteric philosophy and neo-Platonic thinking has led to speculation that he was a member of the atheistic "School of Night", centred on Walter Raleigh. (There is not much evidence that they knew each other, apart from a dedicatory poem that Chapman wrote for Raleigh's account of his voyage to Guiana.) It is hard to work out how serious Chapman's philosophical speculations are. Does his poetry point us towards intimations of the divine through his belief in poetic fury and *enargia*, as his meticulous and dutiful editor, Zenón Luis-Martínez, argues? Or are his works elaborate and cunning explorations of poetic language, replete with irony, making him a "metaphysical" poet?

The Shadow of the Night was Chapman's first published poem. Like Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, it balances two contrasting states: the thoughts and beliefs of the goddess of the melancholy night in "Hymnus in Noctem"; and the power of the moon in "Hymnus in Cynthiam", which is also an elaborate paean to Elizabeth I. The poems can be read as works that are aimed at the occult interests of Chapman's patron, Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, alongside Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and Thomas Nashe's *The Terrors of the Night*, as the introduction suggests. Like those works, Chapman's poems contain more than a hint of humour: after all, Lord Strange was the dedicatee of Nashe's absurd pornographic poem *The Choice of Valentines*, which contains its

fair share of jokes about the body. Invoking the “living spirits” to shun light and live in the darkness with “ghosts, fiends, monsters”, and “Revive the dead, and make the living die / In ruth and terror of your torture”, Chapman asks them to Kneel then with me, fall work-like on the ground,
And from th’infectious dunghill of this round,
From men’s brass wits and golden foolery,
Weep, weep your souls into felicity[.]

Chapman, ever alive to the significance of writing poetry, is surely joking here. The notion that great, divinely inspired art rises out of a pile of excrement (as many social historians claim, a common sight in Elizabethan England), and transforms mediocre poetry into a manifestation of heavenly bliss, is hard to take at face value.

He certainly has an eye for striking absurdities. His address to his fellow poet Matthew Roydon that prefaces *Ovid’s Banquet of Sense* compares poor judgement to wandering “passportless men” who are not regulated enough to understand “the divine discipline of poetry”. The long poem narrates Ovid’s affair with Julia leading up to the *Ars Amatoria*, and his subsequent banishment. In the final stanza, we are told that “Ovid well knew there was much more intended, / With whose omission none must be offended”. The poem thus asks readers to wonder whether Ovid’s erotic experiences point him to higher forms of love or whether it is the actual experiences that matter, rather than the elaborate justification for them. Is this a banquet of the senses or does the feast point us to a truer form of desire? Ovid is here made to muse, “She is a sweet Elysium for the sense, / And nature doth not sensual gifts infuse / But that with sense she still intends their use”. Should we rely on our sense experience, or is Ovid on a journey to enlightenment? Chapman may have been interested in the esoteric and the occult, but I suspect that they cannot have bound and defined his imagination.

This is an extraordinarily detailed and helpful edition with a long introduction, well-judged summaries of sections of the poem, and full notes. Luis-Martínez argues throughout that Chapman is a convinced neo-Platonist whose work is designed to provide a window to the heavens. One does not have to share this reading of Chapman's poetry to find the apparatus enlightening and to be grateful to such a diligent editor.

Andrew Hadfield's recent books include John Donne: In the shadow of religion and Literature and Class, both 2021.

