

George Chapman

1559/1560-1634

For a biography of Chapman, a discussion of his other works, and selections from his other poetry and translations, see the print anthology, pp. 1163-93.

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from *Ovid's Banquet of Sense*

A Coronet for His Mistress Philosophy¹

1
Muses that sing love's sensual empery,²
And lovers kindling your enraged fires
At Cupid's bonfires burning in the eye,
Blown with the empty breath of vain desires,
5 You that prefer the painted cabinet
Before the wealthy jewels it doth store ye,³
That all your joys in dying figures set,
And stain the living substance of your glory:
Abjure those joys, abhor their memory,
10 And let my love the honoured subject be
Of love and honour's complete history;
Your eyes were never yet let in to see
The majesty and riches of the mind,
But dwell in darkness; for your god is blind.⁴

¹ A coronet (corona or crown) of sonnets is a sequence in which each sonnet is linked to the next by using the last line of the previous sonnet as the first line of the next one. The last sonnet of the sequence contains a final line which repeats the first line of the first sonnet. The genre's name suggests its purpose and content: to praise and thus crown the perfections of the individual addressed. As a crown or circlet it also represents the circle, a favourite Neoplatonic image of perfection and wholeness. For the critical disagreement over the relationship between "Coronet" and "Ovid's Banquet of Sense," compare the readings by Spivak, pp. 38-39; Kermode, pp. 84-115; Myers, pp. 192-206; MacLure, pp. 52-59; and Gless, pp. 21-42.

² *empy* absolute dominion, power.

³ *You that prefer the painted cabinet ... ye* i.e., you that prefer the physical beauties of the body (the "painted cabinet") to its inner, spiritual treasures ("the wealthy jewels" contained in this cabinet).

⁴ Traditionally, Cupid is depicted as blindfolded.

3

Love flows not from my liver but her living,⁵
From whence all stings to perfect love are darted,
All pow'r and thought of prideful lust depriving;
Her life so pure and she so spotless-hearted,
5 In whom sits beauty with so firm a brow
That age, nor care, nor torment can contract it;
Heaven's glories shining there do stuff allow,
And virtue's constant graces do compact it.⁶
Her mind (the beam of God) draws in the fires
10 Of her chaste eyes from all earth's tempting fuel,
Which upward lifts the looks of her desires
And makes each precious thought in her a jewel,
And as huge fires compressed more proudly
flame
So her close beauties further blaze⁷ her fame.

4

So her close beauties further blaze her fame,
When from the world into herself reflected
She lets her (shameless) glory in her shame.
Content for Heav'n to be of earth rejected,
5 She thus depressed knocks at Olympus⁸ gate,
And in th'untainted temple of her heart
Doth the divorceless nuptials celebrate
Twixt God and her; where love's profaned dart
Feeds the chaste flames of Hymen's firmament,

⁵ The liver was thought the centre and origin of the passions, particularly passionate love.

⁶ *Heaven's ... stuff allow ... compact it* i.e., Heaven's glories bestow or grant the substance or material (whether corporeal or incorporeal) of which philosophy's beauty is made.

⁷ *close* enclosed, confined; *blaze* proclaim, announce, spread abroad.

⁸ *Olympus* the home of the classical gods.

10 Wherein she sacrificeth, for her part,
The robes, looks, deeds, desires and whole
descent
Of female natures built in shops of art:¹
Virtue is both the merit and reward
Of her removed and soul-infused regard.

6

Her look doth promise and her life assure
A right line, forcing a rebateless point,
In her high deeds, through every thing obscure
To full perfection;² not the weak disjoint
5 Of female humours, nor the protean rages
Of pied-faced fashion, that doth shrink and swell,³
Working⁴ poor men like waxen images
And makes them apish⁵ strangers where they dwell,
Can alter her; titles of primacy,⁶
10 Courtship of antic jestures,⁷ brainless jests,
Blood without soul of false nobility,
Nor any folly that the world infests
Can alter her who with her constant guises⁸
To living virtues turns the deadly vices.

¹ *Wherein ... art* i.e., she sacrifices all those beautifying arts which women engage in.

² *Her look doth promise ... full perfection* This opening clause refers to Mistress Philosophy's undeviating dedication to the virtues that define her. We still refer to such a dedication as a "straight (right) line" (e.g., an individual of virtuous life is said "to walk the straight and narrow"). Philosophy's life does not just "assure a right line," but this line (i.e., her example, specifically her "high deeds") is imagined as having a sharp and penetrating tip: the "rebateless point," one that is unstoppable, but also incapable of being dulled or blunted. This point makes its way through all obstacles (here, the "obscure" things, the vices that the poem goes on to detail in ll.4-12). "Point" also refers obliquely to the weapon that philosophy most characteristically employs: the point(s) of an argument.

³ *Of female humours ... swell* whims, fancies, caprices; *protean* changeable. *pied-faced* stupid.

⁴ *Working* fashioning, moulding, working on.

⁵ *apish* fantastically foolish, affected, trifling; imitative.

⁶ *primacy* pre-eminence, precedence, superiority.

⁷ *antic* grotesque, bizarre, uncouthly ludicrous; *jestures* gestures (perhaps with a visual play on "jest").

⁸ *guises* manners, behaviours; conduct or course of life.

7

To living virtues turns the deadly vices,
For covetous she is of all good parts;
Incontinent,⁹ for still she shows entices
To consort with them sucking out their hearts;
5 Proud, for she scorns prostrate humility;
And gluttonous in store¹⁰ of abstinence,
Drunk with extractions stilled¹¹ in fervency
From contemplation and true continence;
Burning in wrath against impatience
10 And sloth itself, for she will never rise
From that all-seeing trance (the band of sense)
Wherein in view of all souls' skills¹² she lies.
No constancy to that her mind doth move
Nor riches to the virtues of my love.

8

Nor riches to the virtues of my love,
Nor empire to her mighty government;
Which fair analyzed in her beauty's grove
Shows laws for care and canons¹³ for content;
5 And as a purple tincture given to glass
By clear transmission of the sun doth taint
Opposed subjects,¹⁴ so my mistress' face
Doth reverence in her viewer's brows depaint,¹⁵
And like the pansy, with a little veil
10 She gives her inward work the greater grace,
Which my lines imitate, though much they fail,
Her gifts so high, and time's conceits so base.¹⁶
Her virtues then above my verse must raise her,
For words want¹⁷ art, and art wants words to
praise her.

⁹ *Incontinent* lacking in self-restraint, chiefly with reference to sexual appetite; wanton.

¹⁰ *store* sufficient or abundant supply.

¹¹ *stilled* i.e., distilled.

¹² *all souls' skills* the knowledge or understanding of all souls (not usually in the plural, 7. *OED*); perhaps, more generally, the abilities, faculties, or perceptions of all souls.

¹³ *canons* edicts, rules.

¹⁴ *Opposed subjects* i.e., subjects standing opposite the glass.

¹⁵ *depaint* paint, depict.

¹⁶ *time's conceits so base* i.e., those things imagined within the limits of the temporal are base or mean in contrast to the gifts of philosophy.

¹⁷ *want[s]* lack(s).

9
 For words want art, and art wants words to
 praise her,
 Yet shall my active and industrious pen
 Wind his sharp forehead through those parts that
 saise her,
 And register her worth past rarest women.¹
 5 Herself shall be my muse, that well will know
 Her proper inspirations and assuage
 (With her dear love) the wrongs my fortunes show,
 Which to my youth bind heartless grief in age.
 Herself shall be my comfort and my riches,
 10 And all my thoughts I will on her convert;
 Honour and error, which the world bewitches,
 Shall still crown fools and tread upon desert,
 And never shall my friendless verse envy
 Muses that fame's loose feathers² beautify.

10
 Muses that fame's loose feathers beautify,
 And such as scorn to tread the theatre,³
 As ignorant: the seed of memory⁴
 Have most inspired, and shown their glories
 there.⁵

¹ *forehead* perhaps, end or point (not a use cited in *OED*); *through those parts that saise her ... women* i.e., through those parts [that] put her in possession of [saise = seise] and register her worth past [that of the] rarest [of] women.

² *Muses* perhaps refers here more generally, given the tenor of Sonnets 9 and 10, to the individuals inspired by the Muses; thus, poets; *fame's loose feathers* "Fame" means here "report" or "rumour." Fame has feathers perhaps in reference to Virgil's *Aeneid* (4.173-88), where Rumour is represented as a voracious, feathered, female monster. Her feathers are "loose" in the sense of being unnecessary or superfluous, but also in the sense of being wild, unrestrained, dissolute, or immoral.

³ Renaissance poets and men of letters often said that the English stage was a contemptible place in which to employ one's poetic talents. See *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, print anthology, p. 1033, ll.283-302; and Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, print anthology, pp. 735-37, ll.1190-1275.

⁴ *As ignorant* i.e., as [a] vulgar or uncouth [place] (referring back to the theatre); *the seed of memory* perhaps, given the reference to the theatres of Athens and Rome, ancient poetic tradition or poets of the classical world?

⁵ *there* in the theatre.

5 To noblest wits and men of highest doom,⁶
 That for the kingly laurel bent a fair,⁷
 The theatres of Athens and of Rome
 Have been the crowns, and not the base impair.⁸
 Far then be this foul, cloudy-browed contempt
 10 From like-plumed birds,⁹ and let your sacred
 rhymes
 From honour's court their servile feet exempt
 That live by soothing moods and serving times;¹⁰
 And let my love¹¹ adorn with modest eyes
 Muses that sing love's sensual emperies.

*Lucidius olim.*¹²

—1595

⁶ *To noblest wits and men of highest doom* i.e., a description of poets in classical antiquity, but perhaps also a description of those men who aspired to have their deeds displayed and commemorated on the ancient stage; *doom* personal or private judgement.

⁷ *That for the kingly laurel bent a fair* i.e., [the ancient poets of the theatre] aimed for fairly or consistently ["bent a fair"] the laurel wreath that was the traditional prize for poetic excellence in the classical world; such a wreath, however, was also the traditional prize for military conquerors.

⁸ I.e., the theatres of ancient Athens and Rome have been the crown of these poets' careers, or perhaps the careers of the great men depicted in plays or more generally celebrated by these poets, and have not served to undermine or hinder (have not been the "base impair" of) the development of their poetic reputations (or perhaps of the great men's reputations throughout posterity).

⁹ *Far then be ... From like-plumed birds* i.e., contemporary poets of similar ability to their classical forebearers should not hold the stage in contempt.

¹⁰ *and let your sacred rhymes ... serving times* Chapman here addresses Mistress Philosophy again, asking her to make her sacred verses so powerful that they will drive servile poets (those who create poetry only to curry patronage [to soothe the moods of their demanding patrons] and respond to fickle literary fashions ["serving times"]) away from positions and reputations of honour ["honour's court"].

¹¹ *my love* i.e., philosophy.

¹² Latin, "This will become clearer in the future."