

# Agrippan and Christian Cabbalistic Influences in the Poetics of George Chapman

Kimberly Guy

The intellectuals of Elizabethan England prided themselves in being ideal Renaissance men. These men were courtiers, philosophers, writers, and lovers of all things beautiful. Most of all, these men were thinkers. Religiously speaking, the Renaissance brought with it several different types of religious thinkers, many of those whose philosophies included occultism. Occult thought, according to Charles Nauert,

“went [...] from being an unspoken and often unacknowledged element in the mental world of European men [...] to stepping forth into the light during the Renaissance” (225). It was during this time that many of the influential thinkers of Elizabethan England, such as Sir Walter Raleigh and George Chapman, founded a group of occult-minded scholars called the School of Night. Chapman’s poem “The Shadow of Night” is a poem which is built not only on the philosophies of the School of Night, but also the philosophies Henry Cornelius Agrippa set forth in his work De Occulta Philosophia. Chapman demonstrates the paradox of day and night, privileging the night over the day because of the inspired melancholy which occurs at night. According to the School of Night, and Chapman, Queen Elizabeth was thought of as destined to be the catalyst for political, religious, and social reform. This ideology is also present within Chapman’s poem.

“The Shadow of Night” is divided into two sections. The first section is called “Hymns in Noctem” and the second section is “Hymns in Cynthiam.” The poem is a personal one that describes many of Chapman’s beliefs, hopes and fears all of which are centered on the occult and his desire to propagate the cabalistic form of Christianity. Chapman is known for his use of deep mythological symbolism and he utilizes this tactic in “The Shadow of Night.” As stated by M.C. Bradbrock, Chapman, “[...] has private symbols and private uses of words. It puzzles and antagonizes him that other people do not grasp his codes” (133). However, these codes when looked at through the lens of occultism become clear. Chapman uses Agrippa’s ideas of the levels of poetic frenzy as well as the three worlds throughout the poem. He begins with the first level of frenzy in the first world and ends with the third level of frenzy in the third world.

Chapman begins “Hymns in Noctem” in the elemental world. This world is associated with nature and simplicity. The opening lines of this section make his starting point quite clear, “Great Goddess to whose throne in Cynthian fires/ This earthly Altar endless fumes expire” (1-2). This line speaks of an altar which is made of the earth and identifies the type of ritual described as an earthly one that induces the speaker into a

trance. Chapman also throws in an incantation based on the natural philosophies of the elements in lines 39-42 by stating,

When earth, the air, and sea, in fire remained,

When fire, the sea, and earth, the air contained,

When air, the earth, and fire, the sea enclosed

When sea, fire, air in earth were indisposed

Chapman describes the elemental world where the sun dominates as “chaotic,” “confused” and “out of the prime” (61-62). He argues that in this world, men are bound by their beliefs, never contemplating or thinking about them in order to enact change and

This is an unhealthy stagnation. Lines 78-82 demonstrate this idea:

First set and ruled, in most harmonious state,

Disjunction shows, in all things now amiss,

by that first order, what confusion is:

Religious curb, that managed men in bounds,

Of public welfare; loathing private grounds.

82

Not only are people in the elemental world tormented by chaos and confusion, but they are also plagued by sin as well. Chapman mentions three sins in his poem and ties each of these sins to the light of day. Pride is one of the sins that transform the men who enjoy the day into monsters: “Now bodies live without the souls of men/Lumps being digested; monsters, in our pride.” Pride is also responsible for man’s lack of contemplation, for pride is what makes men attempt to attain power even at the cost of their souls. Chapman writes: “Pride bathes in tears of poor submission/ And makes his soul, the purple he puts on.” Envy is another sin Chapman associates with the day. Envy is responsible for encouraging men to want more material things, never striving for spiritual goals, “Like envy, fed with others famishment” (90). Envy breeds spiritual famishment and along with envy comes greed or avarice. Greed, according to Chapman is another negative behavior occurring during the day that propagates men taking others/things for granted never appreciating what they have, “And in naught more than thankless avarice/ Not rendering virtue her desired price” (102-103). Chapman identifies and uses these three deadly sins as an argument against the day. He points out how greed, envy, and pride confine men to the material world and hold them back from experiencing the frenzies and becoming closer to God.

Chapman expresses a desire to move above the elemental world where men do not think for themselves and run around like “Calydonian bores” (84) leaving famine and upheaval in their wake. The description of the land and the beasts that destroy it places this portion of poem in concordance with the realm of the elemental world as described by Agrippa. This world is focused on natural events and clearly the “chaos of the hills” and the “hill of dearth (famine)” meets Agrippa’s definition. Chapman, however, is very dissatisfied with all of this. He sees the night as a salvation because:

behind all this lies the paradox, adhered to by religious mystics and occultists  
alike, that Night fosters the inward wisdom, the knowledge of divine things, by  
blotting out the sense impressions by which we receive the knowledge of ordinary  
like; and, since the senses are the sources of corruption of the soul and of  
mistaken knowledge, Night purifies the mind, acts as a purge for pure spirits  
(Maclure, 37).

It is in this section of the poem that Chapman begins his main argument for the positive attributes of night. He sees the inspired melancholia as a way to move to the next world. Since Night is the time of contemplation and intellect, the day is full of pride and vanity: “Mens faces glitter/ and their hearts are black/ But thou (great Mistress of heavens gloomy rack)/ Art black in face, and glitters in thy heart” (235-238). Night, Chapman argues is the saving grace of mankind:

Nights glorious mantle wraps in safe abodes  
And frees their necks from servile loads:  
Her trusty shadows, succour men dismayed  
Whom Days deceitful malice hath betrayed:  
From the silk vapors of her Ivory port  
Sweet Protean dreams she sends of every sort (336-341).

Night is the saving grace because it is through the night that poetic transformation occurs. Just as Chapman begins his poem in the elemental world of occultism he also begins his poetic transformation at the initial level as well. Actually, he begins at a “sublevel” including the reader in his transformation into the first level of poetic frenzy called *Imaginatio*. He begins devoid of the frenzy and induces a trance like state in an attempt to induce the poetic frenzy in lines 8-14. The catalyst for the frenzy is the Night and he begs of her:

...now let humor give  
 seas to mine eyes that I may quickly reap  
 The ship wreck of the world: or let soft sleep  
 (Blinding my senses) lose my working soul  
 That in her highest pitch, she may control  
 The court of skill, compact of misery.

Chapman describes an event occurring at night in which the “froes,” or people of the day, are having a great time listening to music and dancing. He pities these people because they do not know the poetic frenzy that occurs at night. They, “Now hearing music think it is a charm” (190), but there is no contemplation occurring here and therefore there can be no magic or movement thru the worlds of poetic frenzy.

Because of the contemplative poet’s breakthrough he begins to question why this darkness can not be dominant over the day. Chapman also uses his argument for night to overcome day in the context of the second level of poetic frenzy, Ratio and the second world, celestial. Each of these ideas is painstakingly explored throughout the second half of “Hymns in Noctem,” culminating in a call for reform, in which the night is privileged over the day.

Chapman gives very specific clues to the reader to signify the movement of the speaker into the second occult world, the celestial. Perhaps no clue is quite as clear as when he actually states, “And that most serious actions not respecting/ The second light, are worth neglecting” (360-361). There are many celestial references in this portion of the poem. In lines 105-110 the speaker describes the myth of Amalthea and her evolution into a constellation. He also talks about the stars and their benefits, one of which is to help sailors find their way in the night, “Sweet Peaces richest crown is made of stars/ Most certain guides of Mariners” (374-375). The way to reach heaven, argues Chapman, is through the night and ascension of the worlds, “And they reach heaven, bred under sorrows wings” (367).

Within the Celestial world, there is also an element of prophecy which Chapman includes in the poem as well. At night, “Sweet Protean dreams she sends of every sort:/ Some taking forms of Princes to persuade/ Of men deject, we are equals made (341-343). This is clearly a movement from the elemental or mundane world into a more spiritual realm where visions and dreams are sent to those who have risen above the elemental world. When the occultist has mastered the elemental world the Night will show him secrets, “With graver dreams inspired with prophesies” (353). These prophecies and

dreams encourage the occultist to promote Christian cabalism and help those who have not “seen the night” so to speak.

This marks the transition of the poem from one of observance to one calling for reform. The realm of prophecy and creative achievement, as described by Klibansky, Raymond, Panofsky, Ewin, and Saxl, Fritz in their book Saturn and Melancholy, is associated with the second poetic frenzy is that of politics and political changes. Chapman saw his poetry as divinely inspired by the night, “No pen can any thing eternal write/ That is not steeped in humor of the Night” (376-377). This poetry then can be used as a catalyst for change. Within the first portion of the poem Chapman has given reasons why the night should be favored over the day, in the second level he beseeches the Goddess of night to overthrow the day. He urges, “There fixed forever, where the Day is driven,/ Almost four hundred times a year from heaven./ In hell then let her sit, and never rise” (237-239). Next, he pledges his loyalty to the night, “To thy black shades and desolation/ I consecrate my life [...]” (270-271) and asks for others to join him. His argument is quite simple:

Weep, weep your souls, into felicity:

Come to this house of mourning and serve the night

To whom pale day (with whoredom soaked quite)

Is but a drudge, selling her beauties use

To rapes, adulteries, and all to abuse (327-331).

84

To avoid these terrible things, the Night must be given power over the day, and those who wish to experience the inspiration of the Night must reject the day and embrace the Night. He states:

All you possessed with indepressed spirits,

Indu'd with nimble, and aspiring wits,

Come consecrate with me, to sacred Night

Your whole endeavors, and detest the light (370-374).

Political reform is the domain of the second frenzy as mentioned above, and the end of “Hymns in Noctem” introduces the political figure that is the catalyst for this reform. Her name is Cynthia in this poem, but the School of Night used the name Cynthia as a synonym for Queen Elizabeth. The last 40 lines of this portion of the poem speak of the “Bride of Brides” ascending with Juno and Hymen, the God and Goddess of

marriage, on her train to take away the day and restore the night. Our first reference which can be tied to Cynthia is the reference to the deer that are following Hyperion's horned daughter from the sky to restore the night to power. Hyperion is the God of the sun and Selene, the Goddess of the moon, is his daughter. Both the reference to the deer and the moon correlate with Cynthia or Diana, the chaste moon Goddess of the hunt whose patron animal is the deer. The image created here is an awesome one by the description of Selene's descent, "Enchantress-like, decked in disperant lawn/ Circled with charms, and incantations/ That ride huge spirits, and outrageous passions" (395-397). Now that Cynthia has been introduced with her destiny to restore the Night to power through political and religious reform, the poem shifts its focus from the Night to Cynthia.

Although the transition is easy to spot, Chapman separates the "The Shadow of Night" into two parts and names the second portion "Hymns in Cynthiam" to reflect the change in focus. "Hymns in Noctem" ended in the second occult world, Celestial, and the second poetic frenzy, Ratio. "Hymns in Cynthiam" picks up where "Hymns in Noctem" leaves off and continues the poet's movement through the Agrippian worlds and levels of frenzies. In lines 1-4, Saturn is brought up to remind us of the favored status of the night:

"Natures bright eye-sight, and Night's fair soul,  
That which thy triple forehead does control  
Earth, seas, and hell: and art in dignity  
The greatest, and swiftest Planet in the sky.

The speaker is still in the Celestial world at this point and this is observed by the references to heaven and Cynthia as Diana, Goddess of the moon. Chapman's discussion of attempts to reach heaven places the setting firmly in the Celestial world where the moon waxes and wanes, and its disappearance is a source of anxiety:

The Romans set sweet music to her charms,  
To raise thy stoopings with airy arms;  
Used loud resoundings with auspicious brass:  
Held torches up to heaven, and flaming glass,  
Made a whole forest but a burning eye,  
T'admire thy mournfull partings with the sky" (64-69)

The only true way to reach heaven, according to Chapman, is through persistence in the ascension of the worlds as outlined by the Christian cabalists.

Although Cynthia is a Goddess, she walks among the humans at times. Chapman devotes a major section of this poem beginning at line 220 to describing the classic “hunt” in which Cynthia is hunted by men, transforming herself into first a panther, then a boar. The chase ends when the day dissolves into night and the hunters find themselves led by Cynthia into a hideous thicket where they become trapped as she disappears into the night. MC Bradbrock recognizes that, “The Shadowy hunting is a recognized symbol for the pursuit of earthly desire” (140). Frances Yates also refers to the hunt as an allusion to a Protestant Elizabeth and her battle with both Spain and Catholicism as symbolized by the sun (166). This allusion is obvious in lines 116-119:

85

Then set thy Crystal, and Imperial throne,

(Girt in thy chest and never-loosing zone)

Gainst Europe’s Sun directly opposite,

And give him darkness, that doth threat thy light.

Elizabeth was seen as a beacon of hope for the Christian cabalist. She alone is the person, “That hold(s) the thread, and rul’st the sword of fate” (143). Elizabeth is mentioned in this poem in relation to both her political position as well as her power to propagate protestant Christianity. However, for Elizabeth to be the spokeswoman for the Cabalists it was very important that she remain a chaste virgin. Yates describes this rationale quite nicely, “The intense emphasis on chastity in the Elizabeth cult is here seen as the necessary guarantee that the magic of her cult is a white magic, religious and Cabalist” (167). Chapman reminds Cynthia/Elizabeth to remain chaste and remain unmarried, “The pureness of thy never-tainted life/ Scorning the subject title of a wife” (98-99). Chapman explains that if Cynthia continues to “[...] exercise the virgin Court” (144) she will be able to ascend into the third poetic frenzy, Mans. This frenzy is associated with religious reform, higher magic and divine secrets.

In this level Cynthia moves on to be called Hecate the Goddess of magic:

(As she is Hecate) her sovereign kind,

And in her force, the forces of the mind:

An argument to ravish and refine

An earthly soul and make it more divine (152-155).

The contemplative state and sympathy Elizabeth displays for the Christian cabalists is brought forth here. Chapman speaks of Elizabeth's acceptance of the Cabalists, "With tender circumuecture doth embrace,/ The chiefest Planet, that doth heaven enhance:" (200-201). Lines 392-395 speak directly of the upper light:

The Goddess blew retraite, and with her blast,

Her morns creation did like vapors wast:

The winds made wing, into the upper light,

And blew abroad the sparkles of the night.

Chapman moves on to include the third occult world in this final section of the poem, the world of intellect. For him the world of intellect and the third level of poetic frenzy go hand in hand for one can not advance spiritually without the contemplation that melancholia brings. It is this contemplation that leads to a higher spiritual plane. The highest level of poetic frenzy can help to occultist to recognize that, "The mind hath in her self a Deity" (444) which is the divine inspiration of poets. At this level of the frenzy, "[...] wisdom be the minds true beauty [...]" (472) which leads to enlightenment. This enlightenment leads to knowledge of divine secrets,

And since his eyes were evermore awake,

To search for knowledge of thy excellence,

And all Astrology: no negligence,

Or female softness fed his learned trance, (496-499)

The poet also states his appreciation for Elizabeth and his high expectations of her court. He refers to life under Elizabeth's rule as a, "[...] happy Empire of this Goddess glories" (273). In the final lines of the poem Chapman refers to the "virgin chamber" (509) and implores Elizabeth to exalt Christian cabalism and execute a "Magic miracle" (516) in a "[...] clear, and Icy Pentacle" (515). He calls upon Hecate (Elizabeth) to use all of her magic, poison herbs, rabid mastiffs, and natural disasters to remove the sun and privilege the night so that she may, "[...] for ever live the Planets Queen" (530).

Chapman uses "The Shadow of Night" to express his desires for both political and religious reform. The most obvious occult philosophies shown in the poem are those of the three occult worlds and the three levels of poetic frenzy as described by Agrippa. By interweaving his religious philosophies within the poem, the poem itself becomes a treatise on occultism.



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