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## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### **“Plain as the light in the Cowcumber”: A Note on the Conspiracy in Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d***

Jessica Munns

That there is a Plot . . . ’tis as plain as the light in the Cowcumber—no—hold there—Cowcumber does not come in yet—’tis as plain as the light in the sun . . . it is indeed a Pumpkin-Plot, which, just as it was mellow, we have gathered, and now we have gathered it, prepar’d and dress’d it, shall we throw it like a pickled Cowcumber out at the window? [*Venice Preserv’d*, 5.132–40]<sup>1</sup>

“That there is a plot,” an “actual and dangerous”<sup>2</sup> plot, has recently been challenged by David Bywaters in his essay, “Venice, Its Senate, and Its Plot in Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d*.”<sup>3</sup> Bywaters argues, convincingly, that Venice and the Venetian senate represent London and the Whig city government of London. Bywaters sees the play as supporting Charles II’s proceedings against the city’s charter and relates Pierre’s reference to the senate’s “Charter,” which enslaves people (1.164) to the city’s charter. This is a valuable suggestion, though the Whiggishness of the senate and Londonness of a Venice which is endowed with “wide streets” (3.2.144) has never been in much dispute.

However, Bywaters goes on to argue that if the play is to be understood, as it was in its day, as a Tory work, and if the senate represents the Whigs, then those who plot against the senate cannot also stand for Whigs. Instead, the plotters must represent Tories involved in a Tory plot. Since the conspirators are mostly a disreputable crew and their plot is vicious and bloodthirsty, Bywaters argues (and this gets complicated) that the plot and the conspirators are a Tory version of a Whig version of a Tory plot and conspirators. Hence, the plot is a “parody not of the Popish Plot itself but of the Whig fears from which it arose.”<sup>4</sup> Bywaters argues that this makes things easier, for “A Tory playgoer of the times, caught up in fervent party loyalty, can hardly be expected to have ‘shifted’ his ‘ill-wishes between Senate and conspiracy’ in the manner Taylor suggests, without now and then having questioned the Whiggishness of one faction in his eagerness to applaud its laudable ambition of annihilating the other.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, the audience would have seen that the plot was not “‘actual and dangerous’ but—as the Popish Plot was already to the Tories—hollow and silly, a sort of Whig nightmare.”<sup>6</sup>

1/ *Venice Preserv’d*, in *The Works of Thomas Otway*, ed. J. C. Ghosh (1932; reprint, Oxford, 1968). All references are to this edition.

2/Zera S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans* (Evanston, Ill., 1945), cited by David Bywaters throughout.

3/David Bywaters, “Venice, Its Senate, and Its Plot in Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d*,” *Modern Philology* 80 (1983): 256–63.

4/*Ibid.*, p. 263.

5/*Ibid.*, p. 256, referring to A. M. Taylor’s *Next to Shakespeare: Otway’s “Venice Preserv’d” and “The Orphan” on the London Stage* (Durham, N.C., 1950).

6/Bywaters, p. 260.

*Venice Preserv'd* is undoubtedly a strongly satiric play, and also one which explores fantasies—of sex and power—and nightmares—of perversion and destruction. However, the strength of the nightmares it projects is pitifully reduced if the plot is seen as “hollow and silly.” When Jaffeir glories in the thought of

How rich and beauteous will the face  
Of Ruin look, when these wide streets run blood;  
I and the glorious Partner's of my Fortune  
Shouting and striding o're the prostrate Dead,  
[3.2.143–46]

one has no inclination to laugh at this as an example of Whig hyperbole. A double reading of such lines which renders them a Tory “satiric exaggeration of the Whig version of the Popish Plot”<sup>7</sup> is dramatically incoherent. Belvidera's horrified reactions to Jaffeir's speech and, later on, Jaffeir's horror and disgust at Renault's similarly bloody plans (3.2.332–38) are absurd if from the first the plot is viewed as ludicrous and impossible.

The implausibility of Bywaters's view of the conspiracy is evident if the conspirators in *Venice Preserv'd* are compared to those in Nathaniel Lee's *Lucius Junius Brutus* (London, 1681). Here the Fecialian priests who plot against the Roman senate carry out a cannibalistic sacrifice which parodies the Catholic mass and represents Whig fears of Popish practices—as the comments of the Titus Oates figure, Vinditius, who looks on, indicate. Significantly, Vinditius's reactions are comic:<sup>8</sup>

What would they do with me, if they  
should catch me peeping? Knock out my brains at least;  
another dish for the priests, who would make a fine  
sauce of 'em for the haunch of a fat citizen!  
[4.81–84]

Otway's conspirators are not so exaggeratedly and literally bloodthirsty, nor do their excesses invite humorous deflation. It is important to be clear about where the satiric elements in *Venice Preserv'd* are located and directed. Antonio, the perverse senator, is the primary satiric vehicle; however, Renault's “itching flesh” (3.2.274), the location of a conspiracy to purify Venice in a whore's house, and the nervy irritability of the conspirators all serve to cast a satiric light over the genesis, aims, and intentions of the conspiracy. But the fact that the plot is perverse and misguided does not mean that it is not also “actual and dangerous.” Antonio frequently seems “silly” (though the adjective is a bit too weak to describe his senile depravity), but the conspirators are far too sinister to be so lightly dismissed. They are horribly tortured to death for their part in the plot; they are not weak recusant gentry killed to assuage fantastic Whig fears but are indeed a “dreadfull catalogue to Cut-throats” (4.178) who hoped to destroy Venice with sword and fire.

Bywaters's strict patterning of the play into Whiggish senate and (fake) Tory plotters runs into difficulties as he confronts the split Shaftesbury personalities of

7/ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

8/ Nathaniel Lee, *Lucius Junius Brutus*, ed. John Loftis, Regents Restoration Drama Series (London, Nebr., 1968). See also D. M. Vieth's discussion in “Psychological Myth as Tragedy: Nathaniel Lee's *Lucius Junius Brutus*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 39 (1975–76): 57–76.

Antonio and Renault. After having rather oddly identified Renault with Stafford,<sup>9</sup> Bywaters goes on to agree that he is also a Shaftesbury figure. He adds that "this enriches the play's general attack upon the Whigs. . . . The identification of Renault with Shaftesbury suggests in addition that, if Stafford and recusant gentry are impossible as dangerous conspirators, Shaftesbury and the Whigs may not be."<sup>10</sup> Quite so, which brings us back to the point Bywaters originally sought to refute. Whiggish figures and examples of dangerous and corrupt Whiggish behavior are to be found on both sides, provoking and fermenting dangerous plots.

The conspiracy in *Venice Preserv'd* does not supply an example of Whiggish hallucinations, but it does serve to demonstrate the use and convenience of plots for Whig politicians. Antonio's absurd rehearsal of the speech he plans to make in the senate, quoted in the epigraph, indicates the political mileage to be made out of plots. Further, we do see here a nurturing of plots: "Just as it was mellow, we have gathered, and now we have gathered it, prepar'd and dress'd it." There is a suggestion here of the senate's prior knowledge of the plot (and Jaffeir's betrayal was unnecessary; they were already informed) along with the indication that a plot discovered is a delicacy to be enjoyed. Indeed, it may be that there is an irony in the title, *Venice Preserv'd, or A Plot Discover'd*; Venice is preserved by its plots. Nothing else could hold the greedy and self-seeking senators together, but, against the anarchy of rebels who mirror them in corruption, they justify and consolidate their rule. Antonio's ridiculous speech and his anxiety to "prove there's a Plot with a Vengeance" (5.128-29) place Antonio and the senate (but not the conspiracy) in a satiric light. Rather, the cynical exploitation of an "actual" plot by a frivolous and decadent pervert plays off with bitter irony against Jaffeir's agonies of betrayal, his suicide, and the deaths of Belvidera and Pierre. They plan, turn vicious, suffer, and die to make it a world safe for Antonios.

Contemporaries had every reason to applaud *Venice Preserv'd* as a Tory masterpiece. The play is set in a republic, a form of government abhorrent to Tories and admired by Whig ideologues, and a corrupt senate provokes and then cruelly quashes a debased and violent conspiracy. At its most simplistic level, the play demonstrates the opportunism and instability of such forms of government. However, there is no escape from the complexity of Otway's political vision. Despite topical and specific references and satiric portraits, the play cannot be reduced to a mere piece of Tory Whig-bashing. One cannot privilege a sectarian political reading over a reading which pays attention to the play's thematic structures. The numerous elemental references, the juxtaposing of images of heaven and hell (1.339-41, 2.1-3), the violence of the erotic impulse, and the theme of perverse sexuality which runs like a thread through the play connecting up the senate and conspiracy<sup>11</sup> are part of the totality of Otway's political vision. In this vision, as Gerald Parker has

9/Bywaters suggests that "Renault's French name may be explained by the fact that Stafford was supposed to have contributed to the Plot while in Paris" (p. 261). Renault's name, of course, comes from Otway's source, César Vischard, l'abbé de Saint-Réal's *La Conjuraton des Espagnols contre La Republique de Venise* (Paris, 1674; English trans., London, 1675 and 1679).

10/Bywaters, p. 261.

11/See William H. MacBurney, "Otway's Tragic Muse Debauch'd: Sensuality in *Venice Preserv'd*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 58 (1959): 380-99; and Derek W. Hughes, "A New Look at *Venice Preserv'd*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 11 (1971): 437-57.

said, “rebellion as an idea and as an action is ultimately transferred from the particular to the universal.”<sup>12</sup> If Jaffeur and Pierre emerge as sympathetic characters,<sup>13</sup> it is not because they occasionally mouth Tory critiques of Whig politics. It is because we understand the urge to change a murky world even as we recognize that such urges can have equally murky roots and that the cure may be worse than the sickness. Sympathy for Pierre and Jaffeur does not preclude criticism, but it involves an awareness that they inhabit a vicious world in which “there’s nothing pure upon Earth” (3.2.384) and which includes them and the grim conspiracy the one believes in and the other betrays. Without an “actual and dangerous” conspiracy which has the power to fascinate and to repel, there is no play—that is “as plain as the light in the Cowcumber.”

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12/Gerald Parker, “The Image of Rebellion in Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d* and Edward Young’s *Busiris*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 21 (1981): 389–407.

13/Bywaters (n. 3 above) argues that the “considerable sympathy” with which Pierre is treated could only have been acceptable if he was seen as a Tory (p. 259). Presumably, i.e., a Tory who is also a Whig delusion of what a Tory looks like—as seen by a Tory. It is far too complicated to feel any sort of sympathy for such a vague figure and, moreover, it is highly questionable if Pierre was seen as very sympathetic until the next century. The casting of Betterton as Jaffeur suggests he is the leading character—and he betrays the “Tory” plot.

### James’s Revisions of “The Novel in ‘The Ring and the Book’”

*Susan M. Griffin*

On May 7, 1912, Henry James commemorated Browning’s centenary by delivering “The Novel in ‘The Ring and the Book’” to the Royal Society of Literature, which printed the talk in its *Transactions* (2d ser., 31 [1912], pt. 4:269–98). James revised the address for publication in the *Quarterly Review* (217 [1912]: 68–87). The Soho bibliography of James’s work states that this text was “reproduced” in *Notes on Novelists* two years later. In fact, some eight minor alterations (all matters of word choice or word order) were made when James collected the essay in 1914.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent reprintings of “The Novel in ‘The Ring and the Book’” have, quite logically, relied on the text of James’s final version. This practice, together with the fact that the Royal Society’s *Transactions* are not widely available, perhaps explains why James’s revisions of the talk have received no notice. “The Novel in ‘The Ring

1/Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, *A Bibliography of Henry James*, 3d ed. (Oxford, 1982), p. 153. The editors note that “failure on our part to mention revision must not be assumed to mean that no revision is to be found in the particular book or article” (p. 19). The unnoted alterations here are minor, but the fact that most significant revisions (e.g., “Emile Zola” [1903, 1914]) also go unmentioned indicates the need for textual studies of James’s criticism. For the “Zola” revisions, see *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction*, ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago, 1986).