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# 1

## John Chamberlain Reads the Year

'I love not altogether ydle and empty letters.'

John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, 18 August 1621

'To know Chamberlain in and out, his comings and goings, his reports of what occurred and what was said, is to come close to living in his generation.'

Wallace Notestein, *Four Worthies* (1956)

In the forty-six years since Notestein wrote, scholars have become much less confident about coming anywhere close to living in another person's generation. However, the letters of John Chamberlain have been an alluring source for historians in particular, who have felt that he provides a window onto his age. Chamberlain's extensive correspondence, stretching from 1597 until 1626, and running to 479 letters collected by his editor, Norman McClure, is a particularly rich source for those interested in the minutiae of the court, especially the court of James I, because Chamberlain was, essentially, fascinated by gossip.<sup>1</sup> Most of his letters were sent to his friend Dudley Carleton, who served as an ambassador in Venice from 1610 to 1615, and in The Hague from 1616 to 1624.<sup>2</sup> In them, Chamberlain passed on information about everything that could be read as a sign of the times, from court scandals to speeches in parliament. He relayed accounts of court masques and copies of popular ballads; he informed Carleton about who was in favour and who was out of favour. Chamberlain was, in essence, an interpreter, a reader of all that came his way: of people, of places, of things, of fashion. For that reason, he stands, for me, as an example of how an individual within my chosen year might have read that year, but this is a very particular kind of reader: in early modern terms,

Chamberlain is a practised reader of information from a position both within a certain elite grouping (he was a gentleman), but outside the centre of court culture.

Chamberlain was born in 1554 and followed the usual career of a promising young man: he attended university (Cambridge), though left without taking a degree. He then went to Gray's Inn. While the Inns of Court were the training ground for lawyers, they also attracted those who wanted to be at the centre of artistic and intellectual life.<sup>3</sup> Chamberlain was not called to the bar and lived his whole life as a gentleman of modest but independent means – as, indeed, a 'looker on', to use Notestein's phrase,<sup>4</sup> rather than a direct participant. Few details are known of his life prior to his letter writing, but from his first extant letter, written to Dudley Carleton on 11 June 1597, we hear a great deal about his day-to-day activities. McClure notes how Chamberlain positioned himself at the centre of London's information trade by living near St Paul's Cathedral, where booksellers and gatherers of information of all sorts congregated (i. 5). Chamberlain also had a number of active and influential friends well placed to pass on news to him, the most notable being Ralph Winwood, Secretary of State from 1614 to 1617.

Chamberlain's first 1621 letter, written on 13 January, offers a good sense of his style and his concerns. I will quote the first half of the letter in full. It is a careful account of some events surrounding the visit of the Marquis de Cadenet from France at a time when King James wanted to convince the Spanish that he might possibly be reconsidering a French match for Prince Charles, during a particularly tense stage of the European conflict which had resulted in James's son-in-law Frederick being driven out of the Palatine after his ill-fated attempt to rule Bohemia. The central incident involves a banquet held for Cadenet by James Hay, Viscount Doncaster and Earl of Carlisle, who had acted as an ambassador for James in an attempt to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the Bohemian crisis. Carlisle had strong sympathies with the European Protestant cause and a genuine desire for a French, as opposed to a Spanish, match for Charles.<sup>5</sup> Characteristically, Chamberlain focuses on the way that Cadenet's visit involves a jostle for position and precedence, and a careful display of symbolic conspicuous consumption by James's court:

My very goode Lord: I have heard of no messenger since Captain Goldwell went, though Dieston looke every day to be dispatcht, by whom you shall heare again yf here be ought worth the sending. The next day after the frenchmen were at Hampton Court they were feasted by the King in the upper house of parlement, both the ambassadors

at the Kings table, the rest in the court of requests; the Count d'Auvergne absented himself because he could not be admitted to eat with the King, alleaging that Quene Elizabeth did his father that honor, but yt was aunswered that his father was a kings sonne and yet living. Divers others went away from the Lords table because they might not have precedence (or at least were not offered) of the Lord Chauncellor, Lord Treasurer and Lord Privieseale, which nere-theles sat all on one side. That night they had a bal at Whitehall, and on Twelfth Day were invited to the maske there, which was handsomly performed, but that there was a puritan brought in to be flowted and abused, which was somewhat unseemly and unseasonable, specially as matters stand now with those of the religion in Fraunce. On Monday they were intertained in seeing the Prince with sixe or seven noblemen more run at tilt, which the Prince performed very well and gracefully; that night they were feasted by the Lord of Doncaster at Essex House, with that sumptuous superfluitie, that the like hath not ben seene nor heard in these parts; whereof to geve you some taste, yt is to be understoode that there were more then a 100 cookes (wherof forty were masters) set on worke for eight dayes before: the whole service was but sixe messe furnished with 1600 dishes, which were neither light nor sleight, but twelve fesants in a dish, fowre and twentie patridges, twelve dosen of larkes, *et sic de caeteris*: and for fish all that could be found far and neere, whole fresh salmons served by two and three in a dish, besides sixe or seven Muscovie salmons wherof some were above sixe foot long. Yt were to no purpose to reckon up the grosser meates as two swannes in a dish, two chines of beefe, two pigges and the like; but yt is doubted this excessive spoyle will make a dearth of the choisest dainties, when this one supper consumed twelve score fesants baked, boyled and rosted. After supper they had a banquet, then a maske, then a second banquet, so that the sweet meates alone rising to 500li the whole charge is saide to be above 3000li, besides sixe pound weight of amber-gris spent in cookerie valued at 300li. The King and Prince were present with the ambassadors at a table that went crosse the upper end of the long table, so that the King sitting in the midst had the full view of the whole companie and service; they supt in a lower gallerie. The maske was in a large roome above. (ii.333–4)

Chamberlain clearly revels in this description, however much he may also intend to offer a judgement about ostentatious waste ('this excessive spoyle'). The feast – like the masque, the tilt, even the ordering

of places – was intended to impress; it had, indeed, to be excessive in order to achieve this. Thus Chamberlain places value upon it over and over again: value that we can guess at by the amount and rarity of the dishes, and value in monetary terms that is specified down to the very subtotals. Amounts are what count here, rather than the specifics of any one dish: the number of dishes, indeed the number of cooks, conveys the magnitude of the occasion. The signs of prestige are always registered in Chamberlain's letters: 'Divers others went away from the Lords table because they might not have precedence.'

This passage also provides a context for the way a whole range of cultural events fit into a particular political/social context: the ball, the masque, the tilt. Much has been written in recent years about the role of these symbolic cultural forms in the Stuart and Caroline courts, particularly the function of the masque.<sup>6</sup> For Chamberlain, clearly, the Earl of Doncaster's feast is the most notable event in this series of shows to impress the ambassadors (and others). Indeed, Doncaster had, in his biographer's words, 'carved himself a unique and virtually unassailable position as a banquet master'.<sup>7</sup> He used such a symbolically weighted feast with a deliberation clearly understood by Chamberlain, who applies to it the appropriate analysis. (Unfortunately, the entire manoeuvre was spectacularly unsuccessful, as the Spanish ambassador, Gondomar, was able to induce James to offer a humiliating explanation that he had never intended to reopen negotiations for a French match for Charles.) The tilt is dealt with quite perfunctorily, but the masque receives a more substantial, and again critical, comment.

Recently, Martin Butler has established that the masque in question was Ben Jonson's *Pan's Anniversary*.<sup>8</sup> I will be discussing Jonson's two 1621 masques (the other was *The Gipsies Metamorphosed*) in detail in a later chapter, but in the present context it is important to register Chamberlain's sense of how the political implications of the masque might be read. Chamberlain's 'readings' of cultural events are quite unlike our own forms of interpretation, in so far as he tends to spend much less time than we would like him to on events we have ranked more highly than a dinner. Jonson's masque strikes an unintended sour note because, as Butler has so cogently explained, it was caught between a domestic resistance to Puritanism and the pressure King James was under to defend the interests of Protestants in Europe. Butler thus notes that 'Chamberlain's point is that satire on Protestant extremism is fine when it is designed to counter the growth of popular interest in politics at home, but when the context was the state of Protestantism in Europe generally the issue was far more sensitive'.<sup>9</sup> Chamberlain

registers the reverberations of the masque within a particular political context, rather than commenting in any detail on its contents. But his letter makes it quite clear that there is no real dividing line between *Pan's Anniversary* and Doncaster's banquet: both are symbolic cultural forms designed for a particular set of effects, and in both cases, the response of an audience, onlooker or interpreter cannot be predicted nor made homogeneous. Thus Doncaster's banquet, like Jonson's masque, cannot guarantee a particular interpretation.

Because Chamberlain, in my view, is an inveterate interpreter of everything that comes his way, he underlines the continuing interaction of a multilayered and intersecting set of genres of writing which still, in 1621, cross over between a variety of readers. Chamberlain subscribes to a hierarchy of writing, as we will see, but he is an inclusive rather than exclusive reader, and wants to absorb everything that crosses his path. He is far from certain that the recipient of most of these letters, Dudley Carleton, clearly a more self-important and serious individual than Chamberlain, will feel the same way, and is therefore often apologetic about some of the more trivial items he sends along with his letters. For example, on 17 November 1621, he says to Carleton: 'Yf you have not seene this ydle pamphlet before, yt is like to make you laugh though you had no list' (ii.408). Some irony lurks in this offhand phrase. 'Ydle' pamphlets, like 'ydle and empty letters', cannot easily be distinguished from their opposites within Chamberlain's method of interpretation. His news is always an admixture of what, to the partial reader, is trivia and what is a matter of importance. This is quite clear when one reads modern historians, who pillage Chamberlain for his comments on parliamentary proceedings, but never place what they would regard as his 'serious' political reportage in the context of an entire letter, where *all* information is, as we have already seen, subject to a constant level of interpretation, and it is difficult to set up an opposition between the serious and the trivial. The 'ydle pamphlet' will make Carleton laugh, even if he has no desire to do so; the idle letter is also always going to have an effect on its recipient.

There is one moment when Chamberlain feels that something really is beneath Carleton's attention: 'This inclosed ballet [i.e. ballad] came to my handes by great chaunce, and having scant reade yt I send yt to my Lady for her recreation though perhaps she take no great pleasure in such toyes but only to see the wanton witts of the time' (ii.373). It is hard to tell here whether Chamberlain feels that the ballad should go to Carleton's wife because of its genre or its content. Indeed, he wonders whether she might not take any pleasure at all in it, except as an example

of wantonness (which may imply sexual licence, or merely 'idle' wastefulness). 'Toys' remains a deceptive word in 1621, echoing the typical Renaissance nonchalant pretence that something quite significant is really of no importance at all; it is a word famously used by Philip Sidney to describe his literary endeavours.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that Chamberlain does take pleasure in such toys, and it is tempting even to speculate on the implications of a 'scant' reading of a ballad. Given that, to our eyes, ballads don't require much reading at all, Chamberlain clearly read a ballad with the same intent scrutiny that he used when reading a banquet, or a masque, or a proclamation, or reports of a day in parliament. Accordingly, we have to be careful about automatically interpreting this passage as an indication that ballads are toys fit only for ladies' eyes (again a claim made by Sidney for his *Arcadia*). Without any way of comparing the idle pamphlet sent to Carleton with the wanton ballad sent to his wife, we cannot be sure what form of discrimination is going on in Chamberlain's mind.<sup>11</sup> But it seems to me that he is acknowledging an area where Anne Carleton's taste may coincide with his own, rather than judging the status of ballads or of women readers.

Chamberlain worries about Dudley Carleton's sense of what might be trivial and unworthy of his attention in reference to another ballad: this time a song from the second of Jonson's 1621 masques: *The Gipsies Metamorphosed*. In this case, Chamberlain rather disingenuously states that the song is a substitute for hard news – I say disingenuously, because it comes at the end of a letter containing a fair quantity of news, including material once again often cited by modern historians as conveying the sense of economic crisis at this time, such as 'And withall I can assure you that monie goes here very low and scant and the opinion of our great wealth is well fallen' (ii.404). The Jonson song is included, Chamberlain says, because it attracted the praise of the court:

For lacke of better newes here is likewise a ballet or song of Ben Jonson's in the play or shew at the Lord Marquis at Burly, and repeated again at Windsor, for which and other goode service there don, he hath his pension from a 100 marks increased to 200li per annum, besides the reversion of the mastership of the revells. There were other songs and devises of baser alay, but because this had the vogue and generall applause at court, I was willing to send yt. (ii.404–5)<sup>12</sup>

Much of this comment is concerned with Jonson's place, and therefore it is simply part of Chamberlain's general reporting of shifts in people's positions and offices. As well as Jonson's song, in this letter Chamberlain

included 'a copie of the Kings letter to the commissioners in the Lord of Caunterburies cause' (ii.404), so that the notion that news is lacking seems particularly odd. I think that once again Chamberlain is a little defensive about how his interest in matters like songs might appear to Carleton (it is worth noting that in his own letters Carleton encloses gazettes – i.e. newsbooks – and serious political tracts). Again what is most notable about this comment of Chamberlain's is that it registers the *effects* of Jonson's masque (in this case, its favourable reception, in contrast to *Pan's Anniversary*), rather than offering any commentary on the contents. The song is included because of the court's praise, not because of Chamberlain's own admiration. This is a rather different situation from that concerning the idle pamphlet sent to Dudley Carleton and the ballad sent to Anne Carleton, clearly instances where Chamberlain's own response (however much expressed in a spirit of *sprezzatura*) is a motivating factor.

As a purveyor and interpreter of news, Chamberlain looks to a wide range of sources, for he is concerned to understand how news is processed by different members of society. He is acutely conscious of attempts to control news (and ideas), and notes the conflict caused (particularly in a year when parliament met) by the struggle over control of information. Here he comments on the response to James's proclamation which endeavoured to suppress, in essence, news of the very sort that pervades Chamberlain's letters:

there is come out a new proclamation against lavish and licentious talking in matters of state, either at home or abrode, which the common people know not how to understand, nor how far matter of state may stretch or extend; for they continue to take no notice of yt, but print every weeke (at least) corantas with all manner of newes, and as strange stuffe as any we have from Amsterdam. (ii.396)

Chamberlain naturally sees himself as elevated far above the common people, but he, like they, deliberately promulgates news beyond the stretch of matters of state. Of course, the public dissemination of news is very different from Chamberlain's private letters to Carleton. Nevertheless, Chamberlain's letters are corantos of a sort: books of news, calculated to convey information, and, even more importantly, offered as interpretations, readings, of events. To be a true reader and reporter of news, Chamberlain needs to look up at the doings of the court and down at the common people's response to a royal proclamation. In both cases he finds a shared disingenuousness. The common people,

Chamberlain makes plain, do indeed know how to understand the proclamation: by pretending not to understand how far it may stretch or extend. The proclamation of 26 July 1621 referred back to the proclamation of 24 December 1620 'against excesse of Lavish and Licentious Speech of Matters of State.' The earlier proclamation reinforces the connection between the liberties taken by both the highest and lowest members of society:

it is come to Our eares, by common report, That there is at this time a more licentious passage of lavish discourse, and bold Censure in matters of State, then hath been heretofore, or is fit to be suffered, Wee have thought it necessary, by the advice of Our Privie Councill, to give forewarning unto Our loving Subjects, of this excesse and presumption; And straitly to command them and every of them, from the highest to the lowest, to take heede, how they intermeddle by Penne or Speech, with causes of State, and secrets of Empire, either at home, or abroad, but containe themselves within that modest and reverent regard, of matters above their reach and calling, that to good a dutifull Subjects appertaineth.<sup>13</sup>

Chamberlain's own letters represent a deliberate setting aside of the implications of this proclamation, containing, as they do, and despite Chamberlain's occasional move towards circumspection, a considerable amount of lavish discourse on matters of state. Because of his insatiable appetite for news, Chamberlain's eye extends unusually far for a reader at any level of society in 1621.

Modern scholars have been disappointed by Chamberlain's lack of interest in the public theatre. Most of his references to it are concerned with its social impact, rather than with descriptions of individual plays. (With a few exceptions. Naturally he was interested in a phenomenon like Middleton's scandalous success of 1624, *A Game at Chess*.) In 1621 Chamberlain notes Gondomar, the Spanish ambassador's, visit to a play: 'growne so affable and familiar, that on Monday with his whole traine he went to a common play at the Fortune in Golding-lane, and the players (not to be overcome with curtesie) made him a banket when the play was don in the garden adjoining' (ii.391). Chamberlain doesn't even mention what play Gondomar saw; what is important is the implication of the visit (and his reception), given the shifting tides of anti-Spanish feeling. The same theatre features a few letters later, in an event which many may well have seen as a fitting retribution for such a courteous reception to the much-hated ambassador:

On Sunday night here was a great fire at the Fortune in Golding-lane the fayrest play-house in this towne. Yt was quite burnt downe in two howres and all their apparell and play-bookes lost, wherby those poore companions are quite undon (ii.415)

Chamberlain is interested in the playhouse as an institution, rather than in particular plays; he is concerned with the events it precipitates.

The two moments, in the correspondence for 1621, when Chamberlain engages in something that more closely resembles what we might call literary interpretation, are really, once again, instances of political commentary. Both involve the King. The first relays a famous and much-quoted quip of James's about Bacon's *Novum Organum* (published in 1620): 'the King cannot forbear sometimes in reading his last booke to say that yt is like the peace of God, that passeth all understanding' (ii.339). Chamberlain in an earlier letter of 28 October 1620 reported Bacon's presentation of *Novum Organum* to the King:

This weeke the Lord Chauncellor hath set forth his new worke called Instauratione Magna, or a kind of new organum of all philosophie. In sending yt to the King he wrote that he wisht his Majestie might be as long in reading yt as he hath ben in composing and polishing yt, which is well neere thirtie yeares: I have read no more then the bare title, and am not greatly encouraged by Master Cuffes judgement, who having long since perused yt gave this censure, that a foole could not have written such a worke, and a wise man wold not. (ii.324)

Chamberlain is, as usual, more interested in conveying the jokes and general impressions made by Bacon's magnum opus than in offering anything that we would consider to be a reading of it. He is interested, if you like, in reading the readings of *Novum Organum* and in noting its effect on Bacon's – increasingly shaky – relationship with James.

The second more daring piece of 'interpretation' concerns a work by James himself, inspired by his visit to Burleigh, 'where there was great provision of playes, maskes and all maner of entertainment' (ii.396), including *The Gipsies Metamorphosed*:

The King was so pleased and taken with his entertainment at the Lord Marques [i.e. Buckingham] that he could not forbear to express his contentment in certain verses he made there to this effect, that the ayre, the weather, (though yt were not so here) and every thing els, even the staggs and bucks in their fall did seeme to

smile, so that there was hope of a smiling boy within a while, to which end he concluded with a wish or votum for the felicitie and fruitfulness of that vertuous and blessed couple, and in way of Amen caused the bishop of London in his presence to geve them a benediction. (ii.397)

It is worth reproducing the whole of James's poem before discussing Chamberlain's description of it.

*Verses made by the Kinge, when hee was entertayned at Burly in Rutlandshire, by my L Marquesse of Buckingham.*

*August: 1621*

The heauens that wept perpetually before,  
 Since wee came hither show theyr smilinge cleere,  
 This goodly house it smiles, and all this store  
 Of huge prouision smiles vpon vs heere.  
 The Buckes & Stagges in fatt they seeme to smile:  
 God send a smilinge boy within a while.

*Votum*

*A Vow or Wish for the felicity & fertility of the owners of this house.*

If euer in the Aprill of my dayes  
 I satt vpon Parnassus forked hill:  
 And there inflam'd with sacred fury still  
 By pen proclaim'd our great Apollo's praise:  
 Grant glistringe Phoebus with thy golden rayes  
 My earnest wish which I present thee heere:  
 Beholdinge of this blessed couple deere,  
 Whose vertues pure no pen can duly blaze.  
 Thow by whose heat the trees in fruit abound  
 Blesse them with fruit delicious sweet & fayre,  
 That may succeed them in theyr vertues rare.  
 ffirm plant them in their natiue soyle & ground.  
 Thow Joue, that art the onely God indeed,  
 My prayer heare: sweet Jesu interceed.<sup>14</sup>

Buckingham married Catherine Manners in May 1620, and the couple produced their first child in 1622 – a daughter, not the smiling boy James wished for them. Chamberlain clearly registers the embarrassing nature of this poem, which is rather like a fertility charm. Keen as he

was on hunting and on smiling boys, James envisages something of a solipsistic paradise in the opening stanza.<sup>15</sup> The eliding of the smiling bucks, stags and boy is unsettling – perhaps even more so if one prefers Chamberlain’s reading of bucks and stags in ‘fall’, rather than in ‘fat’, which offers an image of them as willing sacrifices at the King’s hand.<sup>16</sup> It is hard to determine how much more judgement is implied in Chamberlain’s characterisation of James’s inability to contain himself: ‘could not forbear to express his contentment in certain verses’. There is at least some implication in the form of expression used that James perhaps *should* have forbore to express this particular form of contentment. This implication seems more likely given the odd double take about the weather: ‘though yt were not so here’. Chamberlain is surely not simply registering climatic differences between London and Rutland with this observation, but rather acknowledging the effect of James’s public expression of his feelings for Buckingham.

This is, once again, a reading of some of the political implications of this poem; Chamberlain sees it as a piece of writing which confirms (as do so many of James’s literary productions after Buckingham’s ascendancy) the King’s feelings for his favourite, and that favourite’s place at court. This sense is made even stronger when one reads the comment on the poem in the context of a letter which Chamberlain sees as being written at a time of little news. It begins: ‘The last week was so barren that I had no list to write, (for I love not altogether ydle and empty letters) and though this be not much better, yet because I looke ere long to make a step to Warepark to enjoy the fagge-end of this sommer, (which hitherto hath ben such a season as I thincke was never seen,) I would not leave you unsaluted, and withall let you know how we stand here’ (ii.396–7). Then Chamberlain offers the comment on the King’s poem, and this is followed by another list of places, positions and fortunes, beginning with ‘The Lord of Arundells graunt of the corranes [ie. currants] goes not forward’ (ii.397). So the reading of the poem is very much in the context of Chamberlain’s usual reading of matters of social consequence, high and low.<sup>17</sup>

I noted at the beginning of this chapter that it is not possible to use Chamberlain as a necessarily representative reader in 1621: he is quite unique in the way he positions himself as outsider and insider and as a reader of particularly catholic taste. But I do want to use Chamberlain as a paradigm for the practice of reading 1621, because he points to the possibility of ranging between forms, modes, social and cultural productions, generally taken to be quite distinct both in their genre and in their audience. Only when immersed in the general flow of news, of

social and cultural data, as Chamberlain was, is it possible to gain some sense of how information came to be processed as a totality. Chamberlain is in many respects a political reader rather like recent scholars who have reread early modern culture with the aim of restoring it to its political and social context. I see him as the exemplar of a method that will endeavour to allow nothing to pass unnoted. Such a method ensures that we do not read an already over-sifted canon of representative early modern texts, but rather allow ourselves a greater chance to read from within the boundaries of 1621 itself. The result can hardly be a sense of living in Chamberlain's generation, nor, as Stephen Greenblatt has dramatically put it, can we truly speak with the dead.<sup>18</sup> What I am aiming at here is a richer sense of where past texts come from and, in 1621, where they were going.

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