



Giordano Bruno.

Bruno, Giordano (1548-1600)

by Mark Staebler

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Burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic Church in 1600, Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno has come to symbolize the death of individualistic thought at the repressive hand of religious power, as well as its subsequent rebirth.

Although he was accused of blasphemy and immoral conduct as well as heresy, Bruno's specific offense was the propagation of a scientific philosophy that hypothesized the earth's revolving around the sun and the concept of a universe stretching without end to infinity. Twenty-five years before Galileo, Bruno had taken the Copernican concept of a heliocentric solar system to its logical conclusion.

Life and Death

Born Filippo Bruno (and sometimes referred to as Bruno Nolano or Bruno the Nolan) in 1548 in the town of Nola in Campania province near Naples, Bruno took the name "Giordano" when he became a Dominican brother at the age of 15. He was ordained a priest in 1572. His remarkable memory served him well in his studies of the newly-rediscovered Plato and Hermes Trismegistus.

In 1576 Bruno fled Naples to avoid persecution by the Inquisition and subsequently fled Rome for the same reason. Having abandoned the Dominican order, he found a safe haven in Geneva; there he became a Calvinist for a short while until he was excommunicated and forced to flee. His wanderings took him through France; he arrived in Paris in 1581 or 1582.

Enjoying there the protection of King Henry III, Bruno wrote three of his major Latin works on logic, and three of his Italian works on mnemonics, the art of organizing and extending memory.

The actual places of publication of these volumes were disguised: of the six works on philosophy and ethics written in 1584-85, three show the imprint "Venice, 1584," while three show Paris. It is currently agreed that all six were actually published in London under false imprints. Bruno's anomalous, satiric, and obscene stage comedy, *Il Candelaio*, also dates from this period.

At the invitation of the French ambassador to England, Bruno traveled to England, where he lived from 1583 to 1585.

In 1586, Bruno, still under the protection of the French ambassador, left London to return to Paris. After a violent dispute in France over "a scientific instrument," Bruno was forced to flee yet again, this time to Germany, where he was immediately excommunicated by the Lutherans in Helmstadt. Over the next five years, he taught in Wittenberg, in Prague, and in Zurich.

In 1591, at the invitation of the aristocrat Giovanni Mocenigo, Bruno arrived in the Republic of Venice to expound and teach his mnemonic systems and occult philosophies. Denounced for this activity, he was imprisoned there by the Inquisition, then extradited to Rome in 1593. Refusing to recant his beliefs, he was

imprisoned for six years before his sentencing.

On January 8, 1600, Bruno heard his death sentence and replied to the holy worthies, "You who condemn me may tremble more in declaring the sentence than I do upon hearing it." He died in flames on February 17, 1600.

The Vatican placed all of his writings on the infamous Index of Forbidden Books in 1603.

England: Bruno, Marlowe, and Fagot

Bruno's two-year stay (from 1583 through 1585) in the England of Queen Elizabeth I and of Shakespeare often proves the most fascinating period of his eventful life, at least for students of English literature and history. For queer activists seeking to reclaim our roots and forebears, Bruno's English period also proves vital.

In England Bruno met such Elizabethan luminaries as poets Fulke Greville, Sir Philip Sidney (to whom he dedicated *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*), and Christopher Marlowe, as well as the occultist and Hermetic philosopher John Dee. Whether or not he came to know Sir Francis Bacon or William Shakespeare remains unclear, although some scholars detect allusions to him in Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*.

Ben Jonson's play *The Alchemist* offers explicit echoes of Bruno's satiric comedy *Il Candelajo* (1582), while Marlowe's Dr. Faustus yearns to attain Bruno's concept of the Infinite.

Indeed, English-Italian literary comparisons are most apt between Bruno and Marlowe, especially on the basis of their shared iconoclasm: Bruno's *Il Candelajo* laughs at *sporco amor di gargioni* ("the dirty love for boys") whereas Marlowe famously warned of fools "who love not tobacco and boys."

Marlowe's strange death has occasioned many conjectures about his life. Biographer Charles Nicholls, for example, argues that Marlowe served as a spy in the queen's service against the Catholics. Similarly, York University's John Bossy contends that Bruno's English years were spent in the same endeavor, spying for Elizabeth under the pseudonym, "Henry Fagot."

Il Candelajo

As a monk, even a lapsed one, and a philosopher, Bruno was not in a position to leave love poems like those of Marlowe or Michelangelo Buonarroti. Nor did he leave paintings and statues like the Florentine David that might suggest a sexual attraction to other men. But he did leave a single, satiric comedy for the stage, *Il Candelajo*, whose very title, "The Candleholder," is a homosexual slang word of the time, perhaps best rendered in contemporary English as "The Fudgepacker" or "The Butt-bandit."

Il Candelajo presents three characters who are often seen as three of Bruno's alter egos, or three facets of Bruno himself: Manfurio, a pedantic scholar who speaks tortured Latin and loses his glasses; Bonifacio, the "candleholder" homosexual who finally ends up in his wife's bed; and Bartolomeo, the scientist and alchemist who tries to transmute base metals into gold but fails.

Alternatively, writes Roberto Oddo, "The three sage buffoons appear in contradistinction to a band of slum boys who live by their wits, and to the only legitimately "positive" character in the play, the painter Gian Bernardo [Bruno's stand-in]. Gian Bernardo--note the initials G. B.--guides them in their illicit roles, giving them inventive freedom, vitality and a shared code of anti-ethics."

Part of Bruno's subversiveness in the comedy can be found in its language. *Il Candelajo* mixes Italian,

French, Latin, and Neapolitan dialect in a comic pseudo-language. In this field of linguistic and artistic creation, his only peer is the equally linguistically playful François Rabelais (ca 1494-1553).

Il Candelao defies authentic translation. Its pastiches of languages may be rendered into a single, narrative English; or conversely the Latin passages could be left intact and his Neapolitan dialect rendered into Cockney or Ebonic. But none of these solutions adequately conveys the original.

Records reveal no attempt to stage *Il Candelao* until the twentieth century, when it attracted directors of an anti-authoritarian or neo-Brechtian bent. The San Francisco Mime Troupe mounted a version of *Il Candelao* as "guerrilla theater" in 1965, and Italy saw a staging in 2000. Theater critics disliked the Italian production for its length, obscure language, ambiguities, and non-linear narrative; they were confounded by the large audience in attendance, whose sincere laughter and desire to watch a five-hour spectacle proved Bruno's appeal to the common man.

Bruno's Sexuality

While there is no definitive documentary evidence of Bruno's sexual orientation, his homosexuality has long been assumed, principally on the basis of his association with figures such as Marlowe, the accusations of "immoral conduct," and his authorship of *Il Candelao*. Moreover, there is no evidence of any interest on his part in opposite-sex sexual relations.

Both historian John Addington Symonds and aesthete Walter Pater discuss Bruno in detail. Each refers to Bruno's homosexuality as a known, if covert, fact hidden in sly innuendo.

Symonds devotes an entire chapter of his groundbreaking *Renaissance in Italy* to the philosopher, while Pater comments in an 1889 essay that for a man of the spirit, Bruno possessed "a nature so opulently endowed [it] can hardly have been lacking in purely physical ardours." Symonds adds that his own development as a man was due to his readings of Walt Whitman, Goethe, and Giordano Bruno: they "stripped my soul of social prejudices [so that] . . . I have been able to fraternise in comradeship with men of all classes and several races."

Italian gay activist and literary historian Giovanni dall'Orto cites Bruno in his 1988 survey, "Sodomy as Phoenix: Being Homosexual in the Italian Renaissance." In a discussion of "unnatural" desires, he notes that part of the philosopher's offense against the Church was to ascribe the Copernican world outlook to nature itself: whatever comes from within a man is by definition within nature. Hence, Bruno's scientific outlook challenges the very notion of "natural law" and "crime against nature."

Bruno's Legacy

Since his death, Bruno has been seen as a martyr to religious intolerance, a speculative thinker who dabbled in the occult, and a proponent of the new science that "cast all in doubt" during the Renaissance. Only recently has he also been recognized as a queer hero.

Bruno's writings and legacy lay relatively dormant until the nineteenth century, when British scholars presented him as part of a rehabilitated Italian Renaissance. Scholars of the newly-unified Italy of the post-1860s (the "risorgimento") also began to study and reprint Bruno's iconoclastic works.

In 1889, a statue of Bruno was erected on the site of his execution. Sponsored by many of the leading intellectuals of Europe and Rome's municipal government, the monument was bitterly opposed by the Vatican, which rightly saw it as a rebuke of the religious fanaticism that motivated Bruno's execution.

Fittingly, the Rome chapter of Italy's national gay organization, Arcigay, now holds many of its public demonstrations in front of Bruno's statue.

Bruno the monk would have been happy in Rabelais's famous Abbey of Thélème, whose entrance bears the transgressive inscription, *FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS* (Do whatever you like). Indeed, the final words of Bruno's introduction to *Il Candelao* echo this stricture, telling the reader, above all, *Godete dumque, e si possete state sana, et amate chi v'ama* (Therefore take pleasure in things, stay as healthy as you can, and love all those who love you).

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About the Author

Mark Staebler helped organize the first gay student group in the 300-plus year history of Harvard College in 1971. He holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University and has published a verse translation of Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, over 500 reviews and essays on music, a study of gay Puerto Rican poet Manuel Ramos Otero, and feature articles in *TWN*, South Florida's longest-running gay newsweekly.