

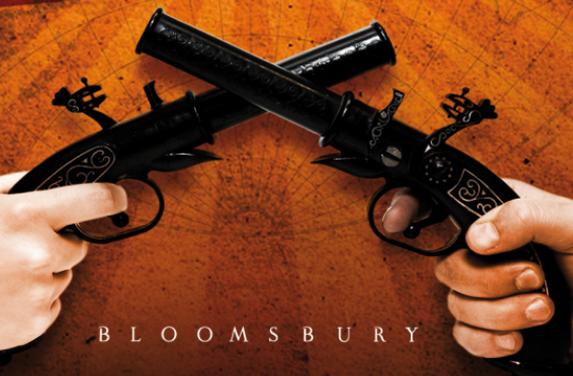
PATRICIA DUNCKER

'Superbly imagined and flamboyantly written'

Beryl Bainbridge



JAMES
MIRANDA
BARRY



BLOOMSBURY

JAMES MIRANDA
BARRY

PATRICIA DUNCKER

B L O O M S B U R Y

LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

For S.J.D.

★ ★ ★

This is as strange a maze as e'er men trod,
And there is in this business more than nature
Was ever conduct of.

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

A surgeon should have an eagle's eye,
a lady's hand and a lion's heart.

Sir Astley Cooper,
Professor of Surgery at Guy's Hospital

PART ONE

THE HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY

The man with a moustache sweeps me up in his arms and bangs me down upon the balustrade. A huge puff of smoke floats out of his mouth. As if he were a dragon. There is a chain hanging from a pin only a few inches away from my nose.

‘Dragon. Gold.’

‘Stand to attention when you’re addressing me, my girl.’ He peers into my eyeballs. I see that his eyes are grey, but flecked with gold. ‘You don’t look like your mother yet, you know. But there’s hope that you will.’

Is he wearing a uniform? Gold shiny buttons and a silk cravat? I put out my fingers and touch the gold. I unleash a strange smell: herbs, musk, forests. And the weariness of immense distances.

‘Travelling dragon.’ I look up at him, already in love with his adventures. ‘Give me gold.’

‘Gold? You little mercenary! Well, well. Don’t think I didn’t offer all that to your mother. Estates, servants, riches, a world of luxury. She wouldn’t have me. Wouldn’t. Even her damned father advised her to reconsider. Another mercenary bastard. She’d promised herself to the other one. Would you believe it? Promised? Who in God’s name makes or keeps promises at the age of sixteen?’

The General has lost his audience. I am now peering over the side of the balustrade. What can I see? A torrent of yellow flowers, falling, falling into a large basin. A stone dolphin with two putti astride,

laughing forever, their faces turned in different directions. A little spurt of water. And circle upon circle of reflections. My face, far below me, shimmers, vanishes, shimmers, gone. The General hauls me upright.

‘Easy there. Don’t you fall off. Your mother will say that I had a jealous fit and pushed you.’

The dragon is giving out small, equal gusts of smoke. I stare hard at his moustachios to find the fire. The little brown poker is too small and thin to produce all that smoke. But come to think of it, the more brilliant the fire, the less smoke. I remember a perpetually blazing corner of the nursery and sit thinking of the dolls on the window sill and the inevitability of tea-time. The dragon unties the chain of gold and carefully fastens it around my neck. He has huge hairy fingers and wears an elaborate heavy ring. But his fingers are gentle, hesitant, insecure. He lays the chain flat, free of my lace collar and red curls.

‘There you are. You asked for gold.’

I understand at once. The dragon is asking me to be his friend. We will be friends forever. We will have adventures together.

‘Dragon.’ I reach up to put my fingers into silk, my head into smoke, my nose into gold. The General kisses the top of my head.

‘Francisco! I thought you’d kidnapped her.’

She is there. My Beloved. All her smooth pink scents, the prickle and stab of her jewellery, the rustle of her silks, the curl of her lip, a pearl in each ear. Now I am perched on her hip, my plump legs astride her waist. I look down at the stone putti in the fountain beneath us. They are riding dolphins. I kiss the shelving pink curve of her jaw and cry out in her ear.

‘Look! Gold.’

‘Now who gave you that?’

Her face is inches away from mine. My Beloved fingers the chain.

‘Mine,’ I say defensively. Hoping we can share it later.

‘Of course it’s yours. Francisco, you mustn’t give her such expensive things.’ But I know from her tone that she is only pretending

to disapprove. She looks up at the dragon. He is twice her size. She is so beautiful to touch. I finger her skin, her pearls. She is mine. She smells of lilacs and powder. The dragon is enveloped in a dense cloud of smoke.

‘Come down into the garden. They won’t miss you for twenty minutes. Don’t look so suspicious. Bring that child. How can I be guilty of any gross improprieties if you’ve got the child in your arms?’

I am swept away into the shrubbery.

Here the earth smells of leaf mould and damp. Drops of water in sunshine become a cluster of brilliants on the rhododendrons. I stare at thick green rushing towards me at eye level. The woman says very little to the man. My Beloved holds me as if she were drowning. But I am looking up, up, up at a vast gulf of blue. Beyond the green cathedral, spangled with pink and purple flowers, into an eternity of luminous blue.

‘Blue. Mine,’ I shriek in her ear.

‘Shhh, darling.’

The dragon is talking to her. Above his low muttering I hear the creak of leather, the cracking of twigs. Now my Beloved is my faithful mare. We are charging towards a gap in the enemy ranks. I dig my heels into her pure white flanks as we sweep past the poised Frenchies, with their green faces and their pink flowering guns. One of the rhododendrons has been transformed into a general. The colossus with the explosion of purple in his cockade must be Bonaparte himself. I flash my sword at him. He wants to steal my chain. My mare shifts beneath me.

‘Don’t kick, sweetheart.’

We sweep towards the gap. My standard-bearer is in front. Smoking. Galloping. We come out of the shrubbery and my mare falls beneath me. But we have escaped the French. Here, all before us, are English fields. Cows standing, chewing, staring, in the spring sunshine. The white fence is a network of shadows on green. Above, the eternity of blue, and all before me, the vastness of this world.

‘Why don’t you run about a little, my love?’

I have lost my army, my horse, my weapons. But I have escaped the French. As I always do in my dreams. I see my Beloved, growing a little smaller, laughing, laughing. Suddenly I have fallen over a grave.

It is a large mound of earth moving slightly at the edges. It is a small grave, not yet decorated with a slab and a name. But it is opening. I sit quite still to watch the resurrection of the dead and my buttocks are growing damp. The earth sarcophagus is cracked across. There is a huge fissure in the lid of this grave, as if the last day had already been announced and the spirit had escaped. I peer superstitiously into the crack, but see only lichen, earth and broken stone. I sit staring at shining wet oceans of green and a trembling grave. This is a child's grave. A child even younger than I am. A child who never knew her Beloved. But she is coming back, struggling under the weight of earth. I lean forward to help. This is a mistake. I catch sight of her claws and pink nose. Quickly. Quickly. She descends back into the grave with a flurry of wet, crumbling earth. I am nearly in tears with disappointment. My dragon must dig her up. My Beloved must find me a baby. I look round for reinforcements. I demand help.

The dragon has quenched his fire. They have both fallen over, like toppled, coloured columns. He is trying to gobble up my Beloved. His moustachios encircle her soft face; one giant claw is fixed in the back of her head, disturbing her gorgeous torrent of ribbons and curls, his other claw is clamped about her waist. No, it is rising, rising carefully towards her left breast. His back arches above her as she falls prone on the grass. Crushed. Her white silk is being eaten by his grey and red stripes. I love her. And he is killing her.

I let out a great wail.

The dragon lets her go. A little. But she is in no hurry to come to me. She enjoys being eaten. She wants him to consume her. She has lost the use of her legs. I increase the volume and frequency of the wail.

At last my Beloved is sweeping across the green meadows towards

me. My Beloved, her hooves pounding the earth, her mane flying, her blue and pink banners trailing in the wind, her eyes flashing as she catches sight of the tiny grave.

‘Oh, my darling love. It’s only a mole. Did it frighten you?’

Yes, it did. The dragon is not to be trusted. He will eat you if you let him too close. I look up mistrustfully, my eyes filling with tears. But my Beloved is not bleeding. Nor is she covered with bites. She has escaped the dragon’s claws. I can see him puffing gently on the horizon. If he comes any closer I will steal all his gold. Yes, all his gold.

But as we scamper back towards him I lose all my fears. They fall away. I have what I want. My Beloved’s hand in mine. Warriors we are. Comrades. Lovers. I will give her all the dragon’s gold. And we will live forever, alone in a cave, somewhere behind the gulf of blue.

‘Chooses her moments, doesn’t she?’ remarks the General.

Suddenly I want to confide in him. Now that my Beloved is completely mine once more.

‘Dead babies.’ I point towards the grave.

‘I haven’t tried to kill you yet.’ The moustache twitches. ‘In fact, for the sake of your mother I will give you anything you want, child. Ask.’

I stare. I have understood. The dragon has become an ancient, leathery, well-travelled magician. He is going to offer me three wishes and this is a test: of my honesty, my breeding, my honour.

My Beloved intervenes. She is not talking to me.

‘I never forgot you. I gave her your name.’

‘She could have been mine in more than name, woman. In fact, can you swear to me that she is not my child?’

Of one thing I am quite certain. I do not belong to the dragon. But he sinks his enormous hairy fingers into my Beloved’s arm. I am too fascinated by his rings, glinting in sunlight, to begin screaming. But as his fingers release her flesh I see small indentations, blue becoming red.

My Beloved bites her lip. I snuggle into her skirts, triumphant, fingering my gold chain. All around us is a world turbulent with

spring light. I am delighted; for I have the distinct impression that they are quarrelling about me.



I watch the firelight making patterns on the tiles. The tiles are black and white marble in the shape of huge diamonds. I try to make my two hands fit completely into one diamond. And they do, easily. I hop like a rabbit from diamond to diamond, each time making sure that my hands never touch the black. If they do touch the black, even the slightest part, something terrible will happen to me. My thumb inadvertently crosses over the forbidden line. And at once my game is finished. I have arrived in a soft, warm stream of red, orange, gold. It is a Turkish carpet. An obstacle presents itself. Four decorated legs in curving black and gold. I hide behind the sofa and peer into two close masses of silk, which are geometric, like the tiles, one is black and one is white. The ladies' knees are touching. One of them has dropped her glove. I settle down beneath them, their personal voyeur, their spy.

‘ . . . a scandal. Well, these days just something of a scandal. I hear she didn't wear her widow's weeds a year. I don't care what she does. Her husband didn't leave her a penny anyway. It was all entailed to the cousins. And knowing her she'd want the best black silk. Or not wear black at all. But for the look of the thing . . . ’

‘ . . . mind you, he'd always been her lover. She met him years before. He used to visit our family. And the Barrys were well-connected. She was torn between the two of them when she was sixteen and really very marriageable. The General went off to fight with the French against England and there were tempests of tears. All kinds of carryings-on. He may be twice her age, but he's a very handsome man. Well, dear, don't look so startled. I'm old enough to say so. Lady Melbourne thinks so too. He's wealthy, talented . . . Of course, he has quite shocking political opinions. He always did have. But even radicalism is perfectly fashionable, if you have enough money to carry it off.’

‘Isn’t he from the Americas?’

‘Venezuela. Or somewhere like that, savage and exotic. But wealthy, my dear, with estates, servants, horses, gold. And of course he’s very well-travelled. I heard him say that if the French invasion had succeeded in ’97 it would have been the best thing that could have happened to us. He thinks the world of Bonaparte. And because he fought on the side of the French he’s a marked man in this country. But he has too much money for them to touch him. Mind you, he’s watched. All the time. I have that on the very best authority. Oh yes, he’s a Papist. And it’s rumoured that he’s had that child baptised. The Barrys were Catholics. But what with all his revolutionary sentiments and French principles he’s probably out of favour with the Papists too. Well, you can see why she’s in love.’

‘. . . Jeremiah Bulkeley was a better catch when she was sixteen. Or at least she thought so. She wasn’t quite so adventurous then. And had all the usual illusions. She was just a little country girl. The General had run off to the wars and the Barrys weren’t rich. But, as I say, they were always well-connected. No, she couldn’t have expected to do better than Bulkeley then . . .’

‘She’s free to marry the General now if she wants to. Then she could be received everywhere. Well, perhaps not everywhere . . .’

‘My dear, I’m not sure he’s the marrying kind. And she has some very odd notions.’

‘. . . and there’s that red-headed child of hers . . .’

‘. . . that’s Bulkeley’s child all right . . .’

‘. . . if not my brother’s . . .’

‘. . . my dear Louisa, you don’t suggest . . .’

‘. . . I’m in a position to know and I’m afraid I do . . .’

‘. . . General Francisco de Miranda and Mrs Bulkeley. No, no, we are disgracefully early. Please don’t apologise . . . May I introduce . . .’

I watch the flicker of my Beloved’s dancing slippers as she crosses the tiles. I flatten myself out onto the rich, warm surface. Her satin slippers look like the tropical butterflies Francisco described, with brilliant golden wings, and spots of black, disappearing suddenly by

magical cryptic colouration on the surface of a tiger lily. She arrives on the carpet and her feet vanish. This is my choice too – vanish, or be sent to bed.

Overhead I hear the muffled slither of politeness. I have blocked up my ears. If I cannot hear I cannot be seen. I survey the battlefield: to my right, leather boots and dancing shoes, frills, flounces and furbelows, straight ahead, chaise longue legs, two, not very solid-looking, to my left, an armada of fire irons, logs and flames. The door is too far away. There can be no escape. I am a spy. I will be shot. Francisco says that spies are always shot. At once. Without trials. I will therefore fight to the death.

No need. The boots creak backwards, giving me a better view of elegant light trousers, and my Beloved's graceful ankles, revealed briefly as she turns, the hem of her shawl trailing across the surface of black and white diamonds. A great gust of cold as the other hall door shuts and the winter pours in from the outer world. I slither away towards the umbrellas and coats and discarded bonnets. Pause in the doorway, then a rapid escape to the bottom of the staircase. Hide behind the sideboard.

The double doors are open into the downstairs dining room. This is one of my favourite rooms. So long as I don't crash into anything I am allowed to wear Francisco's slippers. These are at least ten sizes too big for me, but I can wedge my feet into the toe and use the open flat backs for ballast. Then, gathering speed on the diamonds in the hall, I can slide from one end of the dining room to the other. Rupert bows ironically low. Polishing the oak boards again, Mademoiselle? I'm glad to see that Mademoiselle takes such an interest in the housework. Rupert thinks that I am monstrously spoilt. He says so. Then panders to my desire for sweet cakes, dipped in sweet wine. Only men work for Francisco. We used to have a maid. But my Beloved had no more money to pay for her. So she left. Then there was no more money to pay for the house. So we left that too. Now we live with Francisco.

The dining table is being laid for supper. There is a huge

centrepiece of flowers and fruit, surrounding a small statue of the goddess Flora. Her robe is made of flowers and she carries golden apples in her basket. She is a warm fountain of gold among the white china and dead silver soldiers. I stare at the glasses I am forbidden to touch. Each one has a different face etched in fine swirls. I know all the faces. I have stared at their scratched features, at their grimaces, at their earrings of grapes, their goat-like beards, their ivy-covered rods, their sneers. I want to touch the faces. I am forbidden to touch.

So much I desire is forbidden.

Disgruntled, I check both hall doors, drawing-room door, kitchen door, give myself the all-clear, and then begin the long ascent of the staircase, keeping close to the shadows, counting. The stone stairs are uneven, but I know every step. The candles are lit on the half-landing. The fine glass shades are clear, polished. Salvatore cleans them every day. Francisco bought them from a theatre in Venice that burned down. It was there, just one week before, that he had heard one of the most famous castrati of his age, singing. He explained to me in great detail what a castrato was. It sounded wonderful. You were specially chosen, then you remained a boy forever with a voice borrowed from God and became famous, fat and rich. You never turned into a woman, nor did you die in childbirth.

There is a horsehair cushion on one of the little sofas on the landing. Now it is my saddlepack. I tighten the girth, running two fingers underneath to make certain that my horse is comfortable. I put my feet through the fat stone bannisters and line up my cannon on the front hall door. I have to be both the gunner and the mounted guard. Every so often I change roles. So that my muscles do not freeze up. Up here the hall fire has very little effect. But I cannot be seen. I can pick off anyone who tries to get in. All the guests who have been invited by Francisco and my Beloved are here now. I count out a convoy of elegance and snobbery. Anyone else is an enemy invader. They will be picked off, ascending the staircase.

But no one comes. Rupert and Salvatore are working downstairs. Far away, in the drawing room, the music begins. But I must not

abandon my post or fall asleep. At all costs I must guard the door. The intruders may poison the dogs, murder Rupert and Salvatore with machetes, cutting their throats at once so that their screams are inaudible, swarm up the staircase. I am the last outpost of defence. The city depends on me. I stand guard. But no one comes. I begin to doze off, clutching the stone bannisters. My arse is getting cold. The candles gutter above me.

Suddenly I am awake again, staring at the huge picture that is always there, halfway up the staircase. A man and a woman lean close together. They are vast, giants on Olympus. She holds him close to her. Her fingers are entwined in his long black curls. She shows him her naked breast, her nipple appearing pink between the tresses of her torrent of golden hair. The figures are two solid masses of pink and gold, a gigantic expanse of rich merging flesh, looming far above me. Their nakedness shimmers and gleams in the candlelight. His mouth almost touches hers. For a moment I am terrified. Francisco and my Beloved. They have become monsters. Then the world turns black.

‘Why aren’t you in bed yet, child?’

Francisco has stepped out of the painting, dressed in seconds, and is relieving me of my duties.

‘Will you take the second watch?’ I murmur as he disentangles my legs from the cold stone diagonals of the staircase. If he takes over my post he will not be able to climb back into the picture. Yet again I have rescued my Beloved.

‘I’m on duty all night, soldier.’

Now his moustachios are against my face, his arms around me. I hold on tightly, just in case he tries to get away.

‘You are my prisoner. Don’t try anything,’ I give the orders here. He strides up the stairs, two at a time. There is the library, also lit by candles, brown, red and black leather volumes with a gold globe on the top of one of the bookshelves. The wooden ladder is there for a second, then vanishes as we turn the corner. The terrible painting sinks beneath us. I lean over to see whether it is torn at the edges

where Francisco stepped out. But now it is too far below us, it is becoming too dark to see. The nursery is engulfed in shadows. We have reached the top of the house.

‘You can’t get away from me,’ I mumble accusingly.

‘You’ve taken me prisoner, have you? Right, I yield.’ Francisco lays me out flat upon my bed. He removes my boots.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph, child, your feet are freezing.’

I used to sleep with my Beloved. She used to warm my feet. Since we came to live with Francisco I have been banished to the nursery. There are compensations, but sleeping alone is not one of them. Francisco gives my toes a bracing rub.

‘All right, soldier. Get in. Wiggle down.’

‘Will you tell me a story?’

Anything to keep him here. And out of the painting.

‘Which one do you want? The escape across the marshlands? The battle with the alligator? The Mohammedan brigand who saved my life?’

‘Tell me the story of the picture on the staircase.’

‘No game, soldier. You’re not old enough for *The Rape of Lucretia*.’

‘No, no. Not the one with the black horse. The big, big one with the woman and the man.’

‘That’s *Juno and Jupiter on Mount Ida*. They were the King and Queen of the gods. But Juno was playing a very clever game. You see, there was a war on between the Greeks and the Trojans. All because Paris had run off with Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world . . .’

‘Is she more beautiful than my Beloved?’

‘No, of course not. Juno wasn’t pleased about this, so she was on the side of the Greeks . . .’

‘Why wasn’t she pleased?’

‘She thought that married people shouldn’t run off with people they aren’t married to, so . . .’

‘But you said . . .’

‘Listen, soldier, do you want this story or don’t you?’

‘But . . . all right . . . go on.’

‘Juno was on the side of the Greeks and Jupiter was backing the Trojans. So she was hoping to seduce him off to sleep so that she could arrange the war without any interference. She asked Venus, the goddess of love, for help and Venus gave her a secret potion made with the dew of plants from the forest. And Jupiter was overcome with drowsiness and love . . .’

I don’t hear all the story. But I have the impression that Juno and the Greeks are going to win. And so I am reassured. This is my Beloved’s doing. My Beloved is always on the winning side.

★ ★ ★

I hear her step, somewhere in the room. I smell warm roses in sunshine. She has been dancing. Her hands are damp.

‘Is that you?’

‘Shhhh, darling. Sleep now. It’s nearly morning.’

But I am wide awake.

‘Did you dance all night?’

She laughs softly.

‘Most of it, yes. When we weren’t eating supper.’

‘Do you love me?’

‘More than anyone else in the world.’

This sounds sufficiently extravagant. But I want more.

‘But do you love me the best? More than Francisco?’

‘Well, it’s different. You can’t really compare.’

This will not do.

‘But if you had to choose?’

There is no hesitation.

‘I would choose you.’

‘Mmmmm.’ I snuggle back down into the dark, satisfied. But there is one more question.

‘Who painted you and Francisco on the staircase?’

‘On the staircase?’

‘Yes, enormous.’

She laughs again. She has gathered up her shawl. She is leaving.
‘That’s Juno and Jupiter. Not us. And that was painted by your
uncle, James Barry. Now go to sleep, my love.’

But she is lying. I know she is. It is them.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction

Hallucinating Foucault
Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees
The Deadly Space Between
Seven Tales of Sex and Death
Miss Webster and Chérif
The Strange Case of the Composer and His Judge

Criticism

Sisters and Strangers
Writing on the Wall: Selected Essays

Edited

In and Out of Time
Cancer through the Eyes of Ten Women (with Vicky Wilson)
The Woman who Loved Cucumbers (with Janet Thomas)
Mirror, Mirror (with Janet Thomas)
Safe World Gone (with Janet Thomas)

PATRICIA DUNCKER is the author of five novels: *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), winner of the McKitterick Prize and the Dillons First Fiction Award, *James Miranda Barry* (1999), *The Deadly Space Between* (2002), *Miss Webster and Chérif* (2006), shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize 2007. Her fifth novel, *The Strange Case of the Composer and his Judge* (Bloomsbury, 2010), was shortlisted for the CWA Golden Dagger award for the Best Crime Novel of the Year. She has published two collections of short fiction, *Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees* (1997), shortlisted for the Macmillan Silver Pen Award, and *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* (2003), all of which have been widely translated. Her critical work includes a collection of essays on writing, theory and contemporary literature, *Writing on the Wall* (2002). She is Professor of Contemporary Literature and the University of Manchester.

Praise for *James Miranda Barry*

‘A richly imaginative novel’ *Sunday Times*

‘A powerful atmospheric and highly original novel, full of extraordinary events. Her book is both a superb historical recreation and a magical tour de force’ *Mail on Sunday*

‘An austere beauty’ *Observer*

First published in 1999 by Serpent's Tail
This paperback edition published 2011

Copyright © 1999 by Patricia Duncker

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 36 Soho Square, London W1D 3QY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781408812167

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewan Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.bloomsbury.com/patriciaduncker