

## *Acis, as Genius of Cannons*

“Consult the genius of the place in all;  
That tells the waters or to rise, or fall;  
Or helps th’ ambitious hill the heav’ns to scale,  
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;  
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,  
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades,  
Now breaks, or now directs, th’ intending lines;  
Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs.”

Alexander Pope, *Epistle IV*

In the summer of 1717, after the highly successful performance of his *Water Music* for the King of England, Handel left busy London and went to take up residence at rural Cannons, a few miles from the English capital. The composer, temporarily unable to have his operas produced, was answering the invitation of one of his patrons: James Brydges, the Earl of Carnarvon, who would in 1719 be elevated to the title by which he is best known: the Duke of Chandos. As Paymaster-General of the English armies during the War of Spanish Succession, Brydges was able to amass a colossal fortune starting in 1705. His second marriage, in 1713, to a rich cousin, had added to his wealth. Cassandra Willoughby was also a good match for Brydges, who was an avid art collector. Highly cultivated and artistic, Cassandra had a keen interest in history of painting, having catalogued her father’s collection, and was an amateur painter herself.

The couple set out to enjoy a grand life befitting their high noble rank, and Cannons was to be both the background and symbol of this success. Chandos had started to erect a sumptuous residence at Cannons in 1714. The house itself was of Italian style, a rather new trend in English architecture that was influenced notably by the villas built by Palladio around Venice. England was then as fascinated by Italy as the rest of Europe was, and by the end of the seventeenth century a journey to Italy was a must for the education of every young man of good family. If busy Chandos didn’t himself go to Italy, he wished nevertheless to have Italy around him: the house designed for him by numerous architects, most notably James Gibbs, had all the classical features of symmetry and proportion.

The inside of the house was still under construction in 1718, as the plans for the interior were as grand as for the exterior. Italian artists were brought in to make it the finest house in England, and Chandos spared no expense to have everything be as rich as possible. The rooms, decorated lavishly, were intended to welcome the art treasures he had begun collecting before Cannons was built. Ironically, one of the difficulties he faced was that the War of the Spanish Succession, which was a key factor in his great wealth, also made it more difficult to import art directly from Italy. Even so, his collection of Italian paintings included some of the great masters like Titian and Giorgione. The French school was less well represented, though several paintings by Poussin, an artist who was renowned for his Italian affinity, had been obtained.

Italian and French painters not only decorated the private apartments of the family, they lavished their talents on a series of rooms that were designed to embody a princely life. At a time when public appearances and social gatherings were expressions of power, these spaces were also a kind of set, where the Earl and Countess of Carnarvon could play their roles with magnificence. Numerous rooms were fit to accommodate their passions for the arts, including a picture room, a tapestry room, a huge library, and a special room for music that was situated next to the dining room to allow the noble couple to dine in style. An orchestra and a vocal ensemble were part of the permanent household at Cannons.

But even more than the house and its musical staff, it was the gardens of Cannons that were renowned for their magnificence, their design, and their variety. This admiration was widespread, and the scale of the work put Cannons at the front line of the avant-garde. Thanks to his large grounds, Chandos was able to create a harmonious compendium of different styles. English gardens knew the beginning of a renewal in these years, where the models of Dutch and French gardens were copied but also adapted to allow less formality. In Cannons, like in Het Loo in the Netherlands, there was a pleasure garden and an orchard, but also a grand terrace opening on a parterre with sculptures, on the geometric model of Versailles, which then opened onto a huge park.

The gardens were ornamented with a great basin, a canal, and numerous fountains, all in the Italian manner. As in Versailles, these water features were installed in a spot where neither river nor spring was available; water had to be brought from the closest mountains. To direct such king-like undertakings, Chandos had a water engineer in his household, his chaplain, the Rev. John Theophilus Desaguliers, who created a system of pipes and bores to feed the water features. Desaguliers was truly an expert and, in 1718, dedicated his translation from French of *The Motion of Water* to Chandos. This mastery—and its patronage—over the natural elements can be seen to correspond to the transformation of Acis into a fountain by Galatea. The gardens and waters of Cannons were in the background of the creation of *Acis and Galatea*, a work specially designed for and conceived to please the lord of the manor.

We have very little direct information regarding the private performance of *Acis and Galatea* at Cannons in the summer of 1718. While the selection of this story surely suited Handel, who had already composed an Italian cantata on the same theme, it was also largely appealing to the poets who were by then the literary masters of the intellectual circle at Cannons: Alexander Pope, John Gay, and John Hughes. These poets were deeply connected with pastoral theory, and their skills in pastoral poetry were at a peak during this period, but the choice of the story of Acis and Galatea was certainly influenced by their deep knowledge of the classics, and a strong desire to please their noble patron with a fitting subject.

The characters can first be found in Theocritus's *Idyll XI*, entitled *The Cyclops*, in which the Greek poet tells of the love song Polyphemus addressed to the sea-nymph Galatea, who prefers the shepherd Acis. As Acis changes form at the end of the tale, this story is recounted by Ovid, the Latin poet of the first century, in his celebrated compilation called the *Metamorphoses*. Acis having been crushed under a boulder launched by the jealous Polyphemus, Galatea metamorphosed the young man into a river, Acis's blood being changed into crystal water. The new tale of *Acis and*

*Galatea*, being a product of the collaborative process between writers and composer, contained both poetical and musical evocations of water.

Comparing *Acis and Galatea* with earlier English works generally leads to the conclusion that the work was originally devised as a one-act *masque*. But the similarity of shape with this type of entertainment should not influence our understanding of its form, and in fact *Acis and Galatea* was not meant to be staged like other English dramatic works were in 1718. For a start, the Cannons version included only five solo singers, who sang the principal roles and also served as the “chorus” in a Greek style, commenting on the story but not taking any active part in it. Another piece of evidence about the original staging of the 1718 score was given years later: when a theater production of the work was presented in London in 1731, the work was advertised as “being the first Time it ever was performed in a Theatrical Way.”

The first *Acis and Galatea* was meant to be performed before an audience, not staged like an opera. We can only speculate what exact form this performance took. There is some evidence that *Acis and Galatea* was more a succession of pastoral pictures leading to an apotheosis than a real drama to be performed in a theatrical way. A 1732 performance of the work, this time supervised by the composer, announces clearly, “There will be no Action on the Stage.” Handel chose to present *Acis and Galatea* as a *serenata* in costumes in front of a theatre set showing, “in a Picturesque Manner, a rural Prospect, with Rocks, Groves, Fountains and Grottos”. The pastoral set of this performance looks like the view of a real garden, and one is irresistibly reminded of Cannons. The allegorical content of the libretto and its variations around the water theme may indeed offer a key, if framed by this Arcadian set “and every other Decoration suited to the Subject.” The allegory of the power of water must have found in Cannons a setting full of reflections for the eyes of Chandos and the audience at the first performance.

The gardens and water features created by Chandos made a suitable set for his pastoral, even if stylized. The metamorphosis of Acis could have then taken place in front of the grand canal, maybe involving, by the opening of a large tap at the crucial moment, a display of waterworks... By this simple gesture, the allegory of the power of Galatea/Chandos on the Waters of Cannons would have been crystalline. Acis would have then become “the genius of the place,” in the words of a motto that Pope was soon to define as a rule for inspiration in English garden design, and which already finds an echo in the admiration of John Macky in 1722: “The disposition of the Avenues, gardens, Statues, Painting, and the House of *Cannons*, suits the Genius and Grandeur of its great Master.” In the gardens of Cannons, Handel, Pope, Gay, and Hughes had created a suitable Arcadian pastoral, and Chandos had found, in the river-god Acis, a perfect “genius of the place.”

— Gilbert Blin