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The Death of Alasco

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Notes and Documents

The Death of Alasco

One of the most bizarre descriptions in all of Scott's novels is the manner of Alasco's death in *Kennilworth* (1821). The alchemist, Scott says, "had been mixing some of his devil's medicines, and the glass mask which he used constantly had fallen from his face, so that the subtle poison entered his brain, and did its work."¹ This scene, which to most readers must indeed appear a fanciful absurdity, is, in fact, taken from one of the most celebrated criminal cases of seventeenth-century France. The following, from John Beckmann's *A History of Inventions and Discoveries* (1817), provides a particularly full account of "the French Medea" and her lover.²

"The art of poisoning never excited more attention than it did in France about the year 1670," Beckmann writes. "Mary Margaret d'Aubray, daughter of the lieutenant-civil Dreus d'Aubray, was, in the year 1651, married to the marquis de Brinvillier. . . . He [the marquis] was mestre de camp of the regiment of Normandy, and during the course of his campaigns became acquainted with one Godin de Sainte Croix, a young man of a distinguished family, who served as a captain of cavalry in the regiment of Trassy. This young officer, who was then a needy adventurer, became a constant visitor of the marquis, and in a short time paid his addresses to the marchioness, who lost her husband after she had helped to dissipate his large fortune, and was thus enabled to enjoy her amours in greater freedom." Beckmann goes on to relate how the marchioness' father, scandalized at her conduct, had her lover arrested and thrown into the Bastille, where he learned the art of preparing poisons from another prisoner: an Italian named Exili.

¹ *The Waverley Novels* (Edinburgh, 1871), XII, p. 460.

² See Voltaire, *The Age of Louis XIV*, tr. William F. Fleming (New York, 1901), pp. 168-170. In addition, Beckmann notes several histories of the period which also contain accounts of the affair, e.g. Simon Reboulet, *Histoire du règne de Louis XIV* (Avignon, 1746), V, 159; Antoine-Augustin Bruzen de la Martinière, *Histoire de la vie et du règne de Louis XIV* (La Haye, 1740), IV, 229; and François Gayot de Pitaval, *Causes célèbres et intéressantes* (La Haye, 1737), I, 267-326.

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Upon his release the following year, Sainte Croix promptly taught his newly acquired skills to the marchioness, who often "assumed the appearance of a nun, distributed food to the poor, nursed the sick in the Hôtel Dieu, and gave them medicines, but only for the purpose of trying the strength of her poison undetected on these helpless wretches." When she felt herself and her potions ready, the marchioness turned her talents upon her own family. "By the force of money," Beckmann continues, "she prevailed on Sainte Croix's servant, called La Chaussée, to administer poison to her father, into whose service she got him introduced, and also to her brother, who was a counselor of the parliament, and resided at his father's house. To the former the poison was given ten times before he died; the son died sooner; but the daughter, mademoiselle d'Aubray, the marchioness could not poison, because, perhaps, she was too much on her guard; for a suspicion soon arose that the father and son had been poisoned, and the bodies were opened." Finally, however, the marchioness' career came to an abrupt end.

"Sainte Croix, when preparing poison, was accustomed to wear a glass mask; but as this once happened to drop off by accident, he was suffocated, and found dead in his laboratory. Government caused the effects of this man, who had no family, to be examined, and a list of them to be made out. On searching them, there was found a small box, to which Sainte Croix had affixed a written request, that after his death it might be delivered to the marchioness de Brinvillier, or, in case she should not be living, that it might be burnt." The box, though, was opened, and "there was found in it a great abundance of poisons of every kind, with labels on which their effects, proved by experiments made on animals, were marked. When the marchioness heard of the death of her lover and instructor, she was desirous to have the casket, and endeavoured to get possession of it, by bribing the officers of justice; but as she failed in this, she quitted the kingdom." The marchioness fled first to England, and later to a convent at Liege. Eventually, however, she was lured from her privileged sanctuary by a French officer who "assumed the dress of an abbe, found means to get acquainted with her, acted the part of a lover, and, having engaged her to go out on an excursion of pleasure, arrested her. . . . Notwithstanding all the craft which she employed to escape, she was conveyed to Paris, where she at first denied every thing . . ." ³ Finally, however,

³ *A History of Inventions and Discoveries*, tr. William Johnston; 3d ed. (London, 1817), I, 88-93.

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

the French Medea confessed her crimes, and she was beheaded and her body burnt on the 16th of July, 1676.

Considering both the availability of this account⁴ and Scott's interest in the recondite, it is not surprising that he should utilize the irony of Sainte Croix's death for his poisoner in *Kennilworth*.

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A Copy of Douglas' *ENEADOS*

A copy of the first edition of Gavin Douglas' *The XIII bukes of Eneados* (London, 1553) has recently been acquired by McGill University, Montreal. One of the scarcest books of Scottish poetry, only five copies are located in the *Short-Title Catalogue*.

⁴ Beckmann's *History* was a part of Scott's vast library. See *Catalogue of the Library at Abbotsford*, comp. John George Cochrane (Edinburgh, 1838), p. 204.