REVIEW


In a review of Joan Faust’s *Andrew Marvell’s Liminal Lyrics: The Space Between*, published in these pages, Blaine Greteman cautiously praises Faust’s departure from the “impeccable and familiar historical method” which has characterized much of the best recent work on Marvell. Another volume reviewed in this issue, Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker’s *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane*, might be praised in the same vein; while grounded in a searching historicism, their study takes high-wire risks in going beyond the safe precincts of historical method to reconstruct Marvell’s “imagined life” from the fragmentary glimpses of a self revealed in Marvell’s poetry. Takashi Yoshinaka’s valuable contextualist account of the poet, *Marvell’s Ambivalence: Religion and the Politics of Imagination in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England*, by contrast, resolutely stands or falls on its adherence to an “impeccable and familiar” historical approach.

One of the most successful aspects of Yoshinaka’s method is the author’s deft articulation of readings of Marvell’s prose tracts with discussions of Marvell’s poetry, lending his subject an air of intellectual and psychological coherence that he has often seemed to lack. Of the prose works *The Rehearsal Transpos’d* and *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* are the most often cited here, but Yoshinaka also makes illuminating use of the obscure *Remarks on a Late Disingenuous Discourse* and *A Short Historical Essay*, knitting together treatments of such characteristically Marvellian concerns as providence, choice, skepticism, and sympathy from across the writer’s career. The juxtapositions of poetry and prose never feel forced, and they rarely fail to deepen or sophisticate our understanding of Marvell’s lifelong preoccupations and convictions.

Students of Marvell will also want to have *Marvell’s Ambivalence* near to hand as a sourcebook for the seventeenth-century discourses and debates that enmeshed the poet. The book’s apparatus is magisterial, its footnotes replete with apt quotations from and references to the works of Marvell’s contemporaries, including those he was sympathetic to or influenced by as well as works that counterpoint his own positions. Yoshinaka’s study constitutes a significant remapping of Marvell’s place in the history of ideas and among the “religio-political perspective[s]” of mid-seventeenth-century England, particularly Calvinism and Arminianism. The findings of modern and contemporary commentators on Marvell and his century are also richly mined and documented here: for every “canonical” work cited or deployed Yoshinaka seems to unearth an overlooked journal article or underappreciated monograph, and he sustains with unusual commitment a dialogue with early modern historians. In this economically anxious time for academic presses, some credit must also go to Boydell & Brewer for providing such a generous platform for displaying the author’s research; future scholars will be grateful for it.

“The purpose of this book,” the author tells us at the outset, “is to investigate the way in which the poems of Andrew Marvell, especially those composed, or assumed to have been composed, around 1650, and the philosophical, political and religious fault-lines of the Caroline and Interregnum periods can be mutually illuminating” (1). Yoshinaka also
aims to substantiate Marvell’s “hitherto unnoticed connection with the liberal, rational, and skeptical thinkers associated with the Great Tew circle, in relation to the transformative public events of the period.” The structure of the book is funnel-like, beginning with two wide-ranging chapters locating Marvell within contemporary discourses of providence (Chapter 1) and skepticism (Chapter 2) before proceeding to exhaustively (at times exhaustingly) contextualized accounts of the “Horatian Ode” (Chapter 3), “Appleton House” (Chapter 4), “The Garden” (Chapter 5), “To His Coy Mistress” (Chapter 6), and “Bermudas” (Chapter 7). Providence and chance, destiny and choice, are keywords throughout.

The mutual illumination of Marvell’s poems and the “philosophical, political and religious fault-lines of the Caroline and Interregnum periods” is a welcome premise. Marvell’s irony and (is it fair to say?) his strangeness—especially that of his lyric poetry—has often led to his being prized as singular, whereas Yoshinaka’s approach grants “the chameleon” an historical character and suggests that his “celebrated ambivalence” may signify not just a personal but to some degree a national disposition toward the crises of the middle seventeenth century. The mode of presentation is uncompromisingly circumspect and contextualist; some readers may well wish for a more balanced proportioning of literary-critical exposition with contextual reconstruction. One can see that “Horatian Ode” is germane to Yoshinaka’s theme of “ambivalence,” however there is little excitement in discovering Marvell superbly weighing both (or all) sides of the religio-political equation in 1650; more instructive are later chapters of the book, in which Yoshinaka plunges “Coy Mistress” into a discursive matrix of ambiguously charged (politically speaking) natural philosophy or unpacks the Baxterian probabilism of “perhaps” in “Bermudas.” In a book of this length and density, two significant omissions must be mentioned: the lack of engagement with recent work on Marvell’s sexuality and the avoidance of the dating controversy surrounding “The Garden” and the “Mower” poems. While Yoshinaka signals his awareness of the “dating game” in a long discursive footnote (177 n.2), this is not really adequate when so much of the book’s argument would seem to rest on the resonance of the poems with a presumed compositional context.

Reading Marvell’s Ambivalence while preparing this issue of the Newsletter also prompted some broader questions about the current enterprise of Marvell scholarship. Yoshinaka claims to take up anew Marvell’s “celebrated poetic ambivalence.” I wondered though whether the prevailing historicism in Marvell studies still does celebrate his “poetic ambivalence”? Or has the recovery of a “political” Marvell inclined us to see instead of irony, ambiguity, ambivalence the qualities of an operative, of a man in the world—subtlety, caution, canniness, calculation? Also what relation does “Marvell’s ambivalence” have to “the liminal Marvell” or the “indeterminate Marvell,” terms used recently (though differently inflected) by Joan Faust, by Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker, and by others? How far do they map a new identity for Marvell and how far do they re-canvass or re-contextualize an old one? But in any case Marvellians should be glad for the occasion this important study gives for reassessing Marvell’s contexts and for appreciating his poems’ brilliant discursive layerings.

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