

TRADITIONAL MALE FRIENDSHIP IN MARVELL'S *AN ELEGY UPON THE DEATH OF MY LORD FRANCIS VILLIERS*

BY GREG MILLER

In *An Elegy Upon the Death of My Lord Francis Villiers*, the young Marvell attempts to place himself through writing within the company of friends. (Though the authorship of the poem is contested, I find it consistent in manner, style, and voice with Marvell's body of work.) Consideration of traditional male friendship in this early elegy offers a vantage point from which to reflect on even more ambiguous praise in Marvell's later poems to or about revolutionary figures and a foil against which to place the later satires. I would like to raise the possibility that the model of a community of disinterested friends that Marvell takes from royalist circles becomes the model of his later critiques of self-interestedness in literature and politics. What I see as Marvell's ideal of a Baconian community of the disinterested—the model of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, for example, or the Royal Society for Medicine—survives experiences of defeat, failure, and loss. The “chameleon” Marvell whom so many critics have seen as fleeing us is, this reading suggests, most visible to us in this consistent flight from what we, and many of Marvell's contemporaries, might call the self. To strive to become “disinterested” is to acknowledge the self's tenacious ties, leads, and strivings. Marvell takes ideals, Royalist in genesis, and makes them his own, unremittingly disinterested and un beholden in spirit.<sup>1</sup>

And historically there is a homoerotic component to this community, imagined and actual, beginning with Francis Bacon, and we'll explore that connection shortly.<sup>2</sup> In Marvell's elegy, there is a distinctive, if not unique, quality to the homoeroticism that is richly life-affirming and, if you will, part of a polyerotic whole, almost as if the poem imaginatively counteracts senseless death.<sup>3</sup> And in the poem's homoeroticism, we do not experience the “elaborate joke” of other-gender voicing Alan Bray and other historians of sexuality hear in correspondence between men in early modern England: whether it be John Donne's early poems in which he addresses Henry Wooten as a paramour, or George Herbert's to Francis Bacon speaking as a spurned black woman, or their later Caroline imitators.<sup>4</sup> (One hears modern analogies to the British comedy of drag in Monty Python's Flying Circus.) In a very different tonal register, Marvell's speaker's gaze returns Francis Villiers to himself. The poem is the memorializing of a loss that by most accounts many Englishmen, regardless of political or religious allegiances, felt deeply.

Nor do I think Marvell's elegy imagines Francis Villiers as the narcissist many commentators have claimed, and I think that is the poet's point. (Nor do we find what one might call “homo-narcissism,” an imagining of same-sex desire as narcissistic, as in Donne's “Sappho to Philaenus.”) Francis Villiers does not seek his own image in a glass, nor does he seek himself in a man's gaze, but rather he finds himself reflected in the steel of his opponent's sword or armor, in the real but also playful action of valorous preparation with an intimately engaged opponent. The deep situational irony is that Villiers was attacked by a “Parliamentary soldier dashing off his helmet, then running him through from behind,” as Nigel Smith writes, cutting off his nose after his death and mangling in body.<sup>5</sup> Sparring with the poet, however, is another matter altogether:

Lovely and admirable as he was,  
Yet was his sword or armour all his glass.

Nor in his mistress' eyes that joy he took  
As in an enemy's himself to look.  
I know how well he did, with what delight  
Those serious imitations of fight.  
Still in the trials of strong exercise  
His was the first, and his the second prize.  
(ll. 51-8)

In Donne's "Canonization," "the glasses of your eyes" contain the two lovers' world, and the worlds of all those interceding to be like this "holy" couple in their love.<sup>6</sup> Marvell's man is more a man of action, of engagement with the world, than a man who retires from the world in a single, elevated romantic coupling: Lovely and admirable though he appears to have been, "Yet was his sword or armour all his glass." In other words, this steel was his only mirror, and it was no mirror in any usual sense. The purpose of combat, mock or real, was not to see an image of himself, but to become the beautiful thing, the poem says, that Francis Villiers the man in fact was.

And there is an imaged "currency" to this beauty: like father like son.

We do but faintly God's resemblance bear  
And like rough coins of careless mints appear;  
But he of purpose made, did represent  
In a rich medal every lineament.  
(ll. 47-50)

God pricked out this noble son with a particular purpose in mind, the lines imply, building with a surprising flourish on references to the "crystal metal" of Francis Villiers as a fetus in his mother's "womb ... entomb[ed]" and to the manner in which the murdered Buckingham in God's "eternal court" "shone" (ll. 35, 31-32, 27).

One finds in the poem a startling poignancy, combining a range of moods: humor, intimacy, solemnity, sorrow, reserve, irony, the whole beginning and ending with the angry sarcasm, even rage, of an imagined community, a united "we." The final reference to the "just vengeance" wrought by the "Army"—the New Regular Army is angrily defiant.<sup>7</sup> "We" will not "write" but "kill" so many in retribution for Villiers' senseless killing that the New Regular Army will be required to return and itself meet a catastrophic end, thereby becoming Villiers' "trophy and his tomb." The bookends of the poem are a communally militant and military rage, containing a text within which play, creation, preparation, and self-identifying and creating action appear with startling frequency. The "Fame"—or the noise of newspapers—and the voices of those who long for action to properly monumentalize the dead do not satisfy, however. The meaty matter of the lyric voice urges readers to "stony Valour" (l. 22).

But to return to the image of the "gold coin," the "real thing": the elegy makes use of a model of "disinterested" love between men, unmotivated by the desire to rise in wealth or status. In Stuart Britain, Puritan attacks on friendships as "sodomitical" questioned the reality of old ideals of disinterested, self-sacrificing love, reading such relationships, instead, as perversely disguised versions of self-advancement, particularly when the friends were of significantly different rank and the status of one might be seen as rising as a result of the friendship, and such would be the case in a friendship between the son of a country parson from the North Country and an aristocrat raised in the family of the King. As Alan Bray in *The Friend* writes,

The outline of the 'sodomite,' the betrayer, or the foe were never very far from the flower-strewn world of masculine friendship, and they could never wholly be distinguished from it.

A hard fact that those of power and influence preferred not to see but were willing, still, to make use of.

Bray argues that

the triumphal distinction of friendship from service and from the role of a counselor was possible only in rhetoric: as he and all his world knew, the language of 'friendship' was also part of the language of 'service'; and as for the role of a counselor, 'to take aduise of friends,' as Francis Bacon had put it in his essay 'Of Followers and Friends,' 'is euer honorable.' In the subsequent editions, as Bacon's epigrammatic style twists around the hard realities of friendship, even its rhetoric begins to crumble. In the 1612 edition the addition of the word 'some'—'the aduise of some few friends, is euer honourable'—shifts the weight from friendship as disinterested to a realistic judgment that it often was not.... The disinterested character of friendship has been replaced by its utility.<sup>8</sup>

The useful and the honorable were not always distinct.

What could the young poet gain, in a period of warfare, in siding with the side that had, for a good while, been losing? He makes himself useful to the living sister, to whose beauty and goodness he refers in the poem: Mary Villiers, the Duchess of Richmond. Given the tide of the war, however, the eulogy does in fact appear disinterested, "private," surviving in only two copies, claiming greater authority than the Royalist Press that might trumpet events with a different, less artful, and more predictably strident and ideologically coherent manner, though the poem on the surface would appear to make common cause with such voices.

Please allow me to digress in discussing another male literary friendship with larger political implications, a friendship that is through a web of relations related to the one we are discussing. In a curious pair of poems, one English and one Latin, George Herbert, the younger brother of Lord Edward Herbert, addresses Francis Bacon erotically, the latter poem imitated by the royalists Henry King and John Cleveland. The poet Aurelian Townshend, father of Mary Kirke, one of Francis Villiers's romantic interests, was a travelling companion of Edward Herbert, largely because of his skill as a poet and his ability to speak several languages fluently, skills Marvell, of course, shared.

To the Right Hon, the L. Chancellor (Bacon).

My Lord. A diamond to mee you sent,  
And I to you a Blackamore present.  
Gifts speake their Givers. For as those Refractions,  
Shining and Sharp, point out your rare Perfections;  
So by the Other, you may read in mee  
(Whom Schollers Habitt, & Obscurity  
Hath soild with Black) the color of my state,  
Till your bright gift my blacknesse did abate.  
Onely, most noble Lord, shutt not the doore  
Against this meane & humble Blackamore.  
Perhaps some other subiect I had tried  
But that my Inke was factious for this side.<sup>9</sup>

The "Blackamore" is in all likelihood the Latin poem that I here translate:

An Ethiopian Woman Campaigns for Cestus, A Man of Different Color.

What does it matter to me if my face is black? The color, Cestus,  
 Is the shadows' too, for which love nevertheless prays.  
 You notice the traveler's always sun-burnt brow;  
 Ah, how long the journey she who dies for you wanders.  
 Should black soil form the earth, who abhors the field?  
 Close your eyes, and all to you will be black:  
 Or open them, and you'll see the shadows the body throws;  
 At least, allow me to do you this service out of love for you.  
 Since my face is smoke, what fires would you think have  
 Long since in my breast silently lay hidden?  
 O cruel one, do you tell me no? O fates to me prophets  
 Of my sorrow, who have bestowed on me my mournful cheeks!<sup>10</sup>

Edward Herbert's friend and travelling companion, Aurelian Townshend, in his masque *Tempe Restored*, presents a female character, Circe, in the masque played by a woman, who banishes Athena, dismissed as a mere "man-maiden," played by a man, perhaps offering for Charles's queen an imagined alternative to the homoerotic play of James's masques. The plot thickens. Mary Kirke was a former bedchamber woman of Queen Henrietta Maria. Ben Jonson composed his *Masque of Blackness* (1605) for Queen Anne of Denmark; much later, in 1632, Aurelian Townshend replaced Jonson as Inago Jones's collaborator. Language like that used by George Herbert was seen as "sodomitical," in popular ballads, for example, circulated about the young Villiers' murdered father Buckingham's relationship with King James.<sup>11</sup> The young Francis Villiers, in Marvell's elegy both "comely" and "terrible," becomes the enemy of those Puritanical forces whom in death the imagined Villiers vanquishes.

Townshend's freedom combined with his formal lucidity "helps make Marvell's achievement intelligible."<sup>12</sup> The poem offers a celebration of romantic and erotic freedom that is not, however, licentious in feel, as if sexuality might exist in a moment of prelapsarian innocence. (After all, we imagine 11,000 virgins on the horse with the deceased Francis Villiers; though they aren't in the blessed company of Saint Ursula, they are nevertheless virgins.) The married Mary Kirke—whose father Aurelian Townsend wrote a poem urging young women in general and his daughter in particular to maintain their reputations in refusing the advances of suitors—leaves him a locket of her hair, found on the murdered Villiers' body.

Let not thy beauty make thee proud  
 Though princes do adore thee,  
 Since time and sickn'ss were allowed  
 To mow such flowers before thee.

Nor be not shy to that degree,  
 Thy friends may hardly know thee  
 Nor yet so comming nor so free,  
 That every fly may blow thee.<sup>13</sup>

Marvell's poem refuses the certainties of the Presbyterian majority in Parliament—the presbyter Milton famously called "Old Priest writ Large"—refuses their certainties, judgments, strictures, and sensibilities ("On the new forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament").

You might with much more reason go reprove  
 The am'orous magnet which the north doth love.  
 Or preach divorce and say it is amiss

That with tall elms the twining elms should kiss  
Than chide two such so fit, so equal fair  
That in the world they have no other pair.  
Whom it might seem that Heaven did create  
To restore man into his first estate.  
Yet she for Honour's tyrannous respect  
Her own desires did and his neglect.  
And like the modest plant at every touch  
Shrunk in her leaves and feared it was too much.

(ll. 71-83)

"Honours tyrannous respect" recalls Carew's "A Rapture": "Then tell me why / This Goblin Honor which the World adores / Should make men atheists and not women whores" (ll. 164-166).<sup>14</sup> But though the evening's romance, for which the cavalier Villiers risked his life and lost, is extra-marital, and though Kirk is a "modest plant," the natural attraction and flirtation are celebrated, though in a register different than in much Cavalier verse.

Marvell experienced as a young man in royalist circles—at home and abroad—Ben Jonson's "community of the same." At times making use of coterie manuscript circulation, anonymous broadsides, Marvell in his career engages in the creation, in print, of another kind of community of self-possessed, free, "disinterested" actors who choose a community of a different sort. Marvell's literary attempts are rooted nevertheless in early experiences of human qualities Marvell never ceased to celebrate and, in his literary and polemical texts, embody and extend.

Yet died he not revengeless: much he did  
Ere he could suffer. A whole pyramid  
Of vulgar bodies he erected high:  
Scorning without a sepulcher to die.  
And with his steel which did whole troops divide  
He cut his epitaph on either side.  
Till finding nothing to his courage fit  
He rid up last to death and conquered it.

(ll. 115-122)

Though the poem is a monument, it claims to imitate the greater monument of Villiers' actions.

"The poet is always a shadow of the object of praise," Nigel Smith concludes, "be it the hero Oliver Cromwell or Mary Fairfax. The poet is the invisible opposite of these centres of charisma, and often Marvell confesses that it is the hero who is the real poet."<sup>15</sup> Smith refers to this as Marvell's "brilliant sublimation of frustrated energies,"<sup>16</sup> concluding, with Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker, that Marvell "deconstructs the very bases of heterosexuality and patriarchalism alike."<sup>17</sup>

As I argued in an earlier talk, Marvell's poems reflect on history and striving in ways that refuse the clarifying obfuscations of a singular ideology.

Such fell young Villiers in the cheerful heat  
Of youth: his locks entangled all with sweat  
And those eyes which the Sentinel did keep  
Of Love closed up in an eternal sleep.

(ll. 105-8)

Though Marvell, like many others, loved the man, he did not love the monarch or the ideals for which the man lived and died. But Marvell wrote as if he loved the man and rejected utterly the forces that would restrict Villiers', and his own, liberty to shine in his true coinage.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Steve Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 223–27, 237–38. See also John Henry, *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 51–52; and James Loxley, “The Social Modes of Marvell’s Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Andrew Marvell*, ed. Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8–25.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the homoerotic intertextuality of the poetry of Andrew Marvell and John Hall see Paul Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 221–224.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew C. Augustine on Marvell and “polymorphous perversity,” “‘Lillies without, Roses within’: Marvell’s Poetics of Indeterminacy and *The Nymph Complaining*,” *Criticism* 50.2 (2008): 255–78. See also Hammond, “Marvell’s Ambiguities,” *Figuring Sex*, 186–225.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 167–70. See also George Klawitter, “Verse Letters to T. W. from John Donne: ‘By You My Love Is Sent,’” in *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: Haworth, 1992), 85–102.

<sup>5</sup> *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, rev. ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 12.

<sup>6</sup> *John Donne: The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95–96.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Poems*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Bray, *The Friend*, 201, 199–200.

<sup>9</sup> *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. Canon F. E. Hutchinson, 1941 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 209.

<sup>10</sup> *Aethiopissa ambit Cestum Diuersi Coloris Virum.*

*Qvid mihi si facies negra est? hoc, Ceste, colore*

*Sunt etiam tenebrae, quas tamen optat amor.*

*Cernis vt exustâ semper sit fronte viator;*

*Ah longum, quae te deperit, errat iter.*

*Si nigro sit terra solo, quis despicit aruum?*

*Claude oculos, & erunt omnia nigra tibi:*

*Aut aperi, & cernes corpus quas projicit vmbras;*

*Hoc saltem officio fungar amore tui.*

*Cùm mihi sit facies fumus, quas pectore flammis*

*Iamdudum tacitè delituisse putes?*

*Dure, negas? O fata mihi praesaga doloris,*

*Quae mihi lugubres contribuere genas!*

(*Works*, ed. Hutchinson, 437)

The English translation is collaborative work of Catherine Freis, Richard Freis, and Greg Miller.

<sup>11</sup> Danielle Clarke, “‘The sovereign’s vice begets the subject’s error’: The Duke of Buckingham, ‘sodomy,’ and Narratives of Edward II, 1622–1628,” in *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Tom Betteridge (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 51.

<sup>12</sup> Hugh Kenner, *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: The Schools of Donne and Jonson* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 167.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Ian Spink, *Henry Lawes: Cavalier Songwriter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43–44.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Carew, “A Rapture,” *Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, 343–347.

<sup>15</sup> Nigel Smith, *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 339.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

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<sup>17</sup> Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, "Andrew Marvell and the Toils of Patriarchy: Fatherhood, Longing, and the Body Politic," *ELH* 66 (1999): 631, quoted in Smith, *Chameleon*, 342.