

MARVELL'S BRAHMIN STALLION

BY NICHOLAS VON MALTZAHN

In his polemics of the 1670s, Marvell at first frequently and then more sparingly performs those *tours de force* of wit that lend authority to his prose. Much as those sallies in his poetry, often termed metaphysical, distinguish his lyrics, Marvell was in his lifetime more famous—almost too famous—for brilliant raillery in his polemics. His opponents in the 1670s might hold his very success against him, as a mark of insufficient seriousness, or as the drolling of the commonplace book rather than any more gentlemanly exchange. He has long been understood to have restrained himself after his initial victory over Samuel Parker in 1672-3, though *Mr Smirke* (1676) and even his last *Remarks* (1678) still include some wonderful complexities of wit, as Martin Dzelzainis has shown.<sup>1</sup> Especially in Marvell's *Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government*, he has been thought (and not without reason) to have turned to a more documentary style of work, chronicling the erosion of English liberties in part by resorting to an assembly of witnesses to the history of Crown and Parliament in the 1670s.<sup>2</sup>

The wit that remains in Marvell's *Account* bears noting, however, and perhaps especially that Parthian shot with which Marvell concludes an introductory character of popery (a passage awkwardly interpolated here in 1677, and republished separately after the Revolution in 1688/9 [*PWAM*, 2:209, 218]). Here he professes to fault princes for sloth only, rather than for worse policy, in "all that pretense of enslaving men by the assistance of Religion more easily." Marvell then displays his wit in the comparison of Roman priestly stratagems in this kind to those of priests elsewhere: it "is neither more nor less than when the Bramine, by having the first night of the Bride assures himself of her devotion for the future, and makes her more fit for the husband" (*PWAM*, 2:234).

This jest the most recent editor of the *Account* has annotated with reference to some germane materials, while missing its most immediate source (*PWAM*, 2:234n). Although the sexual services of the "Brachman Stallion" had indeed drawn notice from the range of authorities there cited, another work had more exactly and also newly described the practice as Marvell describes it. That work is of further interest owing to its relation also to Marvell's service to the Earl of Carlisle's embassy to Moscow (1663-4), namely J. Albert de Mandelslo's additional *Travels ... from Persia into the East-Indies* appended with separate pagination to Adam Olearius's *The Voyages & Travels of the Ambassadors Sent by Frederick Duke of Holstein, to the Great Duke of Muscovy, and the King of Persia...* (London, 1662, hereafter *Voyages*). Though he might have returned to Olearius later, Marvell seems likeliest already in 1663 to have prepared for his diplomatic role in Moscow by informing himself of prior diplomats' experiences there. Here was warning too of the "vast charge and many difficulties" to be endured in such an embassy (sig. A2<sup>r</sup>), as the Earl of Carlisle and his retainers also soon discovered on their much less successful mission.

The Mecklenburger Mandelslo's account of his travels in the 1630s had with Olearius's been translated first into French and Dutch, and now into English by John Davies, to be published by Thomas Dring and John Starkey. Olearius's assistance with Mandelslo's work extended to ample interpolations from previous sources and likely Jan Huygen van Linschoten in particular, so may well color the passages under present consideration; I have been unable yet to consult the German original for comparison. In any case, "Mandelslo" is full of interest—he attests to Kandahar, for

example, as already a site of “continual war almost”; or also to the logic of suttee as forestalling in a polygamous society the murder of husbands by jealous wives; or to the wiliness of Parsees, which Kipling later confirmed; and very much more besides (*Voyages*, 18-19, 40-41, 74-78).<sup>3</sup> In describing a world beyond the Persian embassy to Isfahan, this extension of Olearius’s work includes wide intercultural observations of South Asia. Marvell was plainly fascinated.

It is where Mandelslo reports on the Brahmins among the Malabars that he seems especially to have caught Marvell’s eye:

The *Bramanes* are very much respected all over the *Indies*, but more then any where else, among the *Malabares*, where they have a very odd kind of Employment. For there is no marriage contracted among them, but the first Fruits of the Bride are consecrated to the *Braman*, to whom she is brought, to be deflour’d. They believe that the marriage were not sufficiently bless’d, if the *Braman* have not the first trial of the Bride; whence it comes, that many times he is earnestly intreated before he does it; and if the persons be of any quality, he hath a reward given him, as if he had been hired to do the work. When the men are to go any journey, they intreat the *Braman* to have a care of their wives while they are away, and to supply their places till they return. (*Voyages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> pagination p. 68 [sig. Kkkk2<sup>v</sup>])

Marvell’s recollection, perhaps at as much as 15 years distance, compresses the passage, but the fit is better than to those passages cited from Linschoten, Thomas Herbert, and Henry Neville (*PWAM*, 2:234). Moreover, what may seem Marvell’s wide reading here is likely to have had a more immediate purpose: his own service to the Crown and the Earl of Carlisle in 1663-4 invited study of the prior account of an embassy to Moscovia. The association of that earlier diplomatic experience with his own was apparent enough. Starkey republished the Olearius/Mandelslo *Voyages* in 1669; the same year he published Guy de Miège’s *Relation of Three Embassies* describing the Earl of Carlisle’s embassy.

The subtlety of Marvell’s jest bears noting. He himself was a minister’s son and likely attentive to priestly fatherings.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, questions of fatherly potency or incapacity much color his works in verse and prose.<sup>5</sup> We may guess at the private preoccupations that likely preserved this recollection—notably with priestly arrogations, but also celibacy, and with sexual “first Fruits,” but also with sexual confusions and failures, such as we meet with elsewhere in Marvell’s works. Political preoccupations too, of course: the dizzying wit of his present comment barely disguises his implication that it is not statecraft but some more supine insufficiency on Charles II’s part that permits the priesthood so to abuse the subjects’ trust. And there is surely a religious inflection here: it might be understood that the Church should be the unadulterated Bride of Christ, as in Pauline ecclesiology (Ephesians 5:22-33), rather than prey to such pagan embraces, whether Brahmin, or of Rome, or of something as bad nearer to home.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Dzelzainis, "Andrew Marvell and George Villiers, Second Duke of Buckingham," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 36.2 (2010): 151-69.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Annabel Patterson, Martin Dzelzainis, Nicholas von Maltzahn, and N. H. Keeble, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:209-14. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *PWAM*.

<sup>3</sup> See Kipling, "How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin," in *Just So Stories*, ed. Lisa Lewis (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2009), 23-32.

<sup>4</sup> E. E. Duncan-Jones, "Marvell: A Great Master of Words," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 61 (1975): 275.

<sup>5</sup> See Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 41-73.