MARVELL'S MYTHOLOGY OF DISPLACEMENT IN *AN ELEGY UPON THE DEATH OF MY LORD FRANCIS VILLIERS*

BY A. D. COUSINS

Commentary on Marvell's portrayal of Villiers has tended to dwell on his linking Villiers with Narcissus (ll. 51-54) and Adonis (ll. 109-114). There has been exploration of what Marvell's choice of those myths might imply about his own sexuality, since the Narcissus story, especially in its Ovidian version, relates a beautiful boy's tragic arrival at self-knowledge through autoerotic desire, and that of Adonis relates the tragic death of another signally beautiful young male.[1] Yet Marvell's mythologizing of Villiers is far more comprehensive than has been usually suggested—and it is so, I would argue, because Marvell creates around Villiers a complicated mythology of displacement. He needs to fashion this mythology of displacement, as I am calling it, precisely because what he must distance from remembrance of Villiers are dishonor (in the guise of an unchastity that may be adultery) and defeat (in the undeniable form of death in combat). True, Marvell does transform the passing of Villiers into a romance; that romance is, however, a mythmaking tale that borders on incoherence.

The tenor of Marvell's mythmaking in the Villiers romance is introduced virtually at his poem's start, where the speaker addresses Fame: "Methinks thou Fame should not have brought the news [of Villiers' death]. / Thou canst discourse at will and speak at large: / But wast not in the fight" (ll. 2-4). Those words locate the elegy in both the material world of newsbook propaganda and the more serenely elevated as well as abstract domain of myth.[2] On the one hand, Fame is factional and material. It is contested and uncertain. On the other, insofar as Fame can still be thought of as transcendent, its transcendence here is attributed to Villiers himself. Marvell's speaker insists that Villiers autonomously created his own fame (ll. 116-22). Right from the start, the poem is self-divided; and more divided it will become as Marvell's mythmaking proceeds. To reconsider how Marvell's speaker connects Villiers with Narcissus is to see that at once.

He connects them when ending his celebration of Villiers's "unimitable handsomeness" (l. 45):

> 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.
> (ll. 51-54)

There is a Marlovian flow to those lines that recalls the rhythms of *Hero and Leander*. Their diction, too, glances back at phrasing in Marlowe's poem.[3] This evocation of Marlowe's epyllion is of course decorous in several ways: it accords with Marvell's shaping a romance around Villiers' death; further, like Villiers, Leander is said to be exceptionally handsome; finally, we know that Leander will die young, and Villiers has been taken in his youth. Yet Marlowe shows no interest in presenting his paragon of male beauty as a type of heroic virtue, and therein lies the crucial

difference between Marlowe's portrayal of Leander and Marvell's Marlovian rewriting of the Narcissus myth when closing his praise of Villiers's unique "handsomeness." Unlike Leander—but, more important, unlike Narcissus—Villiers does not establish who he is by way of sexual desire. He finds himself in self-reflective military ambition, not least, in self-focused male rivalry. (Interestingly, at ll. 55-58 Marvell's speaker offers his personal testimony to assure us that Villiers was no less preeminent in military skill than in looks.) This initiates a still more complicated and disjunctive moment in Marvell's mythologizing.

His speaker proceeds to link Villiers's sister, the Duchess of Richmond, with Venus:

> Bright Lady, thou that rulest from above
> The last and greatest monarchy of love:
> Fair Richmond hold thy brother or he goes.
> Try if the jasmine of thy hand or rose
> Of thy red lip can keep him always here:
> For he loves danger and doth never fear.
> (ll. 59-64)

That incongruously incestuous and chaste re-telling of the Venus and Adonis myth presents Villiers as both a destined victim and nonetheless empowered. First a heroically refigured Narcissus, now he becomes an Adonis of heroic stature. He is here an Adonis resembling *Mars Victor*; and, if his sister/Venus cannot detain him, another female presence in the poem nevertheless does. According to Marvell's speaker, only "The matchless Chlora" (l. 69) "could now prolong / His [Villiers's] stay" (ll. 67-68)—that is, delay him from rejoining his troops and thus unintentionally leave him exposed to fatal attack when, later, he sought to reunite with them. It is precisely and ironically her delaying him, in other words, that brings about his death. "Chlora" has long been identified as Mary Kirke, daughter to Aurelian Townshend and married at the time of her involvement with Villiers.[4] Ostentatiously careful to evade any suggestion of sexual impropriety between Villiers and Kirke, Marvell's speaker in effect transforms her into a second *Venus Caelestis* and so a counterpart to Villiers's sister. But, unlike the Duchess of Richmond, Mary Kirke becomes as well a type of *Venus Victrix*. This is not merely because she succeeds in keeping Villiers back from the war. The speaker goes on to assert that the pair remained innocent despite their physical desire for one another, chiefly by reason of Kirke's unwavering commitment to chastity (ll. 80-82). Indeed, as a result of her devotion to female "Honour" (l. 79), "it might seem that Heaven did create" the chaste lovers in order "To restore man unto his first estate" (ll. 77-78). She being at once *Venus Caelestis* and *Venus Victrix*, they become as if an unfallen Adam and Eve. Marvell's mythologizing of Villiers—in particular, his intricate rewriting of the Venus and Adonis story—may well be the stuff of Caroline romance; it also verges on confusion.

The more Marvell's mythmaking seeks to harmonize the incongruities of Villiers's death, the more it draws attention to its own elegantly desperate labors. Obvious problems center on Kirke's role as *Venus Victrix* and Villiers's as *Mars Victor*. If she is one, then he cannot really be the other. It might seem that the discrepancy is explicable enough: she dominates their relationship, making them the embodiments of courtly Platonic Love; through his heroic virtue, he dominates his and the court's foes. Evasion or concealment is essential to both elements of such an argument, however. The mythology of displacement designed to distance sexual impropriety from the remembrance of Villiers is insistent, defiantly inconsistent and implausible. Marvell's elaborate metamorphosis of Kirke into *Venus Victrix* acknowledges the power of the unflattering circumstances that it toils to fictionalize. Yet because

Villiers dies in combat, a greater problem lies in Marvell's implicitly associating him with Mars the Victor. Marvell's speaker aims of course to distance the idea of defeat from the fact of Villiers's death; but his attempt to sublimate the latter's death into triumph is a self-consciously precarious act of repudiation. When the speaker tells of Villiers's riding from "[t]he matchless Chlora" back to war, he iterates his subject's role as a Mars-like hero of romance: "How comely and how terrible he [Villiers] sits / At once and war as well as love befits!" (ll. 91-92). In order to image Villiers as a Mars who can suffer what might seem defeat but is undeniably death, he then links Villiers with Hector (ll. 97-104) and, again, Adonis (ll. 109-14). Yet this is a Hector slain by Myrmidons and not Achilles, an Adonis killed by boors and not a boar; and this is the point at which Marvell's mythology of displacement seeks to identify victory.

The speaker's allusion to Hector establishes an analogy that, although limited, is affective, for it allows him to evoke the pathos both of Villiers's untimely death and of the savagery visited upon Villiers's corpse.[5] First, Hector is described as "ignorant that yet e'er night he must / Be drawn by him [Achilles] inglorious through the dust" (ll. 103-4). Then follows, "Such fell young Villiers in the cheerful heat / Of youth: his locks entangled all with sweat" (ll. 105-6). After this—and description of Villiers's supplanting Adonis as a cause of grief for Venus—we are told:

> 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. 115-22)

Thus Villiers becomes a Hector who is victorious beyond mere victory, a conqueror glorious in his contempt of being overwhelmed by lesser men and all the more spectacular in achievement because they do overwhelm him.[6] He may have been outnumbered by his foes and unable to defeat each and every one of them, but by slaughtering so many he revenged himself upon them before his own death; and because he eternized himself through that slaughter, through his Homeric (albeit also Egyptian) accumulation of corpses, he managed even to challenge and overcome death itself. In despite of what might otherwise appear Villiers's ugly if valiant defeat, Marvell's speaker offers an urgent and highly wrought assertion of his right to be remembered as a hero in the mold of Mars the Victor.

Marvell's self-consciously overreaching fiction there suggests of course that Villiers was supranatural in life and triumphantly so in dying; indeed, it indicates Marvell's personal triumph over the artistic challenges inherent in the circumstances occasioning his elegy. His intricate romance celebrates his subject's powers and his own: Villiers's heroism and the heroic aspirations of his own artistry. It affirms the courtly culture in which Villiers participated, and with which Marvell distinctly associates himself. Nevertheless, his virtuosic attempt to make Villiers's death an epiphany further intimates the strain in his mythmaking, which the affinities of his epideictic rhetoric emphasize. Here, as elsewhere in the poem, the voice of Marvell's speaker resonates with that of John Cleveland (and here, to a much lesser extent, likewise with that of Thomas Carew). His voicing a courtly *hauteur* through hyperbolic disdain recalls Cleveland's recurrent tactic for dealing with the enemies of the Crown. Marvell's speaker, expressing his ingeniously troped

scorn of those lesser men whose "vulgar bodies" serve only as a memorial to Villiers, is akin to—though not identical with—Cleveland's persona in *To P[rince] Rupert*:

> Sure *Iove* descended in a leaden shower
> To get this *Perseus* [Rupert]: hence the fatall power
> Of shot is strangled: bullets thus allied,
> Feare to commit an act of Parricide.
> Go on brave Prince, and make the world confesse
> Thou art the greater world, and that the lesse.
> Scatter th'accumulative King; untruss
> That five-fold fiend, the States SMECTYMNUUS.[7]

Although each proclaims victory, the narrative in the climactic episode of Cleveland's poem reverses its counterpart in the climactic episode of Marvell's. This in itself is not unrevealing; but more importantly, within each we see the same supranatural characterization, the same contempt, expressing similar political sympathies. Lingering reflections of those sympathies can be seen in the icon of Charles I set within *An Horatian Ode*—and, beyond, in the celebratory allusions to Davenant within *Tom May's Death.*

In both passages a mythologized, courtly hero disdains and transcends armed opposition; just so, the speakers in both passages laud the hero with an extravagant ingenuity that also directs *sdegno* towards those who are outsiders and underlings.[8] As we recognize at once, however, the passages strikingly differ. Cleveland fables that Rupert is by divine origin beyond defeat and by natural law impervious to wounds. Similar layers of fable are woven round Marvell's Villiers—yet if defeat can be denied, vulnerability and death cannot. Thus the aptness with which Marvell's speaker in effect translates Carew's elegiac exaltation of Donne into his own of Villiers. Carew's "Here lies a King, that rul'd as hee thought fit / The universall Monarchy of wit" now becomes "Till finding nothing to his courage fit / He rid up last to death and conquered it" (ll. 121-22).[9] In the pacific time of James and the earlier reign of Charles, Donne was the all-conquering monarch of wit; in the war-fractured time later in Charles's reign, when the composite British Empire ruptures in internecine struggle, Villiers must seek to conquer death itself. The fiction that he has done so—the flamboyant displacement of his defeat—nonetheless allusively acknowledges the disfigurement and mutilation consequent upon his death (ll. 104-10). It cannot ignore the brutalizing violence that points to a larger disfiguring and dismemberment: that of the body politic by civil war. A triple loss is therefore communicated throughout Marvell's lament for Villiers: of the scion of a preeminent royalist family; of an unquestionable belief that cavalier heroic virtue will necessarily overcome dissidence; and of the Caroline court's assured dominance over the homeland. Marvell may well have been pressed for time when writing the elegy for Villiers. But the greatest pressure on him lay in seeking to represent and encompass that manifold loss, for under it Marvell's mythologizing romance becomes all but incoherent.

Macquarie University

Notes

[1] See especially Paul Hammond, *Figuring Sex Between Men from Shakespeare to Rochester* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 212-14. See also, Greg Miller, "Traditional Male Friendship in Marvell's 'Elegy Upon the Death of Lord Francis Villiers,'" *Andrew Marvell Newsletter* 5.1 (Summer 2013). Reference to Marvell's

poem is from *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, rev. edn (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), cited subsequently as Smith. Although there used to be some doubt about attribution, the Villiers poem is now generally accepted as Marvell's.

[2] On the relevance of newsbooks, see David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics 1627-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 181. See also: Joad Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper: English Newsbooks 1641-1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 185-87; Jason Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95-100.

[3] See for example 1:45-48 and 141-42, but also *Philippians* 4:8. Reference to Marlowe's verse is from *The Collected Poems*, ed. Patrick Cheney and Brian J. Striar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[4] Smith, 11 and 16, citing E. E. Duncan-Jones, "Notes on Marvell," *Notes and Queries* 198 (1953): 102.

[5] With regard to the latter, see Smith, 12.

[6] His death is consequently reminiscent of, while differing from, Hector's in *Troilus and Cressida*.

[7] Reference is from *The Poems of John Cleveland*, ed. Brian Morris and Eleanor Withington (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). Cleveland's modern editors note that the penultimate line in this passage points to "the 'Five Members' who are dubbed with the nickname of Pym their leader, and referred to in the next line" (130). For further information on "Smectymnuus" see the headnote to Cleveland's poem with that title (102). See also *The Rebell Scot*, ll. 89-94. For a mock-heroic antithesis to Marvell's image of Villiers, see *The Mixt Assembly*, ll. 53-62.

[8] The aggression that Marvell's speaker directs against those in command of Parliament's armies could hardly be more emphatic. Addressing Fame, he asserts: "Much rather thou I know expect'st to tell / How heavy Cromwell gnashed the earth and fell, / Or how slow Death far from the sight of day / The long-deceivèd Fairfax bore away" (ll. 13-16). Near the poem's end, he turns his animosity against the rank and file.

[9] Reference to Carew is from *The Poems of Thomas Carew with His Masque Coelum Britannicum*, ed. Rhodes Dunlap, corr. edn (1949; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).