Marvell and Maniban
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For Andrew Marvell, writing poetry was to be engaged in a promotional system as he drew on humanist skills that became his stock in trade when he determined not to follow his father into the ministry. How publicly he performed or disseminated his poetry is another matter, the manuscript evidence suggesting only a limited diffusion of his poems in his lifetime and those chiefly his Restoration satires.\(^1\) The publication only posthumously of Marvell’s Miscellaneous Poems (1681), which is the sole witness for much of his poetry, has cemented his reputation for privacy. Even his more private performances—those influentially characterized by T.S. Eliot as “the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody” (89)—were part of a secretarial repertoire in which Marvell’s virtuosity might be winningly on display, whether to others or to himself. Beyond such obvious instances as Marvell’s Protecto Poems, we get glimpses of his poetic interests informing his relation to his patrons—in his correspondence with the Lord Wharton, for example—and to his family.\(^2\) The profound worldliness of Marvell’s work was effaced when twentieth-century biographical tradition chose to cast Marvell as an enigma and when critical tradition chose to elevate his lyric poetry at the expense of his satires and his political prose. Lost was the occasional dimension of even that lyric poetry, its intimate and intricate relation with pretexts, patronage, and the poet’s interregnal and Restoration careers. But this may be more recoverable than has been allowed. It is often said that Andrew Marvell reveals little of himself, but perhaps we have been looking in the wrong places.

One of Marvell’s more self-revealing performances is among the least known of his works. Published in his Miscellaneous Poems (1681) are the Latin elegiac distichs addressed “To a Gentleman that only upon the sight of the Author’s writing, had given a Character of his Person and Judgment of his Fortune” (how far this is Marvell’s own title remains uncertain). Its more Marvellian subtitle names its subject in addressing “Illestrissimo Viro Domino Lanceloto Josepcho de Maniban Grammatomantis.” Over 80 years ago, Pierre Legouis corrected eighteenth-century speculation that the poem arose from some early episode in the poet’s life. He instead located a branch of the Maniban family in Bordeaux and tentatively identified the subject of Marvell’s distichs as the abbe mentioned in one of Marvell’s letters to his nephew there (17 July 1676).\(^3\) Where

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Legouis's inquiries centered on Maniban's identity, the present argument begins with that abbé's part in occasioning Marvell's poem.

The biographical context informs the peculiar blend of tenderness and menace of the Maniban poem, which menace Legouis early and late sought to explain away but which Nigel Smith has rightly emphasized. Elizabeth Donno in her edition of the poetry has also noted that its "hyperbolical tone . . . emphasizes a mocking intent" (302n). The mockery has been supposed "good-humoured and ironic" (Haan 199), but even if we were to accept this characterization of its tone, it may not enough convey the urgency of Marvell's underlying concern. He finally associates Maniban with the Nauplian Palamedes, thus counterpart to Marvell's implicit Ulysses. This recalls the murderous forgery through which Ulysses revenged himself upon Palamedes, who had seen through the madness Ulysses had feigned seeking to escape going to Troy (Hyginus, Fabulae no. 95, 105). This notoriously "diuelling subtiltie" (Le Sylvain 412) on Ulysses's part complicates Marvell's self-representation as one who resents being discovered. However ingenious Palamedes was in his invention of letters of the alphabet (Hyginus, Fabulae no. 277), Ulysses exceeds that ingenuity in perpetrating unjust violence against him. But Marvell's own ingenuity is here to refer only to the Palamedes "Qui dedit ex avium scriptoria signa volatu, / Sydereaque idem nobilis arte fuit" (who provided written symbols from the flight of birds, and was likewise famous in the art of the stars), with Maniban conflating the genesis of writing with augury.

Owing to Marvell's letter to Popple dated 17 July 1676, his sharpness in writing of Maniban has been held to follow from Marvell's concern to conceal his controversial engagements in that season of Mr. Smirke and his Short Historical Essay. If so, it is odd that he should then write quite openly in English about that controversy and reserve his Latin in this letter for more personal communication. But a newly discovered document from the next year sheds light on the later circumstances in which Marvell likely wrote the poem and on why it is in Latin, on why the "grammatomancy" in question was attempted, and on why Marvell should have so resented it.

To be understood aright the poem should be read as addressed much more to Marvell's favorite nephew, William Popple, than to Lancelot-Joseph de Maniban. William Popple (1638-1708) was the son of Marvell's sister Mary's marriage to Edmund Popple, that brother-in-law long a pillar of the Hull mercantile community who did much to foster Marvell's later career, both with his Hull constituency and with the Hull shipmasters' guild, the Trinity House. Marvell's correspondence with the