The Subliminal Muse in Marvell’s “Unfortunate Lover”

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A definitive reading of Marvell’s “The Unfortunate Lover” is impossible. Unlike Jonson’s “On my First Son” or Milton’s Piedmontese massacre sonnet, we do not know the *mise-en-scène* for Marvell’s poem. Thus it justifies a reader’s response more than those two poems, making it in some ways a more satisfying read because we are not distracted by facts; we are not cemented to one historical moment with exact characters overshadowing the imagination’s stage. We are not, of course, free to read it in just any way: Clues within the poem do anchor it to some readings more than to others. Reading the poem as a eulogy for a shipwrecked Charles I as Muriel C. Bradbrook and Margarita Stocker have done (see Marvell, *Poems* 88) is difficult. If there is any political content in the poem, the poem more probably uses political gloss to enhance the “allusive amatory state [rather] than the other way round” (Norbrook 168). Perhaps most telling in a reading of this poem are its two *personae*: the shipwrecked male and the male narrator. The absence of any female character in the poem leads a reader to expect some degree of homoeroticism in this drama; indeed, the narrator does refer to the tragic figure immortalized in the poem as “my poor Lover” (11). Of course, “my” lover may very well be read as “our” lover, in the sense of “as we take up our story, we find our lover shipwrecked and fighting for his life,” but such a reading is not the only, nor the most probable, reading of the intensely passionate “my.” The poem argues strongly in itself for a biographical reading.

The imagery of “The Unfortunate Lover” is perplexing and complicates the narrative, if there is a narrative at all: The entire poem may be an extended metaphor for an aborted love. In stanza II the details, for example, work in three different ways at once. The shipwreck may be real, in which case the mother and fetus are smashed against a rock effecting the Caesarian section mentioned in line 16, gruesome though possible. In a second alternative, the “mother” might simply be the ship on which the lover travels, in which case the lover is a fully grown sailor or passenger caught in the throes of a massive storm, one that lasts days, if we can believe the poem. A third way is that the entire scene is meta-

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physical, taking place, as it were, in the narrator's or possibly Marvell's heart, as he creates images to capture the break-up of a love affair. That the entire situation is metaphoric is shored up in stanza III, wherein we are told the storm lashes the lover several days, and in stanzas IV and V, wherein we meet a pair of cormorants with decidedly separate missions: one feeds the new-born and the other pecks at his heart. These birds should incline most readers to conclude they are not reading the account of an actual maritime disaster but rather are deep inside the narrator's brain where he is struggling to express the smash-up of a love entanglement.

Marvell was no stranger to loss by drowning: His own father was lost to the Humber in the winter of 1641. Closer to the penning of "The Unfortunate Lover," other deaths, though not by drowning, inspired Marvell to write formal elegies: the death of Lord Villiers, the brother of the second Duke of Buckingham, on the battlefield in 1648, and the loss of Henry, Lord Hastings, to smallpox at age 19 in 1649. In between these two deaths came the death of Marvell's nephew and possible godson (von Maltzahn 43). Of the two formal elegies, both written as occasional verse, the Villiers poem is the more satisfactory. The Hastings poem, conventional in its sentiments and rather disengaged from its subject, is not without charm but lacks the intense emotional engagement the Villiers poem enjoys. The latter poem was published hugger-mugger in quarto pamphlet and did not appear in the 1681 edition of Marvell's poems. Most readers presume that since the poem was dangerously pro-Royalist for its time, Marvell, who had cast his lot with the revolutionaries, could not have praised so ardently in print a man who died on the wrong side. But such readers overlook another aspect of the poem that may have been embarrassing to the poet, i.e., its unabashed dalliance with Villiers' beauty in such lines as "Never was any humane plant that grew / More faire then this and acceptably new" (39-40) or "And his unimitable handsomenesse / Made him indeed be more then man, not less" (45-46) or "lovely and admirable as he was" (51). Moreover, the strong interest in Villiers's love-life and a comparison to Venus's Adonis are rather suspect in an elegy. The Villiers poem has an infatuation in it that is absent from the Hastings poem and makes it in some respects a companion elegy to "The Unfortunate Lover," if only for the highly personal link between subject and poet. Hastings received a formulaic tribute, but Villiers received a poem so emotionally charged that it may have been too warm too include in a compendium of public adulation.

But if the unfortunate lover is fictive, we have another problem. What is he doing on the ocean? The poem gives no reason for his being there but simply states,