

"HE NOTHING COMMON DID OR MEAN":  
MARVELL'S CHARLES I AND  
HORACE'S *NON HUMILIS MULIER*

at the instant when the blow was given there was such a dismal groan among the thousands of people that were within sight of it (as it were WITH ONE CONSENT) as he had never *heard before*, and desired he might never hear the like again, nor see such a cause for it.

— Eyewitness account of Dr. Phillip Henry

Now Caesar, though he was marvelous sorie for the death of Cleopatra, yet he wondred at her noble minde and corage, and therefore commaunded she should be nobly buried, and layed by Antonius.

— North's *Plutarch* (1579)

Phillip Henry and his fellow spectators would remember details of the execution of Charles I all of their lives.<sup>1</sup> On this cold, sunny day (30 January 1649), the hangmen were disguised on the black-draped scaffold, its rope-trussed block so short that the king would be forced to lie down, even after he had requested a higher block so that he could kneel. As if to further obscure him from the thousands who turned out, the Army guards surrounded him. Charles made a short, brave speech in which he repented for the death of the Lord Strafford in Ireland,<sup>2</sup> and described himself as a "Martyr to the people." As he spoke, the guards clapped their hands, either to drown out his words or to applaud them. When Charles had finished, he worried lest the headsman would botch the job: "Take care they do not put me in pain." After he lay down and stretched forth his arms for the signal to strike, the executioner complied, severing the head with one clean stroke before he held it up by the hair to the crowd. Those assembled let out a collective groan at this sight, but the usual mob surged forward to soak up the gore with handkerchiefs. Slivers from the blood-soaked boards sold well as souvenirs.<sup>3</sup>

The discovery of Cleopatra's body by a much smaller group of people was no less a spectacle. Nor was the sight of her effigy paraded in the inevitable triumph, which even as partisan a detractor as Propertius describes in loving detail: *bracchia spectavi sacris admorsa colubris* ["I saw her arms bitten by the sacred adders"] (*Elegiarum* III.xi.53).<sup>4</sup> I cite Plutarch's account of Octavius Caesar's reaction to Cleopatra's suicide with Dr.

Henry's recollections because both eyewitnesses were "marvelous sorie" at the demise of the respective monarchs, and "wondred" at their "noble minde and corage," reactions we might not expect. Such sorrow at death and wonder at nobility figure prominently in the poetics of Andrew Marvell's "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwel's Return from Ireland" (1650) as he memorializes Charles. The title signifies his kinship with his Roman forbear; indeed, he is perhaps our most Horatian poet. Yet, more specifically, his literary recreation of the doomed king owes much to Horace's ode *Nunc est bibendum* (I.37), especially the portrait therein of Cleopatra, noble in defeat after the battle of Actium (38 BCE).<sup>5</sup> Both poets unexpectedly praise the conquered.

Marvell's poem was not widely published until 1776, cancelled from all known editions of the 1681 Folio of his works except two.<sup>6</sup> The reason seems obvious. An ode ostensibly praising Cromwell would certainly not be popular during the Restoration, as long as the son of his executed predecessor was king. Then again, the sympathetic portrait of Charles could have registered with some Royalists during the Interregnum, who may have circulated the poem in manuscript.<sup>7</sup>

Since we cannot prove who read the "Ode" or how it was received, Marvell's intent has been the focus of intense critical disagreement. His poem served as a centerpiece in the mid-twentieth-century debate over the New Criticism, especially that between Cleanth Brooks and Douglas Bush, whereby the "Ode" became truly canonical.<sup>8</sup> There is scarcely more agreement concerning Horace's attitude toward his Egyptian queen. Scholars of English literature say that *Odes* I.37 "ends as a magnificent and moving tribute to defeated Cleopatra."<sup>9</sup> However, commentators on Horace himself reach no such consensus, and some view *Nunc est bibendum* as a "celebration of" the suicide of an "ugly and vindictive woman" who "had to die."<sup>10</sup>

R. S. Syfret and John S. Coolidge have noted several Horatian parallels and influences in the "Ode." They link Charles with Horace's Octavius or Lucan's Julius Caesar (or Pompey) in the *Pharsalia*, albeit the focus is inevitably upon Cromwell.<sup>11</sup> Yet no one has made a detailed comparison between Marvell's king and Cleopatra in *Nunc est bibendum*.

Actually, Marvell makes extensive use of Horace's *non humilis mulier* as a literary model, and to analyze the resonances is crucial to any interpretation of intent, because Horace taught Marvell the usefulness of subtlety in disturbing the equilibrium of occasional poetry.<sup>12</sup> "An Horatian Ode," like *Nunc est bibendum*, nearly subverts praise for the conqueror with equal praise for the conquered.

In the fifth strophe of Horace's ode, he makes Caesar the subject and the unnamable Cleopatra the object of pursuit and capture:

accipiter velut  
mollis columbus aut leporem citus  
venator in campis nivalis  
Haemoniae

[just as the falcon (pursues) the gentle  
dove or the swift hunter the hare in the  
snowy fields of Thessaly] (17-20)

Earlier, Cleopatra is a *regina demens* (7), drunk with power and possibly Maerotic wine (14), yet *impotens* (10), out of control and surrounded by her perverted flock, a woman who has deluded herself into thinking that she could challenge *imperium*. But, halfway through the ode, Horace modulates this harshness with similes, so that Cleopatra is metamorphosed into a gentle dove to Octavius's predatory falcon, then into a rabbit not deft enough to elude the *venator*. By making her vulnerable and sympathetic, Horace changes the mood in the middle of his poem, balancing his earlier negative assessment and preparing us for the restrained and powerful surge of emotion in the final strophe.

Marvell also introduces Charles in the middle of his ode, but this section serves as a peak or climax rather than the finishing *tour de force* of his Latin model. He draws directly upon Horace's hunter/prey images to create his Cromwell/Charles dynamic.<sup>13</sup> Surely Cromwell is *venator* in "He wove a Net of such a scope" (50). He is also *accipiter*: a "Falcon high" who "Falls heavy from the Sky" (91-92). By implication, then, Charles is *columbus* and *lepus*, the victim of an unrelenting natural force. Marvell even implies that the "Net" Cromwell

"wove" was a ruse (cf. the ironic "wiser Art" [48]) to make Charles flee Hampton Court "To *Caresbrooks* narrow case" (52), and so to execution upon "*The Tragick Scaffold*" (54).<sup>14</sup> However, just as Marvell presents us with an even more brutal image of Cromwell, he paradoxically rationalizes the role of the *accipiter*, who,

having kill'd, no more does search,  
But on the next green Bow to pearch;  
Where, when he first does lure,  
The Falckner has her sure. (93-96)

Just as Marvell calculates the harshness of "kill'd," he immediately softens it, using an analogy to explain Cromwell's function relative to the government he represents. Although the Lord General is a predator, he is merely the agent (rather than the instigator) of doom. The "Falckner" who controls him is either the "*Commons*" (85), or the "*Publick*" (90). Thus, Charles, like Cleopatra, is vulnerable, and elicits sympathy; but Cromwell resembles Caesar, whose burden was to perform a necessary, if disagreeable, task. Marvell well understood Horace's emotional equipoise.

Horace, neither a republican nor a royalist, yet himself dependent upon the patronage of Maecenas, who was close to Augustus, compliments Cleopatra for her regality.<sup>15</sup> Even in his most fervent denunciation, the aforementioned *regina demens* (7), we must note that she is still *regina*, a queen. Many Roman writers cannot afford her this *gravitas*, and describe her as that notorious *mulier*, or even more dismissively, *illa* ["she"].<sup>16</sup> Yet Horace uses the comparative adverb *generosius* ["very nobly"] (21) to praise her uncharacteristically stoic preference for suicide over the humiliation of being led *in triumpho*, like a slave or an elephant.<sup>17</sup> He also fuses *ausa* (25) to Cleopatra to suggest her bravery, daring, or endurance. Likewise, Marvell, eventually to have a position in Cromwell's government, oddly compliments Charles for his nobility, in fact and in bearing.<sup>18</sup> At first, the metaphor "*Royal Actor*" (53) seems fleeing because of the noun, as if the king were somehow deceitful, indulging in gratuitous political theatrics even at his deposition. However, the positive connotations of the adjective are woven through the section of the "Ode" where

Charles is prominent. Here he is *ausa*, as well, although Marvell uses no exact word to signify this. It would be unnecessary — the king's bravery, daring, and endurance speak for themselves.

Thus, "*Royal Actor*" and "*Tragick Scaffold*" (52-53) suggest the concept of *inherent* drama or spectacle, something else Marvell found in Horace as precedent. Cleopatra is herself a spectacle: *fatale monstrum* (21), which, loosely translated, is "doom-bringing portent" or "thing-to-be-wondered-at." Horace's portrait of her behavior is most dramatic, as well, as we proceed from her plotting with base companions to defeat at Actium to her capture. We then watch her brood serenely over her fallen *regiam* (25), and her handling of the *serpentes* (27), her death bravely having been deliberated. In a similar set of *tableaux*, Marvell recounts his king's flight to Carisbrooke, eventual capture, and then subsequent behavior upon the scaffold. These parallel episodes from the lives of Cleopatra and Charles are carefully crafted scenes from plays with "*Tragick*" dimensions. There is nothing gratuitous about the theatrics of either situation; the emotion that underlies such drama is genuine.

Feminine Cleopatra is imbued with masculine *virtus*. She does not fear death; indeed, she actively seeks it, which Horace views as a confirmation of her honor:

perire quaerens nec muliebriter  
expavit ense

[seeking to die, she did not flee the  
sword like a woman] (22-23)

She does not fear Caesar's sword in what Horace would consider a stereotypically womanish fashion, but stands up resigned to her fate. Marvell recreates this same *virtus* throughout his ode, but nowhere more effectively than in his summary of Charles's death speech:

Nor call'd the *Gods* with vulgar spight  
To vindicate his helpless Right. (61-62)

What Charles actually said is the subject of dispute, but his restrained comment on his "helpless Right" seems clear: "A subject and a sovereign are clear different things. . . . it was for this that I am now come here."<sup>19</sup> Like Cleopatra, he is prepared to die for what he is, *nec muliebriter*.

Accordingly, Marvell detects no shirking from what is to be, noting that Charles does not turn his sight from the very instrument of death: "with his keener Eye / The Axes edge did try" (59-60). This specific act exemplifies Horace's generalization about Cleopatra in the first line of his climactic strophe: *deliberata morte ferocior* (29). Charles's gaze along the "Axes edge" to determine its sharpness literally demonstrates that his death has been bravely, even defiantly, deliberated. (The king was alleged to have quipped, "Hurt not the Axe that may hurt me" when one of the *carnifices* inadvertently bumped the instrument.<sup>20</sup>) These lines heighten the emotional intensity of both odes, and increase our sense of the bravery — even the sublimity — of both monarchs.

Faced with the humiliation of defeat, Charles, like Cleopatra, is forced to take consolation from his inner core in making a good death. Again, the wretched little block on which he was to lay his head deprived him of the dignity of kneeling for the stroke, and helped hide him from the crowd. Marvell sympathizes, and compliments the king's grace:

bow'd his comely Head,  
Down as upon a Bed. (63-64)

The phrase "comely Head" owes something to *vultu sereno* (26), which Horace uses to describe Cleopatra's peaceful, even emotionless expression as she surveys the catastrophe that surrounds her, and meditates upon the suicide that she knows is necessary. The ironic simile of the "Bed" also partakes of Cleopatra's placidity. Charles's seeming submission in "bow'd," the signal to the headsman, actually signifies his control in the one situational element of which he is master. Like Cleopatra, he chooses when to die.

The visceral epicenter of this section of Marvell's ode may well be, "He nothing common did or mean" (57). It may also be the most Horatian line discussed here. Its disarmingly simple diction distills the emotional firepower of a dozen tropes,

and explains that Charles was every inch a king. Marvell's six words are reminiscent of *generosius* (21) in all of its senses, especially the inherent (Roman) nobility of wanting to make a good death. However, that Charles was neither "common" nor "mean" recalls Horace's ultimate understated compliment for Cleopatra, *non humilis mulier* (32). She is indeed no ordinary (humble, common, base, mean, mere) woman who will endure the shame of a triumph where she is to be hoisted up to the shouting varletry. Nor is Charles an ordinary man. Although he is a spectacle to his people, humiliated beyond measure in being beheaded like a traitor in a Puritan triumph, he is *non humilis*, regal indeed.

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Horace meditates upon a threat to the state and *imperium*. He concludes nothing — he leaves his readers to do this for themselves. Marvell meditates even more carefully (and profoundly) upon *regicide*, the overthrow of such a state and the transfer and transformation of *imperium*. Yet he also leaves us to reach our own conclusions in order to preserve his most Horatian attribute, his equilibrium. Such apparent balance lends ambiguity not only to the portraits of the vanquished, but to those of the vanquishers, so that praise of the rulers is moderated. Therefore, one is forced to ask: What does it say about Octavius if a *regina demens* takes up half the poem written in his praise? The *superb[us] triumph[us]* (31-32) that Cleopatra circumvents would have been his, after all. What does it say about Cromwell if a "Royal Actor" manages to, if you will, steal the show? Perhaps both conquerors are merely "the Wars and Fortunes Son" (113), and little more, their quarry now usefully dispatched to become "Spirits of the shady Night" (118) — yet spirits that our poets will not allow us to forget.

For C. A. P.:  
"gracious things Thou hast reveal'd"  
(*Paradise Lost* XII.271-72)

M. L. Stapleton

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Henry's account is taken from John Bowle, *Charles I: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975) 335. The selection from North is taken from the *Arden* edition of *Antony and Cleopatra* (London: Methuen, 1982) 278.

<sup>2</sup> Viscount Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, was Charles's Lord Deputy in Ireland, and chiefly responsible for carrying out the king's plan of colonizing the six northern counties (especially Connaught) with English and Scottish Protestants, a plan that was initially unsuccessful but later tragically effective in fomenting the religious and cultural struggles of that country. For all intents and purposes, Charles reluctantly abandoned his Lord Deputy to his enemies when his own Parliamentary struggles began to occupy his attention, and Strafford was executed by act of attainder on 12 May 1641. See J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland, 1603-1923* (New York: Knopf, 1977) 79.

<sup>3</sup> For details of Charles's execution, see Bowle 334-35; Charles Carlton, *Charles I: The Personal Monarch* (London: Routledge, 1983) 359; and Pauline Gregg, *King Charles I* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981) 445.

<sup>4</sup> My edition of Propertius is E. A. Barber's (Oxford, 1953). I have translated the Latin when necessary.

<sup>5</sup> My edition of Marvell is J. M. Margoliouth's (Vol. I, Oxford, 1952, 87-90). For Horace, I rely upon H. W. Garrod's Oxford text (1961, 30-31), and for commentary, R. C. M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace, Odes, Book I* (Oxford, 1989), 407-21, although I disagree with some of their assessments. Many discuss Marvell's debt to Horace. John Coolidge: "Marvell, under the pressure of events in mid-seventeenth-century England, seems to have found in Horace the classical model of a poet maintaining a difficult kind of integrity in a time of great change" ("Marvell and Horace," *MP* 63:2 [1965]: 111). R. H. Syfret: "Marvell . . . shares Horace's tone of rational detachment, his urbanity, tact, wit, sophistication, and irony, and his consummate artistic control" ("Marvell's Horatian Ode," *RES* 12:46 [1961]: 169). See also Patrides, note 12 below.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Story Donno, *Andrew Marvell: The Complete English Poems* (Penguin, 1976) 238.

<sup>7</sup> Cleanth Brooks, "Marvell's Horatian Ode," *English Institute Essays*, 1946 (New York: Columbia UP, 1947) 157.

<sup>8</sup> In what has become a legendary struggle between the New Criticism, the "old" historicism, and "cultural criticism," Brooks and Douglas Bush exchanged opinions over the crux of the "Ode," Marvell's attitude toward the Lord General. Brooks stresses what he perceives to be the irony of the poem that Marvell uses to undercut Cromwell (*Essays* 1947), whereas Bush draws upon historicist arguments to refute Brooks (virulently!) and to prove that Marvell's praise for Cromwell is undiminished ("Marvell's 'Horatian Ode,'" *SR* 60:3 [1952]: 363-76). Virtually all subsequent criticism of the poem has come out of this debate. Coolidge sees Marvell's Cromwell as a "civilized man whose warlike virtue began and will end in the arts of peace" (118). Christopher Wortham takes this position as well (modifying it according to new historicist principles, using Hobbes as support), arguing that any other

reading is "contortion," and downplaying the Charles episode: "all that is in the past." See "Marvell's Cromwell Poems: An Accidental Triptych," *The Political Identity of Andrew Marvell*, eds. Condren et. al., (Brookfield, Vt., 1990) 21. Those who take up Brooks's argument without necessarily subscribing to his literary politics are J. B. Leishman, *The Art of Marvell's Poetry* (London: Hutchinson, 1966); J. A. Mazzeo, "Marvell's Machiavellian Cromwell," *JHI* 21 (1960): 1-17; Syfret 160; and John M. Wallace, *Destiny His Choice: The Loyalism of Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge UP, 1968). Lawrence Hyman takes the middle ground in "Politics and Poetry in Andrew Marvell," *PMLA* 73:5 (1958): 475-79. Some have seen Machiavelli in Marvell's assessment of Cromwell, although this too is controversial. See Mazzeo, *supra*. Also: Brian Vickers, "Machiavelli and Marvell's Horatian Ode," *N&Q* 36:1 (1989): 32-38; and Blair Worden, "Andrew Marvell, Oliver Cromwell, and the Horatian Ode," *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, eds. Sharpe and Zwicker (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 147-180.

<sup>9</sup> Syfret 170.

<sup>10</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard 407, 409, 411.

<sup>11</sup> Syfret and Coolidge pay more attention to the influence of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (and Tom May's translation of it) upon Marvell than to Horace, I. 37. Coolidge notes the difficulty a reader has in discerning which Caesar Marvell uses to compare Cromwell and Charles with: Lucan's tyrannic *parvenu* Julius, or Horace's benevolent Octavius (113). Syfret underscores the importance of May's translation (163), and focuses upon Lucan's Pompey, whom both Charles and Cromwell resemble in a flattering way (166-167). Nicholas Guild argues against the Caesar/Cromwell parallel, substituting the exiled Charles II for the Lord General. "The Context of Marvell's Allusion to Lucan in 'An Horatian Ode,'" *PLL* 14:4 (1978): 412.

<sup>12</sup> For Marvell's poetic equilibrium, see C. A. Patrides: "Marvell did not merely echo the Horatian patterns. . . . He also amended them slyly, thereby promoting an irony that informs every line of his Ode. Horace lauded Octavius without qualification . . . , but Marvell praised Charles as well as Cromwell, even as he modulated his judgments on both." "'Till prepared for longer flight': The Sublunar Poetry of Andrew Marvell," *Approaches to Marvell: The York Tercentenary Lectures*, ed. Patrides (London: Routledge, 1978) 35.

<sup>13</sup> Syfret 170.

<sup>14</sup> In analyzing Marvell's line on Carisbrooke, Margoliouth (238-39) cites Sir Charles Firth's dismissal of the theory that Cromwell tricked Charles into fleeing Hampton Court to the notorious castle on the Isle of Wight: "At the moment, it increased Cromwell's difficulties, and added to the dangers which beset the government" (238-39). Brooks supports this view (*Essays* 136).

Three recent biographers of Charles give virtually the same account of the Carisbrooke episode (Bowle 300-311; Carlton 319 ff.; Gregg 420 ff.), though none suggests any sleight-of-hand on Cromwell's part. The king, fearful of poisoning or an assassination attempt, fled to what he thought to be a bastion of Royalism on the evening of 11 November 1647: "an imposing stronghold, with walls capable of keeping attackers out and uninvited guests in" (Carlton 322). He lived in moderate comfort for approximately five

weeks until he attempted to make amends with the Presbyterians so that they would be in the ascendancy, the radical sects would be put down, and the army would be disbanded. As a result, the Cromwellian forces made the king a virtual prisoner. He tried escape twice; his second attempt found him stuck in a window (hence Marvell's "narrow case[ment]"), with freedom an agonizing five feet below.

<sup>15</sup> "a *rex* was hateful to the Romans, and it was even worse to be enslaved to a woman" (Nisbet and Hubbard 413).

<sup>16</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard 413.

<sup>17</sup> Nisbet and Hubbard, in keeping with their harsh assessment of Cleopatra, argue that *generosius* is simply Horace's way of explaining that she wished to avoid the hangman, and that this word does not reflect any innate nobility of character (410-411).

<sup>18</sup> Donno dates the composition of the Ode during June-July 1650. Marvell was appointed to tutor General Fairfax's daughter Mary in 1653; he became Latin Secretary to the Council of State in 1657 (238).

<sup>19</sup> Bowle 334.

<sup>20</sup> Carlton 359.