Review

“To thee the harmless snake I bring”: The Non-Cavalier Erotics of Marvell’s Mower Poems

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The fusion of eroticism and misogyny is perhaps one of the most prominent characteristics of Cavalier poetry. Women are generally idealized, having their bodies figuratively disembodied, listed from the head down, and compared to pure and beautiful objects through the use of simile and exaggeration (Scott-Baumann, 2008). Furthermore, it is common for women to be portrayed as physically, emotionally and intellectually inferior to men. In Cavalier poetry, women are objectified by angry speakers who, when rejected, express their frustration by calling to mind the wickedness of women. However, Marvell’s mower poems appear to possess a different essence than that of the Cavalier persona because he fuses the erotic with the pastoral, oftentimes using the green world as a vehicle to explore and play with love and desire. In addition, the speaker in the poems maintains his non-contact despite attempting to satiate his lustful feelings for Juliana, and does not become misogynistic when he is rejected as a lover.

Key words: Andrew, Marvell, Mower poems, erotics, cavalier, women, gender, representation, pastoral, 17th century English Literature.

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of different opinions and interpretations when it comes to Marvell’s mower poems. Anthony Funari asserts that “as Damon becomes more sexually aware of himself, he makes the transition from interpreting himself in an intimate relationship with the meadows to one in which his environment becomes alien and must be subjugated to his will” (Funari 2010). He suggests that the love for Juliana is not the reason why Damon is miserable, but it is the fact that Juliana causes him to have a sexual awakening in which he begins to feel distanced and no longer co-eternal with his environment (Funari). As a result, Damon does not mourn for his unrequited love for Juliana, but for the loss of a once pure and pre-sexual existence, so he feels that he must regain that pure relationship with the meadows once again (Funari). Moreover, Damon’s gift of a harmless snake suggests that he is a childish, immature, and asexual character who is not interested in a sexual relationship with Juliana (Funari). Critics like Andrew Kinney believe that Marvell’s mower possesses an insincere persona, because the gift of the chameleon denotes fickleness and dishonesty (2002). In addition, he
suggests that the offering of a snake is “a symbol of inconstancy and insincerity, hiding from the effects of love and disguising himself from love” (Kinney, 2002). Kinney believes that the snake represents “sexuality, sin, and temptation,” so it seems like he associates it with Satan’s deception of Eve and the loss of Eden (2002). However, Andrew Marvell’s final three mower poems are complex in their design, presenting us with an intricate mower who is anything but immature, deceitful, or asexual.

**DISCUSSION**

In “Damon the Mower,” Andrew Marvell places the mower Damon in a Pastoral setting where he is bewitched by the powerful and painful love of Juliana. The first two lines begin by “Hark how the Mower Damon sung, / With love of Juliana stung” (1-2). The reader immediately realizes that this love is not sweet or relieving to Damon; it is a love that stings, swells and aches just as a wasp bite or worst. Furthermore, Marvell creates a landscape that responds to Damon’s grief since “…everything did seem to paint / The scene more fit for his complaint” (2-4). Marvell merges human emotions and nature by presenting an environment that changes and becomes a direct reflection of Damon’s inner melancholy. Damon’s condition affects his surroundings given that “Sharp like his scythe the sorrow was, / And withered like his hopes the grass” (7-8). Clearly, the deep feelings of love and desire for Juliana destroy not only Damon, but also the meadows and the landscape since they become a mirror of his suffering. Damon’s unrequited love for his fair Juliana fills him with hopelessness that is powerful enough to cause the grass to wither and die.

Juliana is not figuratively dismembered and praised for her individual body parts like most women in Cavalier poetry. Her mere, and oftentimes, distant presence in Damon’s mind causes him to have passionate feelings of lust and desire. Damon says: “Oh what unusual heats are here, / Which thus our sunburned meadows sear” (9-10)! The intense heat of his hot desires and his burning lust for Juliana has burned the grass and probably set the meadows on fire. He is aware that this blazing heat is not caused by the sun but “…from a higher beauty growth, / Which burns the fields and the mower both” (19-20). It is clear that Damon attributes his feelings of lust and desire to a “higher beauty,” which is something that is above and more significant than that of the sun’s powerful rays. This higher beauty, which burns the landscape and causes the animals within it to “seek out the shades” (14), has melted Damon internally so that “Only the snake, that kept within, / Now glitters in its second skin” (15-16). The phallic snake is the only “creature” that has been thriving in the intense heat caused by Damon’s hot passion for Juliana (Klawitter 2008). Marvell’s use of the snake which “glitters in its second skin” to symbolize Damon’s erection is ingenious, because he is hybridizing elements of the green world and the erotic.

Drowning in a boiling sea of lust and desire, Damon wanders in the fields and ponders on how he can extinguish the fire “Of the hot day, or hot desires” (26). He says: “To what cool cave shall I descend, / Or to what gelid fountain bend.” The sexual imagery is quite vivid. Presumably, Damon is imagining himself relieved of his burning desire because of a sexual encounter with Juliana. His fiery infatuation would be satiated if he moves down to the yonic “cold cave” and bends to her “gelid fountain” to quench his lustful thirst in a passionate sexual experience. Because of this, it is apparent that Damon is not asexual and is clearly not immature. However, Damon does not attempt to court his “fair shepherdess” (33) by suggesting that he wants to have sex with her. On the contrary, his gifting of “…the harmless snake” (35) that is “Disarmed of its teeth and sting” (36), implies that Damon is interested in a relationship that is beyond that of a sexual one. The offering of a phallic snake that is not dangerous suggests that Damon’s love for Juliana is more platonic than sexual. On the other hand, a speaker in a Cavalier poem would generally present his lover with a perilous snake, armed with sharp teeth that are ready to tear pleasures. For instance, in John Donne’s poem, “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” the speaker seeks to unclothe his lover and use his “roving hands” (25) to physically “explore” her body as if it was a land to be colonized. And in Robert Herrick’s “The Vine,” the speaker dreams of being transformed into a vine which continuously grows and crawls against his lover’s flesh tearing “such fleeting pleasures” (20) as he ravishes her. Such sexually charged language is quite common in the erotic works of Cavalier poets, but seems to be missing in Marvell’s mower poems.

When Damon is rejected as a lover, he expresses his feelings of frustration and despair throughout the three poems. After a failed attempt to court Juliana in “Damon the Mower,” Damon is emotionally distressed and broken. Nevertheless, he does not suggest that Juliana is wicked for denying him, and he does not speak negatively of her (Klawitter 2008). Instead, he begins to meditate on his misery and feelings of loss: “How happy might I still have mowed, / Had not Love here his thistles sowed” (65-66)! Damon once enjoyed a blissful state within the wonderful meadows, but Juliana’s entrance into his life has robbed him of all happiness. He is full of grief to the extent that his anguish pushes him to take out his despair on the landscape. So he “…whet[s] [his] scythe and woes” (72), and begins by “Depopulating all the ground” (74).

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1 In the Hindu religious tradition, the term “yonic” is derived from “yoni,” which refers to the female sexual organs. See Olson, The Many Colors of Hinduism, 225.
Damon's woes and suffering have become as sharp as his scythe, having the ability to tear the grass and the plants from their roots. Similarly, the woes caused by Juliana's rejection of him have come to pierce and tear through his very being. While Damon resumes the act of destruction to the landscape, he "The edged steel by careless chance, / Did into his own ankle glance; / And there among the grass fell down, / By his own scythe, the Mower mown" (77-80 emphasis mine). Because of his profound anguish, Damon accidentally afflicts himself with a physical wound while he frantically destroys the meadows. Now he lies wounded on the dying grass that reflects his pain. Marvell's play on words is witty, and his pun on the word "mown" further suggests the merging of the natural world and human emotions. Furthermore, even though Damon tries to heal his wound, he realizes that the injury caused by his own scythe can be treated. Yet, he suggests that "Only for him no cure is found, / Whom Juliana's eyes do wound" (85-86). Physical wounds are treatable, but those that are emotional tend to rip through one's entire being. Juliana's mere gaze tears through Damon's heart and his thoughts, afflicting him with a wound that can only be cured and mended by death: "Tis death alone that this must do: / For Death, thou art a Mower too" (87-88). The figure of Death uses his scythe to mow and bring death to lovers, just as Damon mows and brings death to the grass. Here, Marvell uses the imagery of the mower mowing grass and compares it to a Grim Reaper mowing lover's lives to intensify Damon's grief. Even though Damon does not physically die, he believes that only dying can spare him from the pain caused by his unrequited love for Juliana.

In "The Mower to the Glowworms," the speaker, who is presumably Damon, continues to mourn for his beloved shepherdess. However, this time he is not only anguished because of Juliana, but he seems to be lost and unable to perceive where he goes in spite of the glowworms "whose officious flame / To wandering mowers shows the way" (9-10). The glowworms are insect larvae that glow and light up a dark path for mowers like Damon "That in the night have lost their aim, / And after foolish fires do stray" (11-12). The "foolish fires" caused by Will-o'-the-wisps can trick the wanderer and lead them to stray off the path. Metaphorically, they can deceive the viewer just as a hope that temporarily leads one on but is impossible to reach. It seems as if Damon believes that his wish of finally uniting with Juliana is far-reaching and impossible to grasp; it is a false hope that misleads him to stray off the path and probably fall in eternal sorrow. When Juliana enters the scene once again, whether in his mind or in reality, her light radiates and is more powerful than the glowworm's flame. In fact, Damon suggests that her luminosity is so strong that she "[his] mind hath so displaced / That [he] shall never find [his] home" (15-16). It is quite apparent that at this point, Damon is blinded by the brightness of her love to the extent that he can no longer find the way home. Here, finding the way home can symbolize a previous state of comfort, safety, and well-being. As a result of Juliana's blinding light, both Damon's vision and mind have been displaced to the point that now he is a lost wanderer who will never feel content or comfort again.

In "The Mower's Song," Damon continues to sing of his obsessive and unrequited love for Juliana. However, the natural scenery around him is no longer a reflection of his grief and melancholic state of mind, but comes to mirror his lustful feelings for Juliana. The grass "Grew more luxuriant still and fine; / That not one blade of grass you spied, / But had a flower on either side" (8-10). The grass and the flowers begin to flourish and recreate an image of a penis in response to Damon's unsatisfied erotic feelings for Juliana. At this moment, Damon is upset and angry as he accuses the meadows of being "Unthankful" and of betraying him and his true fellowship (13). He addresses the meadows directly and asks: "And in your gaudy May-games meet, / While I lay trodden under feet" (15-16)? Instead of sharing his grief as before, the landscape thrives as it engages and participates in the May-games festivities. Anthony Funari suggests that in the pastoral world, the "May festivities center on a robust sexuality, one that celebrates the lustfulness of the natural world. The gown stained green from rolling in the grass, presumably in an amorous embrace, symbolizes the participants devolving into a more natural state of sexual liberality (Funari). The green world has not only stopped reflecting Damon's painful unrequited desires, but it has become a highly sexualized entity mirroring what he will never experience. Moreover, nature's sexual behavior "reduc[es] him to the position of the grass," where he is merely crushed and flattened to the ground (Funari).

Damon views this transformation as evidence that Nature has betrayed and separated from him. As a result, Damon is driven to madness and decides to take out his suffering on both himself and the landscape. He cries: "And flowers, and grass, and I and all, / Will in one common ruin fall" (21-22). Damon's decision to equally destroy both himself and the natural scenery around him implies that he will be connected with the green world once again, even if this connection is not as positive and "green" as it used to be. Instead, the grass and the plants "Shall now the heraldry become / With which [he] shall adorn [his] tomb" (27-28). The grass that once reflected Damon's hopes and miseries will now become an emblem of hopelessness and death caused by Juliana's rejection of him. Damon sings: "For Juliana came, and she, / What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me" (29-30). He is aware of the fact that he can no longer live in peace, since Juliana has become a mower that rips through his thoughts and his entire being. Her rejection of Damon did not cause him to despise her, or insult her by calling her an inconstant wicked woman.
Conversely, his platonic love for her has caused him to mourn his fate and bring about an end to the meadows and himself.

Marvell hybridizes the pastoral with the erotic, and incorporates the use of elements from the green world to symbolize and explore love and desire. The last three mower poems possess a different aura than that of the Cavalier sensibility because the erotic is oftentimes linked to the pastoral and the natural world, as opposed to misogyny. Additionally, Juliana is not placed on a pedestal and objectified like most women in Cavalier poetry. Alternatively, she mostly exists in the realm of Damon’s mind and thoughts. However, not only does her bright burning light displace his mind and lead him off the path of comfort, peace and well-being, but she possesses power that causes him to develop intense feelings of lust that bring about his and the landscape’s common ruin.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

**REFERENCES**


