Marvell’s Damon the Mower as Orpheus

Probably written between 1650 and 1652 when Marvell was in residence at Nunn Appleton, the Mower poems were not published until the posthumous edition of 1681, like most of Marvell’s verses; however, the Mower poems undoubtedly enjoyed a brisk appreciation circulating in manuscript. The poems are not easily pigeonholed. In fact, one poem, “Damon the Mower,” may have been created as a segment of the lengthy “Upon Appleton House” as the two share the same stanzaic form—octets in tetrameter (Smith in Marvell 128). Their provenance aside, when reading all four of the Mower poems, one is struck by their eminent variety: no two written on the same theme. Yet they share a wonderful musicality in the lilting arc for which Marvell had a practiced ear, mirroring rather appropriately the myth of Orpheus, albeit with Marvellian twists and turns. Read as a descant on the myth of Orpheus, the poems initially set up a natural Eden in preference to culture and civilization. Thus, when Damon inculcates himself to be both the player of the lyre and the hopeful player of Juliana, he metaphorically kills himself and must descend to the Underworld with the help of natural light (glowworms). Unfortunately, he cannot resist checking on his love’s progress en route, and he ultimately languishes, dying sexually with the thoughts of what Juliana once meant to him.

The Orpheus story is contained in Book 10 and part of Book 11 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the Orphic material distended by Ovid’s intercalating of various stories into the fabric of Orpheus’s songs. Early in Book 10, Ovid establishes the singer’s disdain for women after the second loss of Eurydice. The self-imposed exile among a loving world of men may seem miles away from the heterosexual world of Damon the Mower, but the same anxiety that led Orpheus into a male environment parallels the only consolation the Mower gets in a world of male farm laborers, so both sing about and pine for a lost woman. Damon fits perfectly that Ovidian mode of “vulnerable, erotic outcasts from the world of gods [. . . , where] misfortunes force them never to stop questing for their selves, however dire the circumstances of the world they inhabit” (Stanivukovic 5). In some sense, therefore, Damon is an existential hero who plods on despite the pitiful state of his love life, realizing that life must be lived, even if it is senseless.

What Damon/Orpheus comes to see, of course, is not the eternal wickedness of woman but rather the eternity of his own grief over losing his mute Juliana/Eurydice. In the first of the Mower poems, “The Mower Against Gardens,” he cries beneath the lines against a world, brought by unnatural gardens, that is devoid of female presence and threatens the fecundity of the fields and meadows in which the Mower works. The hero-narrator establishes his preference for Nature over agricultural experimentation, particularly grafting. The latter has, in fact, perverted natural sexuality not
only by procreating without a male-female dynamic, but also by producing grafted offspring the likes of which have never been known before. Society, of course, does not follow the Mower’s lament: society rather enjoys variety. But the Mower is reactionary because he prizes the old way, the tried and true way, of doing things. For example, in the matter of grafting, which he rejects, there is the Marvellian tease of an image by which the reproductive procedure is abused. Although he pronounces the fruit “adult rate” (line 25), he follows with an extended image of a eunuch producing offspring just as a cherry lacking a seed or testicular “stone” reproduces through unnatural grafting (Smith in Marvell 134). One might very well wonder why Damon/Orpheus is so obsessed with male-male reproductive possibilities when he should be interested in courting a woman named Juliana/Eurydice; but to understand the Orphic theme in the Mower poems, it is necessary to remember that Orpheus did not end his life pursuing women. In fact, he was killed by the Bacchae for his evident disinterest in women, much like the hero in Euripides’ Hippolytus, who is killed after he cries, “We might have lived in houses free of the taint of women’s presence [. . .] eternal, too, is woman’s wickedness” (623–24, 666), and Spenser’s Hippolytus, who also, following the ancients, spurns the love of women (1.5.37.4).

But no such pessimism inhabits the second poem, “Damon the Mower.” First of all, the choice of the name “Damon” is important. It not only calls to mind all the Damons of classical and continental Renaissance eclogues, but it also connotes “daemon,” a creature halfway between god and man, myth and reality. This Damon, although not fortunate enough to be involved in as reciprocal a love as the classic Orpheus enjoyed, is not particularly despondent; in fact, he is content to promise himself the icy balm of Juliana’s cold breast to cool his own intemperate heat, a heat generated as much by his libido as by his work mowing in the sun. Among the many gifts he has proffered her, all to no avail, is a curious one: a “harmless snake [. . .] disarmed of its teeth and sting” (35, 36), a gently phallic snake that contrasts with what we can only suppose was the brutal vigor of some previous, aggressive penile viper that distanced Juliana/Eurydice from her courting mower. The toothless snake is the second appearance of a snake in “Damon the Mower.” It figures earlier in the poem as “the snake, that kept within [. . .] its second skin,” the only creature thriving in the heat of the field (Baruch 246). Left alone, Damon focuses on his scythe, which, neglected by his female quarry, grows “blunter” (71). He whets it to ready it for the business at hand, a destructive macho task of “depopulating all the ground.” This evokes his onanistic act, wasting his seed as “each stroke” (76) of his scythe brings him closer to what he cannot achieve with Juliana, that is, death in coupling.

The Orpheus myth is present here in the snake and the frustrated consummation of the classic lovers. Whereas it is Eurydice who is felled by
the snakebite on the wedding day before the bride and groom can enjoy sexual completion, for Marvell it is the man Damon who is bit by his own scythe-snake. Although Marvell has adapted the mythic characters to suit his own plot, the tone is exactly the same in the two scenarios, one classic, the other Renaissance. Moreover, each story has three characters (woman, man, snake-scythe), and each story involves a near-death experience for the hero: for Orpheus the trip to the Underworld, for Damon the accident with his tool. Neither dies at that point in the story, but each is deprived of love fulfilled in a partner. Orpheus withdraws to his lyre for comfort. Damon withdraws to his manly scythe.

In the third Mower poem, the light of glowworms accompanies Damon/Orpheus on his trip to the Underworld, where he hopes to retrieve the dead Juliana/Eurydice. There, glowworms have an “officious flame [which] to wand’ring mowers shows the way” (9, 10). Damon/Orpheus has lost his way in the dark and needs help to fulfill his quest for the woman presently beyond his reach. Then, in the final stanza, the glowworms become unnecessary because Juliana/Eurydice is present, and her light is enough to make the return trip home of little importance. In other words, just as Eurydice’s presence makes location irrelevant for Orpheus in the Underworld, so too does Juliana’s for Damon, who exclaims, “I shall never find my home,” because Juliana is the only thing that matters in his life. “The Mower to the Glow-worms” is the shortest of the four Mower poems and the most musical. The short stanzas lack the turgidity of the continuous form of the first mower poem and lack the complicated elegance of the stanzas in the second and fourth Mower poems.

With the fourth Mower poem, Damon seems to come to a peaceful conclusion reminiscent of Orpheus’s calm but sad life after returning from Hades’ realm without Eurydice. Damon, it is true, does not meet the same brutal end that Orpheus meets at the clawing hands of the rabid Bacchae, but Marvell’s poem contains in each stanza contrastive images of peace and destruction: Damon thinking gentle thoughts of Juliana as he whacks away at the grass. Juliana has so discombobulated Damon that even his thoughts are tortured (6). The key word in the refrain of each stanza is “came,” with its sexual undertone: the Renaissance faulted woman as the destructive force in the sexual act, preventing men from doing great things, having great thoughts, solving great problems. Each act reduced a man’s pith and energy. The past-tense verb “came,” however, disappears in the final two stanzas, where it is replaced by “comes.” In other words, so obsessed has Damon become with Juliana that she seems to be present, “comes” beneath him, continues to destroy his thoughts and his entire being. His only recourse is revenge (20), which he achieves by destroying the meadow, or, as Rogers would have it, the entire “unresponsive world [. . .] with an act of violent, apocalyptic mowing” (227), while Juliana, or at least the vivid, lifelike thought of having sex with her, continues to plague
him. All of the cut grass, however, is purposeful: it will adorn his tomb (28), and thus in death he will identify more with his beloved meadow than with the woman with whom, like Orpheus, he never copulated except in his imagination. Each man dies, but not in the arms of his beloved.

In spite of the speculation that segments of the Mower poems were created as part of “Upon Appleton House,” the four poems stand well on their own and form an integrated pastoral quartet, resonating the myth of Orpheus.

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