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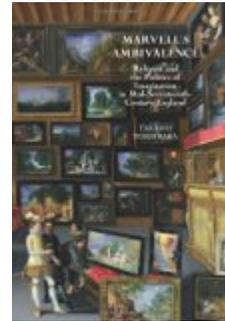
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Takashi Yoshinaka. *Marvell's Ambivalence: Religion and the Politics of Imagination in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011. 330 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84384-265-1.

Reviewed by Brett F. Parker (Isothermal Community College)

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Interpreting the poetic and prose works of Andrew Marvell has always been a difficult and daunting task considering his conscious effort to shade meaning and serve up contradictory implications in a politically volatile period. Forty-four years ago John M. Wallace interpreted Marvell as a political moderate whose allegiance to both the Crown and the Commonwealth were part of intellectual process of choosing sides and making decisions. Only in the last decade have studies of Marvell significantly changed, beginning in 2003 with new editions of his poems and prose works and culminating this past year in the long-anticipated *Cambridge Companion to Andrew Marvell* (2011). The recent scrutiny of Marvell has challenged the notion of categorical consistency and ideological singularity and placed Marvell in a kaleidoscopic light manifested by his skepticism, irony, and rhetorical deftness.

This is certainly true of Takashi Yoshinaka's *Marvell's Ambivalence: Religion and the Politics of Imagination in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England*. In a sense, Yoshinaka's aim is no different than previous attempts to pin down Marvell and find an authoritative and univocal voice in his writings. But rather than simply concluding that "ambivalence" resonates in Marvell's works, he seeks to reconstruct the conditions and contexts that not only formed Marvell's lyrical strategy but also made "ambivalence" a morally right and politically safe position. The backdrop for this contextualization is the discursive debate over the role of providence in shaping and determining the breakdown of authority in the 1640s, culminating with regicide and the engagement controversy. Yoshinaka argues that the language of providentialism was increasingly politicized prior to 1642, and

reached a fevered pitch with the New Model Army claiming God sanctioned their actions and justified the revolutionary course of events. This excessive linking of providence and politics caused a backlash, however, and Marvell was one of the most skilled polemicists who subverted the extremism of Cromwellians while remaining loyal to Calvinist theology. This was possible, as Yoshinaka argues throughout, because Marvell moved between Calvinistic determinism and Arminian free will (destiny and choice). Because Marvell advocated secondary causes of divine providence, he was able to both validate, in poems like "Upon Appleton House" and "The Garden," that there was a necessity and logic (almost inevitability) to the events of the 1640s without removing the possibility of free will and human choice (pp. 173-174). While producing ambiguity in his writing, Yoshinaka suggests that the by the 1650s Marvell was shifting toward accidentalism in the wake of increasingly discredited providential discourse.

Yoshinaka sees Marvell's undermining of providentialism as rooted in his skepticism and rationality, and places him in the Pyrrhonian tradition of Montaigne. The zealotry and dogmatism of the puritans was eschewed by Marvell, as were the claims of any who declared to know God's will. Marvell's poetry, according to Yoshinaka, can be read as varying levels of disbelief and uncertainty, producing a multivocal, seemingly contradictory authorial voice that creates ambivalence and irony. The aim of Marvell's strategy is to evoke the multiple viewpoints and competing voices of the civil war and let each reader make his own choice. Despite his skepticism, Marvell's preoccupation with providence and fatalism suggests that choice is one's destiny, however uncomfortable

and fraught with danger that choosing may be.

The Marvellian moment of choice and destiny is epitomized in the politically charged poems, “A Horation Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland” and “To His Coy Mistress.” In the former, Marvell skillfully undermines the conquest and ambition of Cromwell by using a Roman typology filled with multiple meanings: Caesar, the benevolent ruler but tyrannical usurper; Hannibal, the daring general but defeated Carthaginian (p. 92). More cleverly, Yoshinaka suggests the apparent praise of Cromwell is to be read as a subversion of providentialism and a commendation of free will and human agency. For Marvell, Cromwell is not a man under God’s direct supervision but a Machiavellian agent who seizes circumstances and shapes his own destiny. Yet shaping is not inventing. Destiny, in the sense of the natural flow of history, is psychologically satisfying since it provides stability, makes sense of the incoherent, and precludes choice. This was Marvell’s scylla and charybdis—admiring the potentiality of determinism but recognizing the reality of free will and secondary causes (p. 127).

Yoshinaka does a better job contextualizing the ambivalence and multiple voices inherent in Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” His aim is to challenge the idea that the poem is simply a *carpe diem* work by suggesting the speaker could be either a royalist or a puritan, since they both represent the religious and political extremism Marvell loathed. For instance, Yoshinaka argues that the erotic and epicurean language of the poem suggest a royalist bent and is mixed with the courtly vogue of atomistic thought. He ties these to the Laudian church emphasis on sport, sensory delights, Arminian free will and royal action, concluding that the speaker may be read as a royalist whom Marvell criticizes for impetuosity and zealotry. But the speaker’s intense desire and sensual longing for his mistress can also refer to the puritan enthusiasm of the 1650s, especially with the growing radicalism of millennial thought. It could even be read as specifically anti-Cromwellian in his approval, at times, of Godly rule and his revolutionary activity against the established order.

The lack of moderation and the directing and manipulating of events was shared by both parties in the civil war, and Marvell was using sexual imagery in the poem to mask his criticism of extremism in all forms.

Yoshinaka has written a thoughtful and passionate account of the formation and application of Marvell’s poetic ambivalence in the framework of providentialism and skepticism. He has especially shown where Marvell’s language and imagery are echoed in other works, finding familiar themes in such diverse writers as Abraham Cowley, John Milton, and Thomas Hobbes. Most importantly, he has provided a glimpse into Marvell’s religious and political thinking by situating his writings within the radicalism brought on by the civil war. As a result, Yoshinaka has filled a void in the studies of Marvell’s rhetorical strategy, helping readers identify his aims and understand his ambivalence. Nevertheless, what might have helped even more in this cause is to have analyzed the engagement controversy more extensively, especially the notion, prevalent in Hobbes and others, of legitimacy through defactoism. While Yoshinaka does discuss the claims for and against providentialism among writers during the engagement pamphlet campaign, he does not show how those claims compelled one’s allegiance to the republic, a momentous occasion when choice tested one’s conscience. Another minor criticism is the tenuous connection he makes between Marvell and the enlightened and rational thinking among the Great Tew circle. While there is congruence between Marvell’s “sceptical, liberal theology of the ‘middle way,’” as well as his “espousal of moderation and probabilism,” and the thinking of those of the Great Tew circle there is no evidence of Marvell joining or contributing to the group’s discussions (p. 278). Marvell could be an atomist like Hobbes or a skeptic like Falkland, and Yoshinaka certainly makes the most of these ideological echoes. But one wishes he had mined these connections more thoroughly or at least showed more specifically how Marvell’s ambivalence resulted from those discussions beyond the stance of moderation and restraint. Despite these issues, this is a welcome addition to Marvell studies.

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