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Marvell's "Fleckno," Anti-Catholicism, and the Pun as Metaphor

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Richard Flecknoe, seventeenth-century poet, priest, and lutanist, is one of those eminently forgettable figures who would quickly have passed on to their otherwise just desserts were it not for the satirical pens of their literary betters. This inverted immortality that afflicts the literary dunce, every student of English literature knows, has enshrined Flecknoe forever as the King of Dullness in Dryden's magnificent mock-epic "Mac Flecknoe." So thoroughly is the dunce caught in amber by his scourger that even Dryden's misrepresentation, perhaps deliberate, of Flecknoe as an Irish priest rather than the Englishman that he really was, has been passed down largely unchallenged by subsequent generations of readers.[1]

Although Flecknoe thus lives today primarily as a butt of Dryden's ridicule and as a means by which Dryden satirized his political and literary opponent Thomas Shadwell, he ought to be remembered as well as the immediate object of Andrew Marvell's early satire "Fleckno, an English Priest at Rome."[2] A careful consideration of the "Fleckno" poem can greatly enhance our understanding of Marvell's technical maturation as a poet. The poem also is both an important milestone on Marvell's way to forming his political and religious beliefs and an effective testimonial to the poet's ability to make technique serve belief. More specifically, "Fleckno" illustrates Marvell's early development of that skill and ingenuity with language which could transform even a pun into an ingeniously conceived metaphorical expression.[3] The poem is all the more significant because those beliefs conveyed in it through the metaphorical dimensions of Marvell's punning define the poet's anti-Catholicism. Far from a mere expression of bigotry, this anti-Catholicism would mature later into a profound political

philosophy focusing on the crucial issue of monarchical versus parliamentarian authority, a philosophy that Marvell most fully expresses in his *An Account of the Growth of Popery, and Arbitrary Government in England*, which he wrote near the end of his life.

The plot of "Fleckno, an English Priest at Rome" is simple enough. The narrator arrives at Flecknoe's lodgings, obliged to do so by several calls that Flecknoe had made on him. After climbing the stairs to Flecknoe's room and being admitted, the narrator is made to suffer through a poetry reading. Finally, in order to silence the assault, he invites his host to dine. Flecknoe dresses, and the two men prepare to leave. On the stairs, the narrator encounters a third party, apparently a young Italian. Because there is no room for two people to pass, they enter into a brief row, but the dispute calms and the new arrival joins the others for dinner. After eating, Flecknoe prepares to read his verses again, but is interrupted by the newest member of the party, who insists on reading the poems himself. Flecknoe becomes irate at the reading, apparently conducted in Italian, and enters into an argument with the reader. After a time, Flecknoe leaves to plan a satirical attack on his opponent. Seeing an opportunity for a complete escape, the narrator urges his remaining companion to pursue Flecknoe in order to make his peace with him. The plan works, and the narrator, in gratitude for his deliverance, resolves to have the occasion commemorated in a painting, which he will hang in St. Peter's as an offering of thanksgiving. As such, the poem is a witty lampoon directed against the poetaster Richard Flecknoe.

It is Marvell's use of pun, however, that makes "Fleckno" much more than an attack on one man. Early in the poem, Marvell launches his punning attack on Catholicism. The narrator, "Oblig'd by frequent visits" of Flecknoe (who had spent time in Rome during 1645 and 1645),[4] arrives at the priest's lodgings at the sign of the Pelican, a traditional Christian symbol of Christ because, according to legend, the pelican feeds its young from the blood of its own breast.[5] He finds Flecknoe "three Stair-Cases high, / Which signifies his triple property" of poet, priest, and musician (1-8). The narrator then climbs the stairs to Flecknoe's chamber, a room that Marvell describes in ten highly allusive lines:

> I found at last a Chamber, as 'twas said,
> But seem'd a Coffin set on the Stairs head.
> Not higher then Seav'n, nor larger then three feet;

Only there was nor Seeling, nor a Sheet,
Save that th' ingenious Door did as you come
Turn in, and shew to Wainscot half the Room.
Yet of his State no man could have complain'd;
There being no Bed where he entertain'd;
And though within one Cell so narrow pent,
He'd *Stanza's* for a whole Appartement. (9-18)

The controlling image of this passage is one of death: the room a coffin set on its side, seven by three feet in size, but with neither a "seeling" nor a "sheet." Marvell here is punning, as his editor Margoliouth points out, on the various meanings of these two words. *Seeling* can refer to wall hangings or to black hangings associated with funerals. The sheet likewise may have a funereal association, that of the winding sheet, and also the more mundane reference to the bed sheet (*Poems*, 236). The room, in short, is an empty coffin. The point is that Flecknoe and the religion of which he is a priest are perceived by Marvell as agents of death and corruption rather than of life. The death imagery thus establishes a thematic base for what Marvell attempts to develop throughout the poem, as well as in other writings, that Catholicism, as a false religion, is a religion of spiritual death. The punning here and throughout the poem moves from wordplay to metaphor and satire.

We are also told that the only wall decoration that the room has is the outer surface of the door, which opens inward "to Wainscot half the Room." Such a small room presumably can hold no furniture; we are told quite deliberately that there is no bed, although there are enough stanzas for a whole "appartement," or suite of rooms. As Margoliouth points out, *Stanza*, in addition to a poetic unit, means "room" in Italian (*Poems*, 236). Marvell is here entering upon a theme that he will come back to in "Upon Appleton House," the room-home-inn motif, which, in both of the poems, is developed within a religious and biblical context. Flecknoe's room is so empty that when he departs from it a bit later in the poem he, in Marvell's words, acts "to disfurnish" the room because he has furnished it only with himself (83-84). The chamber contains nothing with which to solace the wanderer or wayfarer. There is no room in the inn because literally there is no room. And even within the small amount of room that does exist there is nothing with which to give rest and aid to the weary because it contains nothing except the priest. Catholicism, for

Marvell, is as empty as Flecknoe's residence, with the lack of physical means of comfort surely meant to represent an accompanying lack of charitable and spiritual attributes.

At the opposite extreme is Appleton House, Lord Thomas Fairfax's country estate in Yorkshire, where Marvell lived in the early 1650s while tutoring the General's daughter, Mary:

> A Stately *Frontispice of Poor*
> Adorns without the open Door:
> Nor less the Rooms within commends
> Daily new *Furniture of Friends.*
> The House was built upon the Place
> Only as for a *Mark of Grace*;
> And for an *Inn* to entertain
> Its *Lord* a while, but not remain.
> ("Upon Appleton House," 65-72)

Fairfax's house, built on the site of the Cistercian priory of Appleton, is described in terms both reminiscent of and contradictory to Flecknoe's chamber. Fairfax's door also is striking, although for its character as an open invitation to the poor (and hence its genuinely Christian nature) rather than for the ingenuity of Flecknoe's door. The word *ingenious* recalls the common complaint that Catholicism had made its way in the world by confounding the simple and gullible through trickery. Marvell, for example, in denouncing the vestments and rites of the Catholic priest in his *Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government*, likens them to "the pranks and ceremonies of Juglers and Conjurers" (252).

The two residences also differ in furnishings. Flecknoe's chamber, as noted earlier, is empty of furniture. It is also empty of people, except for the notorious Flecknoe himself. Once he leaves, nothing remains. Lord Fairfax's house, however, is well furnished, not only with objects of wood and metal, but more significantly with "*Furniture of Friends.*" The house was built, we are told, as "a Mark of Grace," and, in being labeled an "*Inn*," is obviously set within a biblical context. There may have been no room in the inn for Joseph and Mary, and there is no room in Flecknoe's "inn," but there always is room for the poor within the walls of Appleton House. Ultimately, though, the home becomes an inn for Lord Fairfax as well. It is the earthly abode of "Its *Lord* a while" until he passes on to his eternal home in heaven. One of the great ironies of this contrast between the two "homes," both of which, although in different ways, are temporary,

is that one so easily can pass over the religious dimensions of Marvell's description of Flecknoe's chamber. The reason, of course, is that Flecknoe's chamber is not a very spiritual place. But it should be, the poet implies, if the resident is a true priest of Christ. If one wishes to seek a Christian abode, he will not find it, according to Marvell, in Catholicism, but in the life and faith of a man like Thomas Fairfax, the then-retired leader of the Parliamentary army.

It is interesting to note, again by way of contrast between Fairfax and Flecknoe, that Fairfax also wrote poetry. In fact, the source of the quoted passage from "Upon Appleton House" probably was Fairfax himself. In a poem entitled "Upon the Newbuilt House att Apleton," the general wrote,

> Thinke not ô Man that dwells herein
> This House's a stay but as an Inne
> Wch for Convenience fittly stands
> In way to one nott made wth hands
> But if a time here thou take Rest
> Yett thinke Eternity's the Best. (*Poems*, 231)

Flecknoe's poetry, however, lacking the spiritual framework of Fairfax's verses, is treated in Marvell's poem as a type of false gospel. After dining, Flecknoe pulls forth most of the poems which he had wrapped around his upper body before leaving his chambers. The young Italian who has joined Flecknoe and his visitor for dinner then peels off the remaining poems "from within / Like white fleaks rising from a Leaper's skin!" Like an inferior priest, he kisses the poems and begins to read them aloud. The young guest reads exuberantly, but, knowing no English, understands nothing of what he reads, and, by his method of reading, greatly upsets Flecknoe (122-40). This passage calls to mind the common attack by English Protestants on the use of Latin in Catholic services, a device, they believed, to hookwink the uneducated.[6]

Returning to the early passage from "Fleckno" quoted previously, we find additional punning and, concomitantly, Marvell's opposition to Catholicism once again. After noting the absence of decoration in Flecknoe's room, save for the outer surface of the door turned inward, the narrator adds, "Yet of his State no man could have complain'd; / There being no Bed where he entertained . . .'" (15-16). Marvell is punning on the word *entertained*, opening up to the reader an area of common complaint against

the Catholic Church: the perception of sexual immorality on the part of the Catholic clergy and religious that had wide currency at the time. In *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government*, Marvell finds great fault with the doctrine of enforced celibacy for the clergy, for either they "frustrate human nature if they live chastly, or, if otherwise, adulterate it" (257). In "Fleckno," he is even less kind. The lack of a bed with which to entertain, Marvell seems to imply, would be a great sexual deprivation for the English priest. The conjoining of Catholicism and sexuality also occurs later in the satire when we are told about the French youth who "At ordinaries after dinner" (during the mass after communion) compare their "Chancres and Poulains" (that is, their lesions and sores caused by venereal disease) (135-37).[7]

In "Upon Appleton House," that other great example of Marvell's skill in turning pun into religious and satiric metaphor in order to satirize the alleged vices of Catholicism, the poet turns his attention from priests to nuns. In a lengthy passage early in the poem, Marvell recounts the history of Isabel Thwaites, future wife of one of General Fairfax's sixteenth-century ancestors, William Fairfax of Steeton. At a time when the Fairfax estate was still the site of the Cistercian priory, Isabel Thwaites came under the influence of the women of Nun Appleton. According to the poem, "the blooming Virgin *Thwates*," who lived near the priory, often spent summer days "Discoursing with the *Suttle Nunns*" (89-94). The description of the nuns as subtle reflects the common idea touched upon earlier in connection with the "ingenious Door" of Flecknoe's room—the specious and clever reasoning associated with Catholic thought since the days of the scholastics.[8] The nuns seek to win Isabel's membership in their order through a series of enticing arguments. One nun in particular, apparently modeled on Isabel's guardian, the Lady Anna Langton, Prioress of Nun Appleton (*Poems*, 232), raises a variety of advantages to be gained by joining the order, appealing consecutively to Isabel's fear of "those wild Creatures, called Men," to her desire for the "brighter Robes and Crowns of Gold" that await her in heaven as a spouse and queen of Christ, and to her vanity. This last argument leads the prioress into commenting on Isabel's beauty (resembling that of the Virgin Mary), the possibility of future power ("'Our Abbess too, now far in Age, / 'Doth your succession near presage'"), and even her melodious singing voice (97-168). Nor will the future abbess have to forgo pleasure, for their order is not "'yet so nice, / Delight to vanish as a Vice'"

(169-70). Through this attempt at persuasion, Marvell may also be introducing the idea of homosexual love, as the prioress promises to appoint each night "a fresh and Virgin Bride," with whom Isabel may lie

> "as chast in Bed,
> "As Pearls together billeted.
> "All Night embracing Arm in Arm,
> "Like Chrystal pure with Cotton warm." (185-92)

The sensuality of the last four lines of this stanza seems to outweigh the professed chastity. This attempt to win the maiden fails, of course, and Isabel is rescued by young Fairfax.

A recurring word in the Isabel Thwaites section of "Appleton House" is *virgin*, in anti-Catholic literature a particularly loaded word. As Marvell said in his *Growth of Popery*, the "whole Liturgy and Worship of the Blessed Virgin" offended him greatly (252), and in his poetry he makes ample use of the notion of a virgin birth. At the beginning of the passage about Isabel Thwaites, for example, he begins the genealogy of the Appleton House with the observation that "A *Nunnery* first gave it birth. / For *Virgin Buildings* oft brought forth" (85-86). The punning runs through these two lines instead of being confined to a specific word. Literally, the nunnery gave birth to the Fairfax home, as we find in the next two lines, because stones were taken from the ruins of the priory for use in building the first Fairfax house. Marvell also has in mind, though, the Protestant suspicion that nuns were less chaste and virginal than they pretended to be, with the buildings that bring forth of line 86 referring to the nuns themselves. The implicit judgment here is that the nuns, though no more (but also no less) susceptible to sexual adventures than other women, are morally inferior because of the duplicity associated with their professed virginity.

In two of his great political satires, "Third Advice to a Painter" and "Last Instructions to a Painter," Marvell applies the virgin birth theme to an attack on Anne Hyde, wife of the Duke of York, the future King James II.[9] Prior to her marriage to the King's brother, the Duchess of York was widely viewed as grossly immoral, an accusation raised several times by Sir Charles Berkeley, who was a close friend of both James and the King. For obvious reasons, Berkeley later renounced those accusations, thus helping to restore Anne's "virginity." In Marvell's words, she had "perfected that engine, oft essayed, / How after childbirth to renew a maid . . ." ("Last Instructions," 53-54). In the "Third Advice," Marvell yokes

his attack on the Duchess to a reference, as George deF. Lord points out (53), to the alleged representation by clergymen of their mistresses as nieces:

> Berkeley, that swore as oft as she had toes,
> Does kneeling now her chastity depose,
> Just as the first French card'nal could restore
> Maidenhead to his widow-niece and whore. (251-54)

One important example of pun as metaphor still remains to be considered within the context of "Fleckno" and Marvell's anti-Catholicism. The narrator in "Fleckno," prior to the arrival of the Italian, perceives Flecknoe's hunger and inquires whether he "had eat this Lent." Flecknoe answers in the affirmative, that, in fact, he has dined with a number of people, adding that, when alone, his only eating is "when he tryes / With gristly Tongue to dart the passing Flyes" (45-50). The narrator, thinking apparently of the flies, inquires whether Flecknoe had eaten flesh (forbidden, of course, on Fridays during the season of penance):

> And he, that was
> So hungry that though ready to say *Mass*
> Would break his fast before, said he was Sick,
> And th' *Ordinance* was only Politick. (51-54)

Flecknoe thus establishes that he cares little for the rules of fasting and abstinence, and would willingly break both the prohibition against eating prior to receiving communion and the rule against eating meat on the proscribed days. He offers a two-part justification for his behavior: first, that he is not well (referring to the Catholic Church's practice of dispensing with standard rules of fasting for the infirm), and, second, that the rules themselves are merely "Politick," a word that carried with it in the seventeenth century a clear connotation of shrewdness and cunning,[10] the type of practice that Marvell saw the Catholic Church encouraging in order to impose on the will and understanding of the laity. The "interdicting of Meats," in fact, is one of those practices that Marvell singles out in the *Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* for special excoriation (252). What Marvell particularly condemns in this passage is the hypocrisy of the priest, his lack of fidelity to those principles, however misguided, that he supposedly accepts as binding.

Having established the priest's lack of principles, the poet carries the subject of food one step further, to the issue of transubstantiation. This doctrine states that during the mass the bread and

wine are transformed into the actual essence of Christ's body and blood while retaining the surface appearance of bread and wine. Marvell's wit bounces, as it were, off several lines, striking some glancing but stinging blows at the doctrine while punning through the word *body*:

> Nothing now Dinner stay'd
> But till he had himself a Body made.
> I mean till he were drest: for else so thin
> He stands, as if he only fed had been
> With consecrated Wafers: and the *Host*
> Hath sure more flesh and blood then he can boast.
> (57-62)

Marvell's peculiar skill in punning is quite visible in these lines. He works not so much with a word as through it, and then through the line (and in this case through several lines). The key word here is *body*, meaning both the body of Flecknoe and the body of Christ that, Catholics believe, is really present in the host after the consecration. It is this second meaning that particularly permeates line 58, with the allusion to the priest at consecration "making" the body of Christ. The descent into the literal as clarification in the following line actually clarifies, not the poet's professed literal meaning (putting on clothes), but the pun itself and the reference to the issue of transubstantiation. The pun runs through the remaining lines in such a way as to move ahead while also turning back on itself. Marvell gives added attention to both "bodies" while also linking them together. Flecknoe is so thin as to give the impression that he has been eating only the communion hosts. In fact, even the host is said to have "more flesh and blood" than the priest. The effect of the final statement, though, is not to lend any credibility to transubstantiation, but to shore up Marvell's view of the emptiness of both the doctrine and its priest.

Again, one must turn to the larger context of Marvell's thought and writings in order to appreciate fully the significance of this passage—that is, the serious objections that Marvell had to both the doctrine and its propagation, and that therefore the punning is not mere wordplay or an attack on an isolated dunce, but rather geniune metaphor. Marvell concludes his lengthy catalogue of Catholic rites and beliefs in the *Growth of Popery*, those rites and beliefs that he finds intellectually and morally offensive, with what he considers to be the most offensive belief of all:

> But above all their other devices, that Transubstantiall solacism, whereby that glorified Body, which at the same time they allow to be in Heaven, is sold again and crucified daily upon all the Altars of their Communion. For God indeed may now and then do a Miracle, but a Romish Priest can, it seems, work in one moment a thousand impossibilities. Thus by a new and antiscriptural Belief, compiled of Terrours to the Phansy, Contradictions to Sense, and Impositions to the Understanding, their Laity have turned Tenants for their Souls, and in consequence tributary for their Estates to a more than omnipotent Priesthood. (252)

Marvell was not alone in perceiving the doctrine of transubstantiation as the epitome of Roman Catholicism. When Parliament, fearing the growing political influence of Catholicism in England, proposed in 1676 "An Act for further securing the Protestant Religion, by educating the Children of the Royal Family therein; and for the providing for the continuance of a Protestant Clergy," it made transubstantiation, as Marvell records in his *Growth of Popery*, the heart of an oath that according to the Act future monarchs of England should offer:

> "I _____ King or Queen of England, do declare and swear, that I do believe that there is not any transubstantiation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or in the elements of bread and wine, at or after the consecration thereof by any person whatsoever. So help me God." (340-41)

It is a long road from "Fleckno, an English Priest at Rome" to "Upon Appleton House" to the "Painter" poems and *An Account of the Growth of Popery, and Arbitrary Government in England*, but the same man traveled that road. And if Andrew Marvell's wit is to be understood and appreciated, it is well to keep in mind the political and religious framework for that wit. If we approach a "lesser" work like "Fleckno" within the larger context, we can only come away with a clearer realization of Andrew Marvell's genius, for the wit that can turn mocking puns at the expense of the priest and poetaster Flecknoe into religious (and therefore political) metaphors is no mean wit, but a clever, imaginative mind that can conceptualize and promulgate within the limited space of

a line, a phrase, or even a word a wide range of attitudes and beliefs. To be a punster of Marvell's stripe is to be one of the truest of true wits.

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NOTES

1 In Dryden's poem, the aged Flecknoe is made to refer to his son's "Irish pen" (202). Pierre Legouis sets the record straight, however, in his fine biography of Marvell: *Andrew Marvell: Poet, Puritan, Patriot*, 2nd ed. (1968; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), p. 11. A likely explanation for the distortion is that it simply made satirical sense to have the poet-priest come from that island which for so many Englishmen meant superstition, ignorance, and barbarism.

2 Unless otherwise noted, documentation for Marvell's poetry will be made in the text of this paper and will refer to Volume I, *Poems*, of *The Poems & Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, 3rd ed., rev. Pierre Legouis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971). Documentation for *An Account of the Growth of Popery, and Arbitrary Government in England* will be similarly made, but in this case the work is found in Volume IV of *The Complete Works of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Rev. Alexander B. Grosart (1875; rpt. New York: AMS, 1966).

3 Among those who have written perceptively on the skill and seriousness of purpose of Marvell's punning are Rosalie L. Colie in *"My Echoing Song": Andrew Marvell's Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), particularly pp. 93-94; and Ruth Wallerstein in *Studies in Seventeenth Century Poetic* (1950; rpt. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965), where she notes that "where the pun itself leads our thought, it is as part of an already established context of thought," and that "we in evaluating or taking in the wordplay should be guided by the context as a whole" (174).

Those who have studied Marvell's punning, however, have almost totally ignored the poem "Fleckno, an English Priest at Rome," and have inadequately considered the poet's use of pun to express his opposition, for religious and political reasons, to Catholicism. An example of the usual scholarly dismissal of "Fleckno" occurs in *Marvel and the Civic Crown* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978); in a chapter on Marvell's satires, Annabel M. Patterson dismisses "Fleckno" as "Marvell's first and last attempt to write Roman cultural satire in the manner of Donne . . ." (112). This paper attempts to show that the poem should not be taken so lightly.

4 For dates when Marvell could have met Flecknoe in Rome in 1645 or 1646, see Margoliouth's letter in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5 June 1924.

5 See the notes to the poem in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (1972; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 224.

6 For an imaginative later representation of this accusation, see Sec. II of Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, where the three brothers gradually alter their father's will, and finally lock the will (the Scriptures) away in a strongbox (Latin): *A Tale of a Tub with other Early Works 1696-1707*, ed. Herbert Davis (1939; rpt. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 44-55. The volume is the first in Davis' standard edition of *The Prose Writings of Jonathan Swift*.

7 In *A Tale of a Tub*, Martin and Jack, after rebelling against Peter (who represents Catholicism), locate the will and read in it a "Precept against Whoring, Divorce, and separate Maintenance; Upon which, their Work was to discard their Concubines, and send for their Wives" (75). Earlier, Peter had kicked his brothers' wives "out of Doors, and his own too, and in their stead, gave Orders to pick up the first three Strolers could be met with in the Streets" (71).

8 Again we can turn to *A Tale of a Tub*, where Peter "had read *Aristotelis Dialectica*, and especially that wonderful *Piece de Interpretatione*, which has the Faculty of teaching its Readers to find out a Meaning in every Thing but it self; like Commentators

on the *Revelations*, who proceed Prophets without understanding a Syllable of the Text" (51).

9 "The Last Instructions to a Painter," which is included in Margoliouth's edition, and "The Third Advice to a Painter," which is not, can be found together in *Anthology of Poems on Affairs of State*, ed. George deF. Lord (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975). I am indebted to this volume, particularly to notes on pp. 53 and 70, for the information on Anne Hyde. The quotations from these two poems likewise come from the George deF. Lord edition.

10 *OED*: "politic," A.2.d.