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SHORTER ARTICLE

Marvell's Aviary: The Cassowary

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Marvell's shrewd references to birds in his poetry and prose come in 'Last Instructions' to include that most exotic of fowl, the cassowary. By way of simile the voracious cassowary there serves to comment on the voracious Excise tax. Editors have overlooked how near to hand cassowaries might be for Marvell, who seems to have enjoyed them among the sights of St James's Park, where the royal aviary was being newly improved in the 1660s and included such tribute from the East India Company. In the cassowary Marvell had met with a wonder that plainly caught his eye, leaving him with a lasting metaphor for courtly excess and for the all-devouring Excise to which that might lead.

Keywords: Marvell; cassowary; Excise; St James's Park; East India Company

In Andrew Marvell's poetry and prose, we meet with a surprising variety of birds, and those birds often well observed. These are living encounters: a glimpse in the hazel of 'The hatching Thrastle's shining Eye'; the woodpecker walking 'still upright from the Root,/Meas'ring the Timber with his Foot'; how unnatural it might be 'for a Lark to dare the Hobby'.¹ Even those birds with a fuller literary pedigree, chiefly Ovidian, seem taken also from life: 'A num'rous fleet of Corm'rants black', for example, or the intense blue of the 'modest *Halcyon*', which kingfisher's 'Azure dy' seems to infuse the 'viscous Air' and 'jellying Stream' alike.² There are more exotic birds still in his poetic aviary: notably 'an old bustard, maimed, yet loath to yield' that 'Duels

¹ 'Upon Appleton House', ll. 532, 539–40, in Andrew Marvell, *Poems and Letters* [hereafter *P&L*], ed. H. M. Margoliouth and Pierre Legouis, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1:79; *Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Annabel Patterson, Martin Dzelzainis, Nicholas von Maltzahn, and N. H. Keeble, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:253.

² Neal Hackler, 'Marvell's Ovidian Corm'rants', *Notes and Queries* 61, no. 3 (2014): 366–9; 'The Unfortunate Lover', l. 27 (*P&L*, 1:29); 'Upon Appleton House', ll. 669, 673–6 (*P&L*, 1:83).

the fowler in Newmarket field'—affording a simile for the courage of the wounded Monck undaunted in the Four Days' Battle (1666), and drawn perhaps from Marvell's Cambridge days, when Newmarket Heath was within his reach, or his visit to his ancestral Meldreth (southeast of Cambridge) in 1647.³ These and other instances suggest Marvell's fascination and even sympathy with the birds he watched. But the strangest bird in his poetry is surely the cassowary, which enters his description of the 'Excise' (tax) in 'The Last Instructions to a Painter': 'on all Trade like *Casawar* she feeds' (l. 136). That all-devouring tax has many attributes (it is also shark- and bat-like), but this 'Monster' compares most memorably to the voracious 'Casawar'.

How did Marvell know of this denizen of the East Indies? (Its presence in Australia was discerned by Europeans only much later.) We look to Marvell's editors in vain. Grosart offers only '=Casuarius Cassowary, the Asiatic ostrich' with subsequent editors since Margoliouth observing of 'the omnivorous cassowary' that its appetite invites this present application, which in Smith expands to 'a long-legged running bird related to the ostrich and the emu, and noted for devouring whatever it was offered'.⁴ There may be something more in another critic's observation that the cassowary 'has as a distinguishing feature a "crown upon its head" (as Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* puts it)'.⁵ But as yet Marvell's cassowary remains a creature more of story than of life, if that story pleasingly applicable to the dark portrayal of an ever-hungry Excise.

There was a cassowary nearer to home, however, indeed as near as Westminster in the early 1660s. (And a bustard too....) That 'Cassawarwa' was among the sights at St James's Park, now being much improved through royal ambitions for those

³ 'The Third Advice to a Painter', ll. 91–2, in Andrew Marvell, *Poems*, ed. Nigel Smith (Harlow: Longman, rev. ed. 2007), 348; Hilton Kelliher, 'Some Notes on Andrew Marvell', *British Library Journal* 4 (1978): 125–9; Nicholas von Maltzahn, *Andrew Marvell Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 31–2. For relic Great Bustards lingering in that area—notably nesting at Shelford (near Cambridge and Meldreth) as late as 1831—see Michael Shrubbs, 'Some thoughts on the historical status of the Great Bustard in Britain', *British Birds* 104 (2011): 190a.

⁴ *Complete Works of Andrew Marvell*, ed. A. B. Grosart, 4 vols. (London: Fuller Worthies' Library, 1872–5), 1:294; *P&L*, 1:354; Smith, *Poems*, 373.

⁵ A. B. Chambers, *Andrew Marvell and Edmund Waller: Seventeenth-Century Praise and Restoration Satire* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 147.

gardens, with their menagerie and aviary also much enlarged. There 'At a place Neare St Jameses house', in 1662, the inveterate traveller Peter Mundy reported he saw this 'strange fowle somewhat lesser then an Estredge the bodie about 4: foote high very big the head & like a Turkey black shining feathers on spriggs narrow and long which upon him appear like soe many long hairees sleeke and smooth.'⁶ The East India Company seems long to have kept the 'Poultry-house' there supplied with 'exotic varieties', with cassowaries reported for most of the seventeenth century.⁷ But this association of the Excise with the cassowary may also reflect some awareness of how expensive that fowl seems to have been to feed. The Treasury Books record payments for the keeping of many birds at that date, with a 'Cossawarway' much the most expensive at 2 shillings a day; the same price might suffice in toto 'for certain tame pigeons, conies, monkeys, parrots and other birds'.⁸ Might such conspicuous consumption raise eyebrows? Marvell's income as an MP from his knight's pence was only three times this: 6s 8d a day. Whether it was their expense or their danger or that they continued to breed, an East India Company letter a decade later noted 'His Majestie desires no more cassawarrens'.⁹

Birds in captivity must have captivated Marvell in turn. It is no surprise that the garden-, nature-, and bird-loving MP might in his stays in Westminster much avail himself of St James's Park, and in particular Bird-Cage Walk. His recollection of a bustard confronting the Newmarket fowler likely followed from that species also being exhibited here, as Mundy observes ('a shee Bustard of a fine grey collour as big as a turkey hen I think they are of those wee call at Dantzick Averbaens: the Cock blacke the hen grey as the hethcock & hen').¹⁰ Years later, in another satire possibly

⁶ Bodleian, MS Rawl. A 315, f. 242^v: '...it hath 2 feathers more in one quill of which I have some to shew It hath some Appearance of winge or pinions but of no use as the Dodo: ettc./'.

⁷ Caroline Grigson, *Menagerie: The History of Exotic Animals in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19, 26, 31–2; Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, ed. R.C. Latham and W. Matthews, 11 vols. (London: Bell, 1970–83), 2:157n; *OED*, s.v. 'cassowary', offers related citations from Coryate's *Crudities* (1611) to Locke's *Essay of Human Understanding* (1690) (q.v. Peter Walmsley, 'Locke's Cassowary and the *Ethos of the Essay*', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 22 (1993): 251–6).

⁸ *Calendar of Treasury Books* (13 July 1661), 1:262 (cited in Pepys, *Diary*, 2:157n.).

⁹ Grigson, *Menagerie*, 33.

¹⁰ Bodleian, MS Rawl. A 315, f. 242^v.

from his hand, we learn more of the fowl in St James's Park, where the royal ducks are imagined quacking loyally, in French for good measure, 'Vive le roy'.¹¹ But in the cassowary Marvell had met with a wonder that plainly caught his eye, leaving him with a lasting metaphor for courtly excess and for the all-devouring Excise to which that might lead.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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¹¹ 'The Kings Vowes', ll. 52–4 (*P&L*, 1:175); noted in Pepys, *Diary*, 2:157n.

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