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White Tears and Indian Slaves in Marvell's "Mourning"

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Previous criticism of Marvell's "Mourning" has not only ignored the narrator's invocation of "Indian slaves," but has in most cases actually erased it. This essay explores the consequences of that erasure for our understanding of the poem and its place in the history of colonialism and race-making.



Not much has been written about Marvell's "Mourning," and even less about "the Indian slaves" that appear in the eighth stanza. This critical neglect is especially odd since, with the sudden appearance of American slavery in the poem, the narrator stops hesitating and abandons his "withholding of judgment"—the characteristic "shrinking away from meaning" that Stanley Fish argues defines the poem and Marvell's poetics more broadly.¹ Instead, the newly forceful narrator unequivocally judges and rebukes those who doubt the sincerity of Chlora's tears in one of the poem's most arresting images:

How wide they dream! The Indian slaves
That dive for pearl through seas profound,
Would find her tears yet deeper waves,
And not of one the bottom sound. (29–32)²

For H.M. Margoliouth, this is the moment that provides the first "true note" in a potentially frivolous poem "on weeping, that trite and sometimes nauseating subject of the Caroline poets." He notes that here, "the whole feeling of the poem changes, and instead of the 'conceited' and 'metaphysical' nonsense of which it has hitherto consisted, it ends simply and surprisingly."³ I think he's right: it is here, "Full fathom five," that the poem experiences a "sea-change / Into something rich and strange" as Shakespeare might have put it (1.2.395).⁴ But Margoliouth doesn't ask why that "true note" is found in the image of slaves who, by the time Marvell wrote the poem, had been part of the economy of the Caribbean pearl fisheries for over a hundred years.

Indeed, that forced labor is elided from most discussions of the poem. Fish, for example, curiously never considers what slavery indicates in "Mourning," although he goes on to suggest that "the language of tyranny and enslavement" in "A Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body," "does not indicate a desire to be master, but a desire, stronger than Greta Garbo's, to be alone."⁵ And in Paul Delany's otherwise rich and sensitive close reading, the whole question of slavery simply evaporates. "The beautiful image of the pearl divers," writes Delany, "represents vividly the dreamlike futility of

¹ Stanley Fish, "Marvell and the Art of Disappearance," in *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. Michael P. Clark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 27.

² Andrew Marvell, "Mourning," in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, rev. ed., ed. Nigel Smith (Harlow: Longman, 2007). Line numbers will appear in parentheses.

³ H.M. Margoliouth, "Marvell and Other Contemporaries," in *Andrew Marvell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Robert Wilcher (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 341.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016). All references to Shakespeare are to this edition. Act, scene, and line numbers appear in parentheses.

⁵ Fish, "Marvell and the Art of Disappearance," 28.

the observers' quest for final truth."⁶ The slaves here become divers, freely plumbing the depths of experience. I don't mean to pick on Delany, because he is certainly not alone: James Carscallen also silently revises Marvell's slaves into "an Indian pearl-diver."⁷ So does L.E. Semler.⁸ Even Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker, who are always alive to the ways in which troubled forms of agency and subjection haunt Marvell's poems, simply say that "from the very opening of 'Mourning', with its send-up of decipherments, through the variations he plays on the inscrutability of signs, to the teasing analogy between the Indian pearl-divers and those who would sound the depths of meaning, Marvell insists on enigma."⁹

Amy Sattler is one of the very few people I can find who has acknowledged the fact of slavery in the poem, and she observes it as part of a larger pattern in which "the seeing subject may be fettered, enslaved, or even crucified, but vision spurs the interpretive endeavors that constitute poetic creativity."¹⁰ This is an astute observation. But precisely because Marvell's "Mourning" gives these recurrent images of enslavement a local habitation and a name that is distinctly unlike the pastoral bindings and fetters of a poem like *Upon Appleton House*, I want to move away from abstraction or metaphor and consider the historical conditions of slavery that make Marvell's imagery possible. This, in turn, will allow us to query the ways Marvell and his critics aestheticize slavery, connect it to the pastoral fictions of the rest of "Mourning," and undergird the production of beauty—and meaning—with it. What are we to make of the fact that some of us—many of us—experience the poem's profoundest beauty in this moment?

In 1516, the Spanish established their first *rancheria* on the island of Cubagua. By 1540, they had hundreds throughout the Caribbean, in which indigenous and African slaves had harvested over 120 million pearls. By the time Marvell wrote his poem—a full century later, in the 1640s—slaves had sunk "through Seas profound" well over a billion times to ship treasure back to Europe, at enormous human and environmental costs.¹¹ These costs were by no means invisible to contemporary Europeans. Two generations before Marvell's birth, Bartolomé De Las Casas described them in harrowing detail

⁶ Paul Delany, "Marvell's 'Mourning,'" *Modern Language Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1972): 34.

⁷ James Carscallen, "Marvell's Infinite Parallels," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1970): 144.

⁸ L.E. Semler, *The English Mannerist Poets and the Visual Arts* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 207.

⁹ Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, "Marvell and Lyrics of Indifference," in *The Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Martin Dzetzainis and Edward Holberton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 392.

¹⁰ Amy Sattler, "The Poet and the Fettered Christ in Marvell's 'Eyes and Tears,'" *Andrew Marvell Newsletter* 6, no. 1 (2014): n.p. <https://marvell.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/newsletter/the-poet-and-the-fettered-christ-in-marvels-eyes-and-tears/>.

¹¹ Molly A. Warsh, "Enslaved Pearl Divers in the Sixteenth-Century Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 31, no. 3 (2010): 346.

in his *Devastation of the Indies*, which was first published in Spanish in 1552 and then translated into French and newly published in Amsterdam in 1620:

The tyranny exercised by the Spaniards against the Indians in the work of pearl fishing is one of the most cruel that can be imagined. There is no life as infernal and desperate in this century that can be compared with it, although the mining of gold is a dangerous and burdensome way of life. The pearl fishers dive into the sea at a depth of five fathoms, and do this from sunrise to sunset, and remain for many minutes without breathing, tearing the oysters out of their rocky beds where the pearls are formed. They come to the surface with a netted bag of these oysters where a Spanish torturer is waiting in a canoe or skiff, and if the pearl diver shows signs of wanting to rest, he is showered with blows, his hair is pulled, and he is thrown back into the water, obliged to continue the hard work of tearing out the oysters and bringing them again to the surface... Often a pearl diver does not return to the surface, for these waters are infested with man-eating sharks.¹²

Las Casas is not exaggerating the risks that await five fathoms below the surface. As slave deaths accrued in the early years of the fisheries, the Spanish crown put some regulations in place: divers were to work for no more than four hours at a time, or at depths of no more than five fathoms, or 30 feet. But these regulations were largely ignored, and the inspector general of Margarita Island in the late 1580s continued to describe the work as more dangerous than mining. The Spanish Jesuit and naturalist Jose de Acosta described divers routinely working beyond 30 feet, and as deep as 72, leading to frequent collapse and death from exhaustion in the canoes or in the water. From 1538, regulations were in place to dispose of their bodies, with one fine to canoe owners if they were “black” or “Indian” and a greater penalty if the deceased were deemed “Christian” (but leaving it unclear if these were African or native converts to Christianity, or whether in the early days of the fisheries Europeans dove alongside these groups). Shark attacks were so common—and led to such great loss of profit—that later under Philip II various reforms to pearl harvesting were ordered: all operators were required to carry a large fishing hook to fend off sharks, to desist from disposing of shucked oysters in the water (which drew sharks), and in the case of a diver’s death, rather than leaving the body in the water to attract sharks and endanger other divers, the crown stipulated that “the drowned black’s canoe and all the others are obligated

¹² Bartolomé de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies*, trans. Herma Briffault (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 99–100. The French translation was in Johannes Gysius and Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Le miroir de la cruelle, & horrible tyrannie espagnole perpetree au Pays Bas* (Amsterdam, 1620).

to stop fishing and search for the said black, because it will be worth more to find him and take him out than whatever they manage to fish.”¹³

Frequent references to “pearl canoes” are a bit deceiving. If your mental image derives from films about summer camp or some distant high-school encounter with John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*, where the cover image typically includes a solitary figure paddling a tiny boat, then you’re thinking too small. The *Histoire Naturelle des Indes*, a lavishly illustrated manuscript depicting Caribbean flora, fauna, and culture during the late sixteenth century, depicts a pearl-fishing vessel with three masts and sails, manned by at least five divers (Figure 1).

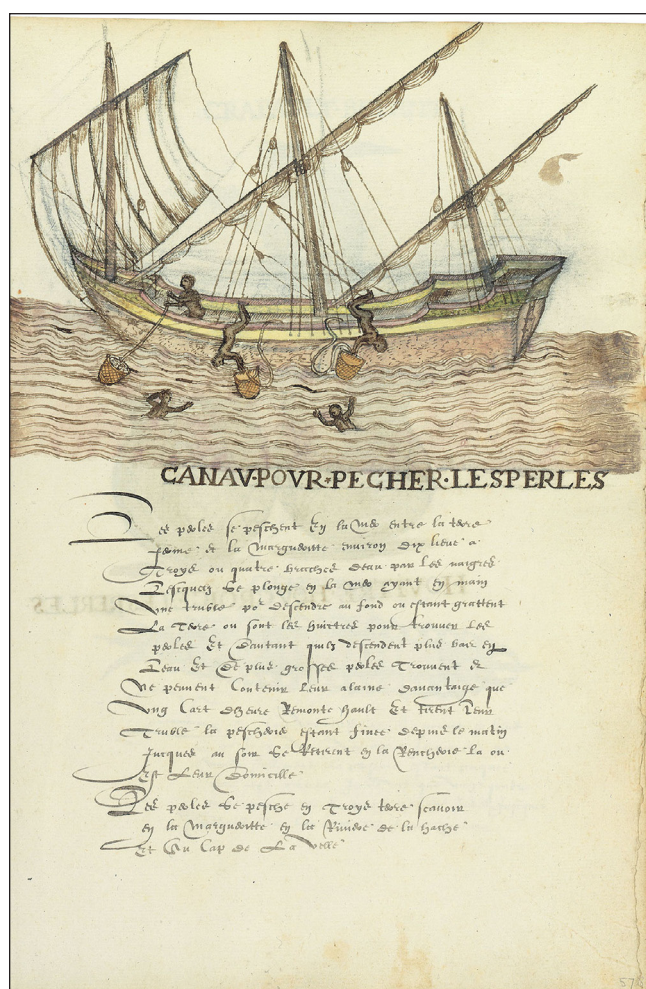


Figure 1: A pearl-fishing vessel in the so-called “Drake Manuscript,” *Histoire naturelle des Indes*, ca. 1586, fol. 57r. The Morgan Library & Museum, MA 3900, Bequest of Clara S. Peck, 1983. Reprinted with permission.

¹³ Translated by and cited in Warsh, “Enslaved Pearl Divers in the Sixteenth-Century Caribbean,” 352.

The *Histoire Naturelle des Indes*, which is often called “The Drake Manuscript” because of a tenuous connection to the English explorer and slave trader Francis Drake, is not a polemic or exposé, and this does not appear to be an exaggerated depiction. In fact, it may underrepresent the true scale of these commercial fishing vessels, which records show typically carried 18 to 20 men in the sixteenth century, with even larger ships capable of holding 30 slaves and two Spanish captains on the water by the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁴ The text accompanying the illustration notes that the “negroes who dive into the sea ... scrape the soil where the oysters are.... And the deeper they descend in the water, the larger are the pearls they find,” but they are not “able to hold their breath more than a quarter of an hour.” It adds that they work “from morning to evening” before returning to shore.¹⁵

Unlike in Las Casas, note that in these late sixteenth-century sources, the slaves diving for pearls are described explicitly as “negroes” or “black.” This would have been the reality of the pearl fisheries throughout Marvell’s lifetime. As Molly A. Warsh notes, the “transition from Indian to African pearl divers took place over the course of the [sixteenth] century, during which Africans and Indians worked side by side,” but in 1558 the Spanish crown ordered “that African slaves replace Indian pearl divers.”¹⁶ This was well known in Marvell’s England, where Richard Hakluyt recounts multiple encounters with Spanish colonists and their enslaved pearl divers in his *Principle Navigations*, first published in 1589. Marvell’s contemporary Peter Heylyn gives an even more detailed account of the replacement of native with African slave labor in his *Cosmographie*. According to Heylyn, the “Spaniards either could not or would not compell [the natives] to dive into the Sea for *Pearl*; but bought *Negro* slaves from *guinea*, and the Coasts of *Africk*, whom they inforced with great Torments to dive unto the bottom of the Sea, many times seven or eight Fathom deep, to bring up the *shels*, in which that Treasure was included: where many of them were drowned, and some maimed with *Sharks*, and other Fishes.”¹⁷ The following year, the independent minister Richard Carpenter would casually illustrate a point, in a polemic against Anabaptists, by referring to “the Negroes that are Divers for Pearls in the *West-Indies*, and walk under Water.”¹⁸ Although indigenous people, who paid taxes to the crown for pearls they retrieved on their own, remained an important part of the pearl economy in Marvell’s lifetime, any “Indian slaves / that dive for pearl through seas profound” would have been black.

¹⁴ Warsh, “Enslaved Pearl Divers in the Sixteenth-Century Caribbean,” 356.

¹⁵ *Histoire naturelle des Indes*, The Morgan Library & Museum, MA 3900, fol. 57r. Translated from the French by Ruth Kraemer, for *Histoire Naturelle Des Indes: The Drake Manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library* (New York: Norton, 1996), 261.

¹⁶ Warsh, “Enslaved Pearl Divers in the Sixteenth-Century Caribbean,” 347, 350.

¹⁷ Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie* (London, 1652), 176.

¹⁸ Richard Carpenter, *The Anabaptist Washt and Washt, and Shrunk in the Washing* (London, 1653), 401.

Even if they survived the work, it was exhausting and painful. The *Histoire Naturelle des Indes* not only gives us an image of a pearl-harvesting vessel, but also a possible clue as to why the divers were frequently referred to as “conch slaves.” Among the myriad illustrations of flora and fauna is one of a conch, with accompanying text explaining that “In this conch is found a certain hair like human hair, the color of gold, and it is very excellent for people who have an earache or who are somewhat deaf.... The negroes often use it, their ears being hurt by frequent dives” (Figure 2).¹⁹ The proximity here of

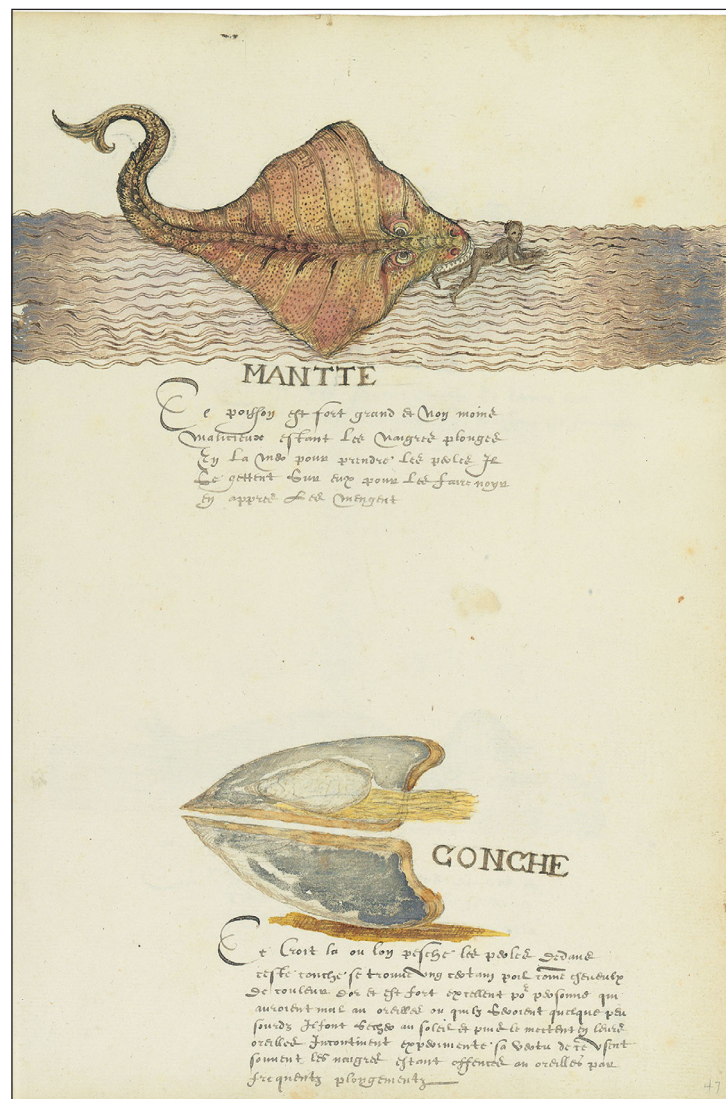


Figure 2: *Histoire naturelle des Indes*, ca. 1586, fol. 47r. The Morgan Library & Museum, MA 3900, Bequest of Clara S. Peck, 1983. Reprinted with permission.

¹⁹ *Histoire naturelle des Indes*, fol. 47r.

exoticized beauty and enforced labor, of golden hair and pain, has disturbing echoes not only in Marvell's "Mourning," but also more broadly in the poetics of conquest Roland Greene has described.²⁰ The page also depicts a manta ray attacking a slave, explaining that "[t]his fish is very large and no less vicious. When the negroes dive in the sea for pearls it jumps on them to make them drown and afterwards eats them."²¹ Whether manta rays were an actual threat, or simply another terror in waters that were certainly prone to deadly shark attacks, it is clear that the pearl fisheries were such a large, cruel business that they left their print everywhere on this author's "natural history" of the Caribbean during the late sixteenth century.

Working under such conditions, it is not surprising that the slaves frequently attempted escape, and the penalties for such attempts were severe. But pearl diving also required tremendous skill and expertise to yield its huge profits, and slaves were sometimes salaried, or shared some portion of their findings, despite repeated crown attempts to eliminate the use of pearls as compensation. Africans, in particular, were widely regarded as having developed swimming as an art well beyond the capacity of most Europeans, whose skills in the water rarely seemed to extend beyond mere survival from drowning.²² As early as the 1520s, a French inventor proposed the use of long-handled tools to replace pearl divers, but the canoe owners protested that such innovations could never match the efficiency of their skilled, enslaved divers.²³ No doubt the owners were also attempting to protect their investment in human capital in its most literal form. Pedro Mexia's popular sixteenth-century text, which Thomas Milles translated and compiled into *The Treasure of Auncient and Modern Times* in 1613, connects the way slave owners "cherished and respected" their slaves directly to their skill and perilous existence:

These Fishers are slaves, serving (for this purpose) the Christian Merchants, Maronites, Jewes or Indians ... and according to their taking pearled Oysters, so are they cherished and respected by their Masters every night, which maketh every one strive to be most beneficiall by his paines. Some times the Seas are swolne more high & boisterous, then the Fishers wold have them to be, because then it is an hinderance to their tarrying long under water; and then they make provision for themselves in

²⁰ Roland Greene, *Unrequited Conquests* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

²¹ *Histoire naturelle des Indes*, fol. 47r. Translated from the French by Kraemer, *Histoire Naturelle Des Indes: The Drake Manuscript in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, 259.

²² Kevin Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006): 1327–55.

²³ Enrique Ottee, *Las Perlas del Caribe* (Caracas: Fundacion John Boulton, 1977), 43–4.

this manner. They have a corde, at each end whereof they fasten a stone, which cord they binde about their backes and so sincking downe into the Sea, by the weight of those stones, they continue firmly under water, and gather the Oysters at their ease: and when they would mount up to the Shippe, lightly they cast off the stones, and swimme nimble in their rising. Such as would meddle in fishing for these Oysters, it behooveth them to be very expert in swimming and diving; because many drown themselves, through want of taking winde, or else are drawne into the depth of the sea, by huge and mighty Fishes, which there they met withall, and then by no meanes can escape drowning.²⁴

The slaves did not “the bottom sound” without tremendous ingenuity, labor, and risk, which is precisely why Marvell invokes them. It isn’t easy to find the meaning of Chlora’s tears.

Marvell’s phrasing allows us a brief glimpse of the semi-industrialized slave economy that developed over 150 years in the Caribbean pearl fisheries. It seems worth pausing on that glimpse of harsh reality, in part, because it was in no way inevitable. Contemporaries were perfectly capable of invoking the mysteries of what lies beneath the surface, and the potential rewards of plumbing those depths for pearls of wisdom, without acknowledging the realities of the contemporary fisheries. Henry Vaughan, for example, asks “who was it ... / That sought out pearls, and dived to find / Such precious perils for mankind”?²⁵ And John Dryden pre-emptively wards off his critics, in the preface to *All for Love*, by claiming that “Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow; / He who would search for pearls must dive below.”²⁶ In both of these examples, the search for pearl is a fairly simple metaphor and neither race, nor race-making, would seem to be involved. Marvell’s usage, in contrast, has more in common with the closing scene of *Othello*. In the quarto text Shakespeare’s protagonist says that he, like “the base Indian, threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe”; in the Folio text, the comparison is to the “base Judean” (5.2.340–41). Whether the comparison is to the American natives or to an anti-Semitic notion of Judas’s betrayal of Christ, this moment ultimately serves to contrast Othello against the play’s pervasive backdrop of white identity. Various characters, including Othello, make this backdrop explicit throughout the play as they

²⁴ Thomas Milles, *The Treasure of Auncient and Modern Times* (London, 1613), 974–75. This volume was printed by William Jaggard and has been proposed as an influence on Shakespeare.

²⁵ Henry Vaughan, “Translation of Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* II.v,” in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (London: Penguin, 1995), 33–36.

²⁶ John Dryden, “Prologue to *All for Love*,” *Selected Works*, 2nd ed., ed. William Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 25–26.

fixate on Desdemona's white skin ("I'll not shed her blood / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow") and its difference from Othello's own (5.2.3-4).

But Othello's othering happens most perniciously and powerfully in moments like this concluding scene of self-slaughter, when it becomes clear that he has internalized whiteness as the implicit, normative position from which all others deviate (Indian, Judean, "turbaned Turk" [5.2.363]). Similarly, Marvell's invocation of "Indian slaves" may ultimately be most significant not for illuminating the reality of forced, racialized, labor, but for the way it makes explicit the powerful fiction of whiteness that undergirds the poem. Whiteness, after all, is the only subjective lens through which this scene of enslaved divers can be aestheticized. And we have seen how easy it is to do just that, transforming enslaved laborers into mysterious and exotic divers, as they have been in most commentary on the poem. Indeed, as he passes, but keeps "silent" his "judgement," the narrator himself begins this aestheticization, implying privileged access to Chlora's motivations even as he refuses the labor of interpretation. If they weren't already implicitly white, both the narrator and Chlora surely become so in this moment, as does the reader who is enlisted in the narrator's private thoughts. When he tells us that when "women weep, / It is to be supposed they grieve," he does so with a newfound authority that is not incidentally connected to that whiteness.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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