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Confused Tears

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Taking stanza two of Andrew Marvell's "Mourning" as its focus, this essay argues that, within the poem's multiple and intermingled readings of the mourner's weeping, tears fall in and out of figuration. Their state changes between charged image and mere water exploited by countervailing hydrologies of grace and carnality. Against the speaker's conclusion that the meaning of women's tears can be supposed but is finally unknowable, the poem proposes a masturbatory heresy of self-sufficiency and multiplicity.



At issue in Andrew Marvell's "Mourning," a by turns solicitous, malicious, and, finally, incurious interrogation of a weeping widow, is the gravity of tears. "You," the poem quizzes us in line one, "What mean these infants which of late / Spring from the stars of Clora's eyes?" (1, 3–4).¹ Her constant weeping is *confused* and confusing, as the speaker notes in the second stanza:

Her eyes confused, and doubled o'er,
With tears suspended ere they flow,
Seem bending upwards, to restore
To heaven, whence it came, their woe. (5–8)

A furtive water word, whose hydro-filiation lies in its Latin root, *con + fundere*, "to pour out, melt," *confused* means both "intermingled" and "flowing together," as Donald M. Friedman has pointed out.² To this we could add "abashed, downcast," and "confusing" in our more familiar sense, as in, not readily legible: her tears fall up and fall down, laden with sincere grief and indulgent self-regard, devout and coy, according to the overlapping and discrepant readings of the speaker and the onlookers he cites. Within the poem's confusion of meanings, her tears fall in and out of figuration; countervailing hydrologies of grace and carnality exploit their state changes between charged image and mere water.

In this second stanza the speaker presents the mourner as a kind of Magdalen, whose sincere and proper weeping shuttles her grief from eye to heaven. Such a holy antigravity will be familiar to readers of Richard Crashaw, who addresses his Magdalen directly: "Upwards thou dost weepe, / Heavens bosome drinks the gentle streame" ("The Weeper," 19–20).³ Indeed, her tears, like stars, "but seem to *fall*" (15, my emphasis). For Crashaw the gravity of the Magdalen's tears constitutes the figure, and the antigravity the real. In "Mourning" the *seemliness* goes in the expected direction, and, although the speaker also draws attention to the simile at work, the effect is to expose the mechanism of figuration: her tears only "seem bending upwards." He acknowledges that, however fantastically they behave in the hydraulics of figuration—whether falling up or locomoting like ambulatory oceans, as tears do in "The Weeper"—her tears are also drops of water and thus subject to the fluid mechanics of the natural

¹ Andrew Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (London: Penguin, 2005), 37–39. All subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by line number.

² Donald M. Friedman, *Marvell's Pastoral Art* (London: Routledge, 1970), 46.

³ Richard Crashaw, "The Weeper," in *The Poems, English, Latin and Greek, of Richard Crashaw*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 79. All subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by line number.

world. In the next stanza, her tears fall more expectedly down, but here, too, the speaker lays bare another simile:

When, moulding off the watery spheres,
 Slow drops untie themselves away,
 As if she, with those precious tears,
 Would strow the ground where Strephon lay. (9–12, my emphasis)

In both stanzas two lines of precisely observed naturalistic description of fluid precede the two-line artifice of the simile: first, the plump filming of water on the surface of the eyeball, a suspending of flow, and then the slow detaching of this eyewater, forced down from her eyes by a gravitational pull, drop by drop. We feel the *is*-ness of the first descriptions balanced against the *seeming* or *as-if*-ness of the second, with the formulation of comparison seaming the two halves of each stanza, the tears-as-water and the tears-as-figure.

This image of tears falling upward is a compressed version of the hydrology of grace that saturates poetry of this period. In Book 5 of *Paradise Lost* Milton apostrophizes the “mists and exhalations” that drift up from Eden to praise God and then, falling back in showers, fructify the earth; Henry Vaughan’s miasmatic verse puts faith in a kind of water cycle of repentance, whereby the heart, softened by rain-like grace, can transpire even its coarsest sins and loft them heavenward in a contrite steam.⁴ The biblical origins of this hydrology—Gideon’s bedewed fleece; drops of morning manna that evanesce by noon; Isaiah’s exhortation, “Drop down ye heavens from above and let the skies pour down righteousness”—were richly elaborated in the religious discourses of early modern England.⁵ John Hayward provides a succinct exemplum in his 1623 meditation *Dauid’s Teares*: “For as all the droppes of raine which fall vpon the earth, are originally drawn out of the sea, which is both the fountaine and receipt of all waters: so all the goodnesse which is in man is deriued from thee; who art the foundation and receipt of all goodnesse.”⁶ The logic of evaporation and dissolution, as we know it from the dewy meadow and the vaporous rain, makes legible the sublime illogicalities of grace, the wondrous traffic between heaven and heart, God and sinner. Grace is analogized to water, which makes its way to earth, and our human response—penitence, prayer, gratitude, adoration—to the water that rises to heaven.

⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara Lewalski (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 5.185; see, for instance, Henry Vaughan’s “The Showre,” in *Silex Scintillans: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, 2nd ed. (London, 1655), 25, EEBO.

⁵ Judges 6:37–40; Exodus 16; Isaiah 45:8. (KJV)

⁶ John Hayward, *Dauid’s Teares* (London, 1623), 230.

Often that response takes the form of tears. The tradition of the *gratia lacrimarum* and the *ars lachrimandi* has been carefully traced, from Paul and the patristics through medieval and early modern regimes of monastic asceticism, affective piety, and compunction.⁷ Modeled on the exemplary tears of David, Peter, and the Magdalen, godly weeping expresses an exquisite intermingling of sorrow and joy, introspection and communal consciousness: an ecstatic voiding in response to God's love or the longing for heaven; grief in the conviction of sin and the vanity of this world; a deliquescence of compassion for another's misfortune. "No teares are lost, that fall from the eyes of godly men, for God catcheth them before they can fall to the ground, and he treasureth them up in his bottle," is the sacramental whimsy preached by Lewis Thomas in his 1599 sermon *Peters Repentance*, but for many lachrymal theologians tears reached heaven not in God's *eau-de-vie* bottle but through the evaporative logic of the water cycle.⁸ A simile from a much earlier text spells out the process: "the tear that a man weepeth through longing for heaven is called dew-water, for as the sun draweth up the dew and maketh thereof the rains to come, so the Holy Ghost maketh the man to look up to heaven, and when he may not thither come as quickly as he would, he sendeth thither his hot tears."⁹ As the sun vaporizes the dew, so God volatilizes the hot tears of those who long for heaven.

God's grace is likened to rain, our tears to dew. And yet: our tears really *are* dew in a way that God's grace is not really rain—that is, while God's grace is also sometimes the rain / dew, especially in fecund times or dry climes, our tears are always wet and thus governed by the actual tensions and state changes that obtain for terrestrial water. The minor hydrology of the tear—of liquid emitted from the human and then subjected to gravity and evaporation, to beading and flow—operates within and sometimes counter to these vaster sacred figurative hydrologies. At once fluid and figurative, tears are themselves and a simile of what they express.

This oversaturation of meaning both intensifies and dissolves figuration, and allows for spillover into related or competing systems of interpretation. In stanza two of "Mourning" the *seem* holds apart the tears that behave as water and the tears

⁷ See Sandra J. McEntire, *The Doctrine of Compunction in Medieval England: Holy Tears*, Studies in Mediaeval Literature 8 (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1990); Marjory Lange, *Telling Tears in the English Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); and Gary Kuchar, *The Poetry of Religious Sorrow in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸ Lewis Thomas, *Peters Repentance*, in *Seven sermons, or, The exercises of seuen Sabbaths* (London, 1610), C6v; quoted in Lange, *Telling Tears*, 146.

⁹ From a twelfth-century sermon on Psalm 126:6: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. Going they went and wept, casting their seeds. But coming they shall come with joyfulness, carrying their sheaves." *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises*, ed. Richard Morris (London: Early English Text Society, 1868), 158. Quoted in McEntire, *The Doctrine of Compunction*, 123.

that float to heaven in a delicate baring of artifice, a seam to be unpicked. And, indeed, in the four stanzas that follow, the speaker rebuts his own reading by reporting how others interpret her tears: “Yet some affirm ...” (13). His *seem* morphs into *some*, the onlookers whose skeptical reading disables the simile of holy grace. Instead of taking *seem* as the verb of simile, the suggesting of likeness, his ventriloquy of the crowd treats it as duplicitous, a verb of performance. Her tears only *seem* to be falling up. Because these tears actually fall down, as tears do, the mourner’s grief is neither devout nor sincere. Her tears disgrace her; they situate her within a competing hydrology, one of carnal grace, whose fluid dynamics govern the body’s outflows in response to desire and pleasure. Her weeping expresses not true grief but erotic narcissism, and the only answering wetness she receives is not the grace of God but an amorous softening of her heart and lubricating of her loins.

Like the hydrology of grace, this erotic schema is structured according to watery likenesses while also enfolding into its figurative system the actually wet. The onlookers fasten on and literalize the falling of her tears in the explanations they provide: they say her tears flow down over her bosom, down into her lap, and are flung from the windows of her eyes like coins. And yet their erotic readings also flicker in and out of figuration. First, they allege that her tears soften her heart not to receive God’s grace—as penitent tears are supposed to soften the stony, calloused hearts of reprobates—but to make tender “a place to fix another wound” (16). That her weeping softens her heart is a figure; that another love shaft will wound her is barely figurative at all, representing the prospective phallus that will presumably penetrate and shed on her its ejaculative dew. Likewise, the “am’rous rain” (19) brimming in her lap is both the Jovian shower that rapes Danaë *and* a sexual saturation. These bodily emissions are, like tears, actual fluid. Just as a hydrology of grace must accommodate wet tears, an erotic hydrology of myth and performance incorporates the wet body, whose psycho-physiological leaking confounds interpretation. With their insistent liquidity tears—and their sexual analogs—both proliferate and unsettle figuration. They confuse.

The floriated speculations in “Mourning” attempt to answer a version of the Pauline question inherent to the *ars lachrimandi*: “what does it mean to weep in an authentically devout way, rather than in a narcissistically self-oriented way?” as Kuchar puts it.¹⁰ God may know, but how can an onlooker tell? The difficulty of distinguishing devout from self-pitying tears, or even happy from sad tears, has exercised both divines and physiologists, as Marjory Lange details in her history of weeping in the Renaissance. According to Laurent Joubert, a sixteenth-century French theorist of laughter,

¹⁰ Kuchar, *The Poetry of Religious Sorrow*, 100.

“one weeps of sadness when suffering presses the eyes and the adjacent areas with constraint, squeezing out their humidity. Joy, on the other hand, dilates and opens the pores, from which the humors are able to flow and fall in the form of tears.”¹¹ Sorrow compresses, joy dilates, but tears are the result in each case. In sacramental traditions, different kinds of water were associated with different kinds of tears, turbid wellwater, for instance, analogized to unworthy crying, melted snow to tears shed on another’s behalf.¹² Tears are so much “excrementall water” if they well up for sinful or solipsistic reasons, “nothing worth if they be not warmed and melted with this heat of loue,” which is, needless to say, a heat of godly love and not the blissful amatory melting suspected of Marvell’s mourner.¹³

When women weep, tears are, inevitably, still more suspect. Timothy Bright, a “doctor of physicke” cited by Lange, codified centuries of humoral and para-humoral medical thought in his 1586 *Treatise of Melancholie*, writing that those who weep most easily “are almost altogether of a moist, rare, and tender body, especially of brayne and heart. ... [T]his is the cause why children are more apt to weepe, then those that are of greater yeares, and women more then men, the one having by youth the body moist, rare & soft, and the other by sex.”¹⁴ Yet against this neutral statement of physiological disposition we might array a robust archive of woman as weepy deceiver, whose oscillations between frigid disdain and melting seduction, ardent tears and reproachful tears, engender the agonies of Petrarchan contradiction: fire-ice, hope-despair, semen-tears, love-hate. Ovid offers this dictum in his *Ars Amatoria: quoque volunt plorant tempore, quoque modo* (women weep when they wish to, in whichever way they please).¹⁵ Women are thus weepers by nature and by wish, both compelled to cry and resolved to cry, a paradox that Lange identifies but only in passing. The Magdalen may be an exemplum of female wetness—in weeping for godly sorrow and godly joy—but her worldly counterparts are at best dubious weepers.

¹¹ Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 56; quoted in Lange, *Telling Tears*, 50.

¹² “For as water taken from pits and welles vpon the earth, is not so fruitfull to make hearbes thriue, as raine water which falleth from heauen; Insomuch as some plants growing in the middest of waters, will wither and die for want of raine: so teares which proceede from terrene respects, make not the soule so flourishing and fruitfull in grace, as teares which fall for the loue of GOD”; Hayward, *Dauids Teares*, 50.

¹³ Hayward, *Dauid's Teares*, 50.

¹⁴ Lange, *Telling Tears*, 29.

¹⁵ Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, Book 3, ed. Roy K. Gibson, Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries 40 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60, line 292. My translation.

Hence the hedging in the speaker's conclusion in "Mourning." Once he's presented the erotic readings of the mourner's tears, he whelms them—and his own earlier similes—in a metaphor of waves. "How wide they dream!" he scoffs,

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)

Tears are the watery abyss that cannot be sounded: their meaning is, finally, unknowable. In the last stanza all relational language recedes, and we are offered the cool indifferent statement that "sure as oft as women weep, / It is to be supposed they grieve," with his "sure" conflating of "weep" and "grieve" held apart by that intervening, slowly unfurling, passive-voiced disinterest, "it is to be supposed" (35–36). The speaker moves from hydrologies, with their overheated deliquescences applied to this singular woman, to drier data and the semblance of a statistical hypothesis. The weeping woman has become "women." Bored, he retreats into the multiple, the maxim.

What *should* we suppose about the wetness of women, and the wetness of this particular woman? In the face of such continuous weeping, Marvell's poem proliferates resolutions that slip into paradox: the mourner cries helplessly and instrumentally; because of female humors and feminine humor; for godly grief and erotic pleasure. The result is confusion—so many resolutions that they resolve into nothing. Is this the same coarse and evergreen unknowability that has been throwing up its hands at women's tears since Ovid's *Ars*? Is the non-resolution just that women are a mystery, their weeping an expression of unfathomable state changes?

We find a riposte to this conclusion exactly mid-poem, where, in the intermingled "am'rous rain" of tears and orgasm, the mourner is made heretically self-sufficient and multiplicitous. In the middle and most scandalous of the onlookers' scandalmongering stanzas, she is accused of crying herself to climax:

And, while vain pomp does her restrain
Within her solitary bow'r,
She courts herself in am'rous rain;
Herself both Danaë and the shower. (7–10)

They're not amatory, but Marvell's other water-and-tear poems are helpful in thinking through this bower interlude. In "On a Drop of Dew" the elaborated water cycle of a

drop that beads and spills and is finally quickened to ecstatic vapor perfectly mirrors the soul's movement through life to death and to salvation. But the tears that remain stubbornly liquid and unevaporated in "Eyes and Tears" derange the cycle of grace, and even suggest heresy, as Joan Hartwig argues. That poem's "fusion of the tears / dew emblematic association into the same eyes" means that "these eyes can produce their own dew without an intermediate step of transformed substance"—no cycle of distillation or shower. "Or in theological terms, the self is now capable of delivering grace to itself by the process of crying."¹⁶

This heresy—of the arrested cycle, of the self-sufficient tear—attaches to the mourner too. Her self-delight presents a still smaller hydrology, one entirely contained within her own body. Her tears mingle with and also arouse what we might imagine as tears from her nether eye or loin dew. Like the eyes in "Eyes and Tears" her body produces its own dew: her eyes drop tears upon this downward eye whose "tears" well up to meet them, one liquefaction provoking another, the I delivering grace to herself. The scandal here is that the mourner needs no lover and no God, in this self-sufficient cycling of pleasure. The only traffic is within the I and between the eyes—that is, the eyes and the vagina—a traffic of defiantly wet liquid.

Masturbation is the solitary, nongenerative sex. Yet, as this stanza slyly proposes, it is also a multiplicative sex. The three confused eyes of the bower stanza—confused in that sense of flowing together—correspond to a companion multiplying of *I*'s. The mourner begins as an autonomous "she," then multiplies into two selves, the agential lover and the liquefied beloved: "she courts herself." The "herself" itself multiplies in the next line, defined as two things, "herself both Danaë and the shower." In the blissful rain of orgasm, the singular *she* gushes into the multiplicity of *shower*. That the erotic analysis of her tears turns to metaphor here—as opposed to the speaker's first two similes—becomes important. In place of the estranging *seem* and *as if*, the onlookers precipitate comparisons that, by disbaring any intervening grammar of relation, collapse the ironic distance between speaker and object, and between tenor and vehicle. In the bower stanza, relationality is neither between tears and object, nor woman and lover, but is rather a condition of the mourner and her own body. As her relational and social being—wife, widow, prospective lover—dissolves, her tears proliferate her self into *she*, *herself*, *Danaë*, and *shower*. The speaker's multiplicative move from *this* mourner to all women has its counterpart here in a masturbatory reverie that imagines

¹⁶ Joan Hartwig, "Tears as a Way of Seeing," in *On the Celebrated and Neglected Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 80.

self-sufficiency not in a conserving sense of adequacy but rather as a superadding, an engulfing saturation, a self-multiplicity.

The first two stanzas foreground how simile operates, in the hydrology of godly grace; this midpoint stanza shows us how metaphor works: how the wetness of the body fiddles with figuration so that her fluids are at once the Jovian shower, orgasmic dew, and tears—two real fluids intermingling with myth—and the mourner is an amalgam of beloved and lover, Danaë and self.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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