

Dung-Carters and Holy Avarice in Edward Taylor's "Mediation 1.46"

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Nay, may I, Lord, believe it? Shall my Skeg
Be ray'd in thy White Robes? My thatcht old Cribb
(Immortal Purss hung on a mortall Peg.)
Wilt thou with fair'st array in heaven rig?
I'm but a jumble of gross Elements
A Snaile Horn where an Evill Spirit tents.

A Dirt ball dresst in milk white Lawn, and dect
In Tissue tagd with gold, or Ermins flush,
That mocks the Stars, and sets them in a fret
To se[e] themselves out shone thus. Oh they blush.
Wonders stand gastard here. But yet my Lord,
This is but faint to what thou dost afford.

I'm but a Ball of dirt. Wilt thou adorn
Mee with thy Web wove in thy Loom Divine
The Whitest Web in Glory, that the morn
Nay, that all Angell glory, doth ore shine?
They ware no such. This whitest Lawn most fine
Is onely worn, my Lord, by thee and thine.

This Saye's no flurr of Wit, nor new Coin'd Shape
Of frolick Fancie in a Rampant Brain.
It's juyce Divine bled from the Choicest Grape
That ever Zions Vineyarde did mentain.
Such Mortall bits immortaliz'de shall ware
More glorious robes, than glorious Angells bare.

Their Web is wealthy, wove of Wealthy Silke
Well wrought indeed, its all brancht Taffity.

But this thy Web more white by far than milke
 Spun on thy Wheele twine of thy Deity
 Wove in thy Web, Fulld in thy mill by hand
 Makes them in all their bravery seem tand,

This Web is wrought by best, and noblest Art
 That heaven doth afford of twine most choice
 All brancht, and richly flowerd in every part
 With all the sparkling flowers of Paradise
 To be thy Ware alone, who hast no peere
 And Robes for glorious Saints to thee most deare.

Wilt thou, my Lord, dress my poore wither'd Stump
 In this rich web whose whiteness doth excell
 The Snow, though 'tis most black? And shall my Lump
 Of Clay ware more than e're on Angells fell?
 What shall my bit of Dirt be deckt so fine
 That shall Angelick glory all out shine?

Shall things run thus? Then Lord, my tumberill
 Unload of all its Dung, and make it cleane.
 And load it with thy wealthi'st Grace untill
 Its Wheelles do crack, or Axletree complain.
 I fain would have it cart thy harvest in,
 Before its loosed from its Axlepin.

Then screw my Strings up to thy tune that I
 May load thy Glory with my Songs of praise.
 Make me thy Shalm, thy praise my Songs, whereby
 My mean Shoshannim may thy Michtams raise.
 And when my Clay ball's in thy White robes dresst
 My tune perfume thy praise shall with the best.

Drawn from Revelation 3:5, the epigraph of Edward Taylor's "Meditation 1.46" (1692) anticipates that the white garment of redemption—the robe of flesh Christ donned to save humanity—will serve as the dominant image in

the poem. Much of the imagery in this meditation (Stanford 74-76) is in fact devoted to the varieties, production and decoration of cloth. Less certain, however, is the identity of the narrator who is fixated on this redemptive raiment. It is the poet who speaks, of course, but through what performative persona? Similar to the voices heard in other poems comprising the first series of Taylor's *Preparatory Meditations*, the bumbling narrator in the reverently playful "Meditation 1.46" is effectively a theatrical character who reveals himself to us through dramatic monologue.

Applying an English cultural practice he had observed firsthand both in his homeland and New England, Taylor fashions a speaker whose vocabulary indicates his social rank. A cluster of words in the first stanza suggests the narrator's position at the low end of the seventeenth-century English social scale. This cluster includes "Skeg," "Cribb," "Purss," "rig," "Horn" and probably "Peg." In Taylor's day these words had different meanings depending on their distinctive use within various social strata. Considered singly, each of their specific connotations in the monologue does not reveal much more about the speaker than a certain uncultivated awkwardness in self-expression. Considered collectively, however, the close association of these words in the short span of the monologue's opening lines intimates that the narrator is very familiar with the seventeenth-century argot of English criminals: "Skeg" (theft, plunder), "Cribb" (pilfer, hoax), "Purss" (loot), "rig" (rob, cheat), "Horn" (declared an outlaw), and "Peg" (indicted).

Such a representation of the narrator dramatizes Taylor's Calvinistic belief in the criminal sinfulness of fallen, innately-depraved humanity. Just as in society crime and poverty are commonly found together, in Taylor's Calvinistic understanding humanity is impoverished precisely because of its post-Adamic outlaw relationship with the Creator. Metaphorically representing this dual spiritual condition, the narrator in "Meditation 1.46" is not only familiar with criminal argot but also economically destitute. He is barely surviving at his low-end job as the carter of "Dung." His rickety "tumberill" (a wagon that can be tilted to dump a load) aptly represents his filth-filled body subject to decay and death.

Since the socially and spiritually fallen dung-carter is poor, he has nowhere to live other than inside the foul cart of his mortal body. His body/wagon is "thatcht," a conventional humorous seventeenth-century roofing allusion referring to head hair. The narrator's skin, furthermore, is described as a tarp

stretched over his wagon-load of dung, an image the narrator extends into a comparison of himself to dung-loving snails living inside their shells. When the narrator laments that “an Evill Spirit tents” beneath this fleshly tarp, he refers to the body’s mortality and the fecal stink of decay inside him. Obviously the carter’s situation is far from good as he works with and lives inside this ramshackle “thatcht old Cribb” made of “Skeg” (inferior wood) and featuring a “poore wither’d Stump.” It is no wonder that such a destitute person would fantasize about riches.

Nor is it surprising that the narrator is unable to comprehend why a well-off, peerless lord (Christ) would simply give away something of immense value (“wealthi’st Grace”). He is understandably skeptical about such a free offer. Well versed in the ways of criminals, he wrestles with the suspicion that he is being gulled in some sort of confidence scheme. Confidence is indeed the issue.

The narrator needs to reassure himself about this lord’s generosity (the promise of redemption). He needs to be more certain that what he has heard is “no flurr of Wit,” no deceiving rhetorical sleight of hand. He is equally on guard against any counterfeit, any “new Coin’d Shape,” that might make him a dupe in the transaction. He wants to trust, but he is hesitant: “Nay, may I, Lord, believe it?” This question, which opens the monologue, initiates the dual tone of skepticism and amazement registered throughout the poem.

The possibility of such a rapid transformation in economic and social standing may reflect Taylor’s late-Renaissance awareness of the economic blurring of clearly demarcated social ranks. In spiritual terms, however, the poet also affirms the older hierarchical distinction between rulers and subjects. In crude socio-economic terms the narrator wonders how could he, someone of such low social rank, possibly be chosen for such an astonishing largesse? At the core of his vacillation between belief and doubt is the fundamental question Calvinists were routinely urged to ponder concerning their possible elevation in spiritual standing through divine election.

Of course the impoverished dung-hauler is not going to decline the priceless gift, if it is indeed offered, despite his inability to comprehend the motivation (divine mercy) behind it. In fact, Taylor’s persona in “Meditation 1.46” mimics the sensibility of the criminal exiled to a penal colony in “Meditation 1.15” (Scheick 94). Both have grown greedy through earthly hardship, and both ask for huge quantities of their lord’s bounty. After all, the destitute

dung-carter thinks, since “Well wrought,” “richly flowered,” “Wealthy Silke” or “Lawn” (fine linen) “deckt / In Tissue tagd with gold” is being given away, why not ask for as much of it as can be gotten? He can appreciate Christ’s spiritual garment of redemption only through his delimiting materialistic understanding. And so he mistakenly—humorously, for the savvy reader—tries to quantify Christ’s unquantifiable munificence.

First, the dung-hauler wants his old bodily cart to be unloaded of its putrefaction (morality). Next, his corporeal wagon needs to be cleaned and covered anew with Christ’s white raiment (redeemed flesh). Reverently amusing here is the narrator’s materialistic suggestion that Christ’s largesse will transform his rickety dung-cart into a more upscale wagon. He specifically hopes for a caravan, a covered wheeled vehicle used during the seventeenth century either to inhabit as a home or to convey goods. He imagines how Christ’s precious white raiment would refurbish both the narrator’s bodily wagon and his social/spiritual status. Then his life would be transformed from low-end impoverishment (death and damnation) to high-end enrichment (eternal life).

The last stanza advances his hope a little further. Just as breezes refreshingly pass through a cleansed and refurbished caravan, the Holy Spirit will blessedly course through a redeemed body. At present, in stark contrast, the foul “Snaile Horn” or “old Cribb” of the narrator’s body/wagon is filled with dung and unpleasant sounds (inept meditations likened to intestinal noises). It is a place more suitable for animal than human habitation. Renovated, however, this body/wagon would have an appealing smell and sound. Cleared and refreshed, it would become the Holy Spirit’s wind instrument (“Shalm”) capable of perfumed, glorious songs (meditative verse) of praise for the Creator.

But this wonderful final stage is reserved for the afterlife, and unfortunately the narrator is still very much an indigent creature in the temporal world, where quantity seems to matter. This is particularly apparent in the penultimate stanza. There the speaker envisions his renovated covered wagon overloaded with “wealthi’st Grace until / Its Wheels do crack, or Axletree complain.” He fantasizes about “cart[ing this] harvest in / Before its loosed from its Axlepin” (fatally breaks down). That the hauler cannot help but think quantitatively of loading up non-material grace, to the point of cracking wooden wheels and their axles, aptly dramatizes the emotional impact of the spiritual deprivation Taylor believes to define post-Adamic humanity.

Also from the poet's Puritan perspective, the carter's irrelevant and ludicrous greed in this matter satirizes humanity's unworthiness as a recipient of Christ's rich redemptive gift, which remains far beyond human understanding. At least, Taylor humorously implies, the narrator is now avaricious about what really matters (redemption). In an Augustinian sense, too, even avarice, one of the seven deadly sins, is ultimately redeemed and elevated by Christ. In the hopeful, reverently comic vision of "Meditation 1.46" both the dung-carter and his avarice potentially undergo an amazing transformation in social/spiritual status.

WORKS CITED

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