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Victoria Moul
 Classics Department
 King's College London
 Strand
 London
 WC2R 2LS

THE SOURCE FOR PRIAPUS IN COWLEY'S ODE 'TO THE ROYAL SOCIETY' (1667)

A statue of Priapus makes an unnamed but memorable appearance in the third stanza of Abraham Cowley's late ode *To the Royal Society* (1667, lines 49-61) a poem which has attracted a considerable amount of critical commentary.¹ In the most detailed discussion of this stanza, Catherine Butler has suggested possible sources for Priapus in Tibullus, Virgil and Hobbes' *Leviathan*.² The clearest parallel for the passage, however, and the only one that makes sense of an otherwise strange transition from a fleeing ghost to a statue of Priapus in an orchard has not previously been noted.

At this point in the poem the hero of the ode, Francis Bacon, has 'With the plain Magique of true Reasons Light' (45) succeeded in banishing the 'Gigantic Ghost' (43) of (implicitly scholastic) 'Authority' (41) back to its grave: 'To Graves, from whence it rose, the conquer'd Phantome fled' (49). It is at this point that the 'Monstrous God' – Priapus – puts in a comic appearance:

He [Bacon] broke that Monstrous God, which stood
 In midst of th'Orchard, and the whole did claim,
 Which with a useless Sith of Wood,
 And something else not worth a name,

¹ Key discussions of the poem include Robert B. Hinman, *Abraham Cowley's World of Order* (Cambridge MA, 1960), 184-96; Guy Laprevotte, 'To the Royal Society d'Abraham Cowley', *Etudes Anglaises*, xxvi (1973), 129-149; Mary Elizabeth Green, 'The Poet in Solomon's House: Abraham Cowley as Baconian Apostle', *Restoration: Studies in English Literature, 1660-1700*, x (1986), 68-75; Achsah Guibbory, 'Imitation and Originality: Cowley and Bacon's Vision of Progress', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, xxix (1989), 99-120.

² Catherine Butler, 'The Stagirite and the Scarecrow: Stanza 3 of Cowley's ode 'To the Royal Society' (1667)', *Restoration* xxi (1997), 1-14. Derek Hirst and Stephen N. Zwicker (eds), *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane* (Oxford, 2012), 172-3 also comments briefly on the Priapus passage in their exploration of possible links between Cowley and Marvell.

(Both vast for shew, yet neither fit
 Or to Defend, or to Beget;
 Ridiculous and senceless Terrors!) made
 Children and superstitious Men afraid.
 The Orchard's open now, and free;
Bacon has broke that Scar-crow Deitie;
 Come, enter, all that will,
 Behold the ripen'd Fruit, come gather now your fill.
 (*To the Royal Society*, 50-61)

Priapus has two attributes in the stanza: the 'Sith' (that is, scythe) that he holds – which is 'useless' (as a scythe) because it is only made of wood – and 'something else not worth a name', that is, a large erect penis which was a standard feature both of statues of Priapus and of images of him in poetry and art. Both scythe and penis are 'vast for shew, yet neither fit / Or to Defend, or to Beget' (54-5) and are therefore 'ridiculous and senceless Terrors' (56): that is, no-one should fear rape or assault at the hands of such a statue. Statues of Priapus (complete with oversized phallus) were commonly used as scarecrows in classical Rome, and Catherine Butler has suggested two specific parallels for the image here, from Tibullus (*Elegies* 1.1.17-18) and Virgil (*Georgics* 4.110-1), both of which mention Priapus' weapon (his sickle or pruning-hook) but not his penis. Many parallel passages could be adduced from the *Priapea*, a collection of short and mostly sexually explicit Latin poems on the statues of Priapus.³ But the closest parallel both to the details of the statue and to his role within the stanza is at Horace, *Satires* 1.8, which, like Cowley's lines, mentions two implements (in this case the phallus in his groin, and a reed on his head)⁴; and from which Cowley

³ Three priapea appear in the *Appendix Vergiliana*, and the *Priapea* collection as a whole was attributed to Virgil in the earlier part of the Renaissance (see W. H. Parker, *Priapea: Poems for a Phallic God* (London, 1988) and Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus* (Oxford, rev. ed. 1992)). The dating of the *Priapea* is contentious and uncertain (see Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 141-3). On the imitation of priapea in neo-Latin poetry, see Donatella Coppini, 'The Comic and the Obscene in Latin Epigrams of the Early Fifteenth Century', in *The Neo-Latin Epigram: A Learned and Witty Genre*, ed. Susanna De Beer (Leuven, 2009), 93-96.

⁴ The mention of Priapus' 'right hand' as preventing theft (*Satires* 1.8.4) also implies that he is holding his traditional weapon, the sickle or pruning-hook.

appears to have borrowed the ‘useless [Sith of] wood’, echoing Horace’s *inutile lignum* (‘useless wood’):⁵

*Olim truncus eram ficulnus, inutile lignum,
cum faber, incertus scamnum faceretne Priapum,
maluit esse deum. deus inde ego, furum aviumque
maxima formido; nam fures dextra coerceset
obsceneoque ruber porrectus ab inguine palus;
ast importunes volucres in vertice harundo
terret fixa vetatque novis considerare in hortis.*

(Horace, *Satires* 1.8.1-7)

I was once a fig-tree trunk, a useless plank,
When a carpenter, unsure whether to make a pedestal or a Priapus,
Preferred me to be a god. So a god I am, a great source of dread
For thieves and for birds. For both my right hand and the red stake
Standing upright from my obscene groin restrain thieves;
And the reed fixed on the top of my head scares away
The troublesome birds, and stops them settling in the renovated gardens.

The context for this passage is the conversion of a paupers’ burial ground on the Esquiline Hill into a public garden; a process overseen by Maecenas, Horace’s patron, who owned land in the area.

The poem goes on to offer a mock-aetiology of the large crack in the wooden statue’s rear:

⁵ In Horace, the statue is ‘useless’ as a lump of wood, but not as a statue of Priapus. Cowley has transferred the phrase to the wooden scythe, but in so doing echoes other instances of the phrase in Latin poetry. The phrase *inutile lignum* refers to a penis at *Priapea* 73.3. In their brief discussion of this passage, Hirst and Zwicker cite Vioque’s commentary on Martial 7.19.1 (Guillermo Galán Vioque, trans. J. J. Zoltowski, *Martial, Book VII. A Commentary* (Leiden, 2002), 154) but seem to have misinterpreted Vioque (Hirst and Zwicker 2012, 172), conflating the comment on the word *fragmentum* (which suggests a shipwreck) with the note on *inutile lignum*. The phrase *inutile lignum* does not suggest shipwreck in Latin. In a note (172, n. 28) Hirst and Zwicker suggest that ‘it may be mere coincidence’ that Marvell’s father and Cowley both interpreted *inutile lignum* as a penis, but such an interpretation is unsurprising given the appearance of the phrase with precisely this meaning in the *Priapea*, as well as in a more generally Priapic context in *Satires* 1.8.

Priapus finds the witches Canidia and Sagana, who use the desolate and sinister burial ground for their spells, even more unpleasant than thieves or wild creatures (17-20, that is, those whom Priapus is traditionally supposed to scare away); at the climax of the poem, he breaks wind loudly, frightening off the witches and causing the crack in his buttocks (46-47). As they flee, the witches, who are represented as sinister and powerful in the middle of the poem, appear merely ridiculous (48-50).

Horace's poem, like many of the poems of the *Priapea*, describes Priapus' enormous penis. But Horace's poem also offers the link, required by Cowley's ode, between Priapus and a burial ground – the site of the grave to which the 'Gigantic Ghost' of Authority has fled. The transformation from cemetery to garden is emblematic of the new order: the new order of Rome under Octavian, in Horace; of the new post-Baconian scientific enlightenment of the Royal Society, in Cowley. Moreover, the relevance of Maecenas to Horace's poem is echoed by Bacon's major role in Cowley's ode.

Cowley's poem adds to the Horatian story, however, since Bacon not only banishes 'Authority' (as Priapus does the witches in *Satires* 1.8) but also destroys Priapus himself. The terms of that destruction – 'He *broke* that Monstrous God' (50) – itself appears to allude to Horace, since the ribald point of *Satires* 1.8 is to offer an explanation for the large crack in the wooden statue. Cowley's Bacon goes farther than Maecenas, removing not only the witches but also Priapus himself: Butler notes that Hobbes cites the god Priapus as one in a series of examples of pagan superstition now banished by reason, and this may be relevant here.⁶ The light of scientific understanding means that even 'Children and superstitious men' (57) will no longer be afraid of such a statue, and indeed Cowley specifies that the orchard will be open to 'all that will' (60).

There is a tension however between the profession of a scientific 'free for all' of light and knowledge, and the rhetorical structure of the passage, which depends so heavily upon innuendo

⁶ Butler, 'The Stagirite and the Scarecrow', 9-15.

(‘And something else not worth a name’, 53) and allusion: indeed, without the link provided by Horace between burial ground, Priapus, superstitious magic and the overhauling or rejecting of all these elements, the point of the Priapus statue in the poem has eluded many sensitive critics.⁷ Moreover, the role of Priapus in the poem seems both to endorse and reject sexual potency or even sexual aggression: Priapus, both in the *Priapea* tradition to which Horace’s poem belongs, and in Cowley’s own Latin poetry, is a by-word for sexual aggression⁸; on the other hand, what is singled out for scorn in Cowley’s ode is not Priapus’ sexual aggression but rather his impotence (because he is made only of wood). He is an emblem of sexual aggression, but an impotent one; and it is not clear, from the poem, which of these aspects most offends Bacon. This ambiguity perhaps relates to a feature of Cowley’s late work more generally, which is marked both by its interest in and engagement with science and (especially) the scientific understanding of fertility, but also by anxiety around the transgression of gender boundaries and sexual violence.⁹

The uneasiness of this stanza, and its allusive complexity, continues to its end. No sooner has Cowley opened up the possibility of an Edenic orchard of truth and knowledge, open to all, than he steps back and expresses a further doubt:

The Orchard's open now, and free;

Bacon has broke that Scar-crow Deitie;

Come, enter, all that will, 60

⁷ Butler points out (‘The Stagirite and the Scarecrow’, 9, note 27) that many critics have conflated the ‘Monstrous God’ (Priapus) with the ‘Gigantic Ghost’ of Authority, although this makes the passage hard to follow.

⁸ Priapus appears several times as a scare-crow or guard in the *Plantarum Libri Sex*; but also as sexually aggressive god, most extensively at 5.447-455, which relates the story of the lote-tree, originally a nymph who was changed into a tree to escape from Priapus.

⁹ The first two books of the *Plantarum Libri Sex*, in particular, return repeatedly to aspects of this theme: many of the plants are metamorphosed nymphs, escaping the threat of rape by a god; and all the plants of Book 2 are useful in human pregnancy and birth. Book 2 includes a debate about the purpose of menstruation and its role in reproduction, but also the abortifacient qualities of many of the herbs described (see Victoria Moul, ‘Ovidian transformations in Cowley’s herb garden’, in *The Afterlife of Ovid*, ed. Peter Mack (London, 2015), 221-34). Cowley’s scientific knowledge in the *Plantarum* is repeatedly depicted as obtained by discussion with female plants. Cowley’s application of the imagery of sexual aggression to Harvey’s pursuit of Nature in his ode to Harvey has often been noted. Guibbory, ‘Imitation and Originality’, 110-11, in an acute reading of the Harvey ode, suggests this image reflects Cowley’s feelings of both admiration and slight revulsion towards Harvey’s project.

Behold the rip'ned Fruit, come gather now your Fill.

Yet still, methinks, we fain would be

Catching at the Forbidden Tree,

We would be like the Deitie,

When Truth and Falshood, Good and Evil, we

Without the Sences aid within our selves would see;

For 'tis God only who can find

All Nature in his Mind.

(58-68)

Even in this vision of scientific rationality, human nature and (in theological terms) sinfulness reassert themselves: 'Yet still, methinks, we fain would be / Catching at the Forbidden Tree' (62-3). Such a reservation is, formally speaking, appropriate to the genre: Pindaric victory odes regularly set the highest praise for human achievement against a warning 'foil' of just this kind – those who climb highest, have farthest to fall – and in English poetry the imitation of this effect can be traced back to Jonson's imitations of Pindar.¹⁰ But there is an allusive logic here too: in the Vulgate, the word for tree – including the tree of the knowledge of good and evil from which Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat – is *lignum*.¹¹

Cowley's incorporation of the memorable vignette from *Satires* 1.8 serves several purposes: it explains the, otherwise strained, transition from burial ground to orchard – the burial ground of authority is to become the pleasure gardens of the new science; the dramatic shape of the satire, on the restoration of a previously taboo area and the banishing of superstition in the form of

¹⁰ Willcock describes Pindar's gnomic expressions as 'moralising or proverbial reflections' (M. M. Willcock, ed., *Pindar: Victory Odes* (Cambridge, 1995), 12; see also E. L. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica* (Berkeley, 1962), 7-8. In print editions of Jonson's Pindaric odes, these expressions are often 'pointed as gnomic' (using for example inverted commas at the start of the line only); see Victoria Moul, 'Versions of Victory: Ben Jonson and the Pindaric Ode', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 14 (2007), 51-73.

¹¹ 'lignum etiam vitae in medio paradisi lignumque scientiae boni et mali', Vulgate *Gen.* 2.9. *Lignum* is not the standard word for tree in classical Latin, and in when it does have this meaning it tends to imply that the tree is old, rotten or perhaps reduced to a stump (*OLD, lignum, -i* 2). *Satires* 1.8 is sometimes cited as an example of this rare usage (e.g. *Lewis & Short, 'lignum, -i', II D*).

witchcraft, are directly relevant to the terms of Cowley's praise of Bacon and the Royal Society; and at the same time Cowley's addition to the story – Bacon's 'breaking' of Priapus as well – functions as an extension of the point: the new science is more than just a modern version of Augustanism. On the other hand, Horace's poem also allows Cowley to introduce a note of caution and unease. The strikingly conflicting allusive associations of the Latin word *lignum* – tree of life, tree of knowledge, dead wood, or even a penis – lies at the heart of the stanza's resonance and difficulty. Wooden statues are easily broken, but human nature – including its tendency to excessive desire and intrusive curiosity – is not so easily mended, not even by the new science of the Royal Society.

King's College London

VICTORIA MOUL