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Comments on Amy Clampitt's "Matoaka"

BY TERRY L. MEYERS

If you're a poet compelled to write a poem for a particular occasion, your muse might well freeze up. Almost a century ago, for example, at Charter Day, 1897, Thomas W. Higginson hailed the College in a poem that included a pleasing tribute (couched in a clever metaphor) from Harvard to William and Mary as "Thou earliest College of our native land / The first conceived, yet not the earliest born!" But Higginson's poem is flaccid, done in by the bombast characteristic of the genre:

*O nurse of presidents and judges grave!
Thou gavest them their early days of joy
Born, bred and reared this side the Atlantic wave,
Marshall, the youth and Jefferson the boy.
In their glad hours began
The word American
At last to mean new hopes without alloy.*

All the tricks of the versifier are here: sentimental apostrophe ("O nurse"), redundancy ("judges grave"), poetic inversions to help a rhyme ("judges grave" again), and so on.

But the risk William and Mary's Tercentenary Commission took when it commissioned a poem to mark the 300th anniversary of the College's charter has been brilliantly justified by Amy Clampitt's powerful response to the challenge. Her "Matoaka," in quatrains of stately free verse, is strong in all that charges language with poetry's grandeur. Listen to the richness of sound, for example, as Clampitt evokes the childhood remembered by Pocahontas, the Indian princess whose rescue of Captain John Smith from execution by her father and whose later trip to England (where she died at Gravesend still young) is an exemplary tale that we all learn as children. As she finds herself in "foul, fashionable London / with its spiteful / stares and whispers, its catarrhs, / its bruited rifts and ruinings," Pocahontas recalls growing up untouched by the complexities of European civilization. She thinks back to her

*girlhood's remembered grapevines,
strawberries, sun-*

*warm mulberries, leapfrog,
cartwheels, the sound of streams,
Of names, of languages: Pamunkey,
Chickahominy . . .*

One rich way to approach the poem is to emphasize that it is by a woman about another woman, a Native American of the early seventeenth century, and to locate the poem as an artifact of the late twentieth century, when the hegemonic institutions of European white patriarchy are under critical exploration. The poem's theme of the cultural con(de)struction of womanhood slides into focus as Clampitt evokes men who construct and deconstruct the myths women are subjected to, men such as the structuralist anthropologist and student of myth Claude Lévi-Strauss; the ironically named Paul De Man, a recently deconstructed guru of deconstructionism; and Virginia's own Parson Weems (1759-1825), who married into the Ewell family and, more importantly, introduced into America the mythologizing biography (he invested George Washington with the cherry tree and silver dollar). Clampitt suggests that the archetype of "A king's / daughter as advocate" (e.g. the ship-wrecked Odysseus succored by the princess Nausicaa) "was / the story we told once, from which / we've since recoiled" and that such slippery myths underlie, and undermine, certitude of belief and of identity:

*Who was she?
Ask Paul De Man,*

*For instance. Ask Nietzsche, Freud
or Lévi-Strauss. Ask Parson
Weems, while you're about it.
Ask any woman*

*What she thinks, or thought she did.
The stories we tell ourselves keep changing.*

Approaching "Matoaka" from this angle quickly broadens into examining the vast cultural changes since Englishmen first tried to settle "Roanoke, on the Outer / Banks, what little there ever was / to remember long overgrown." If the very name of the Indian maiden shifts ("Matoaka. A woman's name, though / not the one we know her by"; "not as Matoaka or, any longer, / Pocahontas but, renamed in Christ, / Rebecca"; "as Mistress / Rolfe, she crossed / that threshold"), so too have



Photo by C. James Gleason

Amy Clampitt read her Tercentenary poem "Matoaka" in the special setting of the Botetourt Gallery in Swem Library as one of the events associated with Charter Day.

larger terms and beliefs shifted and faded. History itself has become a "long quasi- / anonymity," a "shadowy predatory tentshow" with once-certain pieties and pious certainties everywhere called to account. The Brafferton, for example, was founded (but failed) as a school to convert and educate Indians to Christianity and was supported by revenues from the estate of the great British man of science Robert Boyle; now it is "a monument / to words we, or some of us, / once listened to / in fear and trembling," "monument at last / to policy, tergiversation and / neglect." The corrosion of time, the complexity of motives, the conflict of cultures, the loss of certainty: "Who's the more lost?" Clampitt asks—Pocahontas married for reasons of policy ("the mere sullied pawn / of statecraft and testosterone") to John Rolfe, Pocahontas sent to London ("chief showpiece / of colonial bravado")—or us, "given our own / tergiversations, the worn-down / pieties we stumble over, / that trip us up—gnarled rootstocks / of the once counted on." We are, by comparison to the faith of an earlier age, "Less certain, / ourselves, of anything / except the omnipresence of error."

So where is William and Mary in this poem commissioned for its Tercentenary? Evoked through its campus and its historic associations, William and Mary, "a college given royal grant / and charter to propagate a faith," is at the center of the poem. Take the title. Even to a Virginian, the name may not at first recall the woman we choose to remember as Pocahontas. And to those who know William and Mary, the title recalls most immediately the picturesque campus lake—itsself, not just incidentally, a construct of colonial times and the bearer of several names over the centuries (i.e., Raccoon Chase, Archer's Hope Swamp, the Mill Pond, Jones's Millpond). The title of the poem, then, moves us obliquely towards a woman whose being and import are subject to slippery cultural determinations, moves us by way of a body of water associated with a college (and indeed a town) that has itself at several times and in several ways been con-

structed, destroyed, reconstructed, deconstructed, and redeconstructed. Lake Matoaka, "mere water, rippling, preserves / the name of one— / her true, her secret name perhaps, / but that's surmise." (Ponder, by the way, the epitaph of Keats: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water"). The poem approaches Matoaka (lake and woman) in an intimated journey by way of

Virginia's rivers and peoples and then a walk through the campus, a walk that explores names and signification, names representing the College's founders, faculty, administrators, and benefactors: "beyond / the sunken garden, the crape- / myrtle symmetries, / past the foundation-stone surnames / (Blair, Wythe, Ewell, Brafferton, / Crim Dell)."

Recognizing that the College was chartered for pragmatic aims, for ideological, colonialist as well as for idealistic purposes, we can see it as an institution at the center of determining, defining, defending, and criticizing our culture's most important myths, those constructions and beliefs that define how people relate one to another—as men and as women, as classes and interests within a culture, and as cultures in touch with others. In the closing lines of the poem, Clampitt locates the College somewhere close to the center of the human endeavor:

*to stroll thus
is to move nearer,

in imagination, to the nub,
the pulse, the ember of what she was—
no stranger, finally, to the mystery
of what we are.*

For all the uncertainties of what we know and of how we express what we know (even words, Clampitt says, turn to "bric-a-brac," "whatever they / once stood for gone"), "Matoaka" hints still at a divine presence, past change:

*the awesome news
of Love personified, Who, having
undergone the worst, might still
prove to outlast undoing.*

(An associate professor of English at William and Mary, Terry L. Meyers conceived the idea of commissioning a Tercentenary poem for the College.)