Part 3: The Seventeenth Century – The Age of the Revolution (1603-1688)

# 3.8 ANDREW MARVELL

(1621-1678)

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Andrew Marvell’s father, the Reverend Andrew Marvell, died from drowning after a boating accident, thereby possibly curtailing Marvell’s academic career and possibly leading to his taking religious orders. Marvell probably studied at the Hull Grammar School; at the age of twelve, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where he earned his B.A. in four years, then began studying for a Master of Art (which he did not complete).



Image 3.9 | Andrew Marvell

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He may have traveled the Continent during the Civil War. He secured a position as tutor to the daughter of Lord Thomas Fairfax (1612-1671), a Parliamentarian general. Marvell’s Parliamentarian sympathies may have won him his subsequent positions, as tutor to William Dutton, the ward of Oliver Cromwell; as Latin Secretary, assisting John Milton in translations and diplomatic correspondence; and as Minister of Parliament, a position Marvell held until his death but that began before the Restoration. As a politician, Marvell seems to have promoted the interests of religious and political dissenters, though he did not actively oppose the Restoration. He may have saved Milton’s life after the Restoration, a time of reprisal when many “rebels” were executed. His poem “On Mr. Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” praises Milton’s genius at a time when Milton was exiled for his political activities.

Scholars have sometimes divided Marvell’s work into pre- and post-Restoration, with most of his poetry being placed pre- and most of his prose, particularly his political writing, being placed post-Restoration. All of his writing is characterized by its intellect, wit, and often abstruse logic. John Dryden noted Marvell’s tendency towards the abstract, especially when dealing with emotional subjects. In the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) linked Marvell with the metaphysical poets in their uniting reason and emotion. Like that of other metaphysical poets, such as John Donne’s, Marvell’s poetry uses puns, paradoxes, and incongruous images. What seems unique to Marvell is his willingness to maintain ambiguity, to give all sides of a subject their due, to complicate rather than simplify. In “To His Coy Mistress,” he can adore his mistress’s eyes, forehead, and “the rest” (16) yet still roll all her sweetness and strength into “one ball” (42).

## 3.8.1 “A Dialogue, Between The Resolved Soul, and Created Pleasure”

(1681)

Courage my Soul, now learn to wield

The weight of thine immortal Shield.

Close on thy Head thy Helmet bright.

Ballance thy Sword against the Fight.

See where an Army, strong as fair,

With silken Banners spreads the air.

Now, if thou bee’st that thing Divine,

In this day’s Combat let it shine:

And shew that Nature wants an Art

To conquer one resolved Heart.

Pleasure.

Welcome the Creations Guest,

Lord of Earth, and Heavens Heir.

Lay aside that Warlike Crest,

And of Nature’s banquet share:

Where the Souls of fruits and flow’rs

Stand prepar’d to heighten yours.

Soul.

I sup above, and cannot stay

To bait so long upon the way.

Pleasure.

On these downy Pillows lye,

Whose soft Plumes will thither fly:

On these Roses strow’d so plain

Lest one Leaf thy Side should strain.

Soul.

My gentler Rest is on a Thought,

Conscious of doing what I ought.

Pleasure.

If thou bee’st with Perfumes pleas’d,

Such as oft the Gods appeas’d,

Thou in fragrant Clouds shalt show

Like another God below.

Soul.

A Soul that knowes not to presume

Is Heaven’s and its own perfume.

Pleasure.

Every thing does seem to vie

Which should first attract thine Eye:

But since none deserves that grace,

In this Crystal view thy face.

Soul.

When the Creator’s skill is priz’d,

The rest is all but Earth disguis’d.

Pleasure.

Heark how Musick then prepares

For thy Stay these charming Aires;

Which the posting Winds recall,

And suspend the Rivers Fall.

Soul.

Had I but any time to lose,

On this I would it all dispose.

Cease Tempter. None can chain a mind

Whom this sweet Chordage cannot bind.

Chorus.

Earth cannot shew so brave a Sight

As when a single Soul does fence

The Batteries of alluring Sense,

And Heaven views it with delight.

Then persevere: for still new Charges sound:

And if thou overcom’st thou shalt be crown’d.

Pleasure.

All this fair, and cost, and sweet,

Which scatteringly doth shine,

Shall within one Beauty meet,

And she be only thine.

Soul.

If things of Sight such Heavens be,

What Heavens are those we cannot see?

Pleasure.

Where so e’re thy Foot shall go

The minted Gold shall lie;

Till thou purchase all below,

And want new Worlds to buy.

Soul.

Wer’t not a price who’ld value Gold?

And that’s worth nought that can be sold.

Pleasure.

Wilt thou all the Glory have

That War or Peace commend?

Half the World shall be thy Slave

The other half thy Friend.

Soul.

What Friends, if to my self untrue?

What Slaves, unless I captive you?

Pleasure.

Thou shalt know each hidden Cause;

And see the future Time:

Try what depth the Centre draws;

And then to Heaven climb.

Soul.

None thither mounts by the degree

Of Knowledge, but Humility.

Chorus.

Triumph, triumph, victorious Soul;

The World has not one Pleasure more:

The rest does lie beyond the Pole,

And is thine everlasting Store.

## 3.8.2 “On a Drop of Dew”

(1681)

See how the Orient Dew,

Shed from the Bosom of the Morn

Into the blowing Roses,

Yet careless of its Mansion new;

For the clear Region where ’twas born

Round in its self incloses:

And in its little Globes Extent,

Frames as it can its native Element.

How it the purple flow’r does slight,

Scarce touching where it lyes,

But gazing back upon the Skies,

Shines with a mournful Light;

Like its own Tear,

Because so long divided from the Sphear.

Restless it roules and unsecure,

Trembling lest it grow impure:

Till the warm Sun pitty it’s Pain,

And to the Skies exhale it back again.

So the Soul, that Drop, that Ray

Of the clear Fountain of Eternal Day,

Could it within the humane flow’r be seen,

Remembring still its former height,

Shuns the sweat leaves and blossoms green;

And, recollecting its own Light,

Does, in its pure and circling thoughts, express

The greater Heaven in an Heaven less.

In how coy a Figure wound,

Every way it turns away:

So the World excluding round,

Yet receiving in the Day.

Dark beneath, but bright above:

Here disdaining, there in Love.

How loose and easie hence to go:

How girt and ready to ascend.

Moving but on a point below,

It all about does upwards bend.

Such did the Manna’s sacred Dew destil;

White, and intire, though congeal’d and chill.

Congeal’d on Earth: but does, dissolving, run

Into the Glories of th’ Almighty Sun.

## 3.8.3 “The Coronet”

(1681)

When for the Thorns with which I long, too

With many a piercing wound, (long,

My Saviours head have crown’d,

I seek with Garlands to redress that Wrong:

Through every Garden, every Mead,

I gather flow’rs (my fruits are only flow’rs)

Dismantling all the fragrant Towers

That once adorn’d my Shepherdesses head.

And now when I have summ’d up all my store,

Thinking (so I my self deceive)

So rich a Chaplet thence to weave

As never yet the king of Glory wore:

Alas I find the Serpent old

That, twining in his speckled breast,

About the flow’rs disguis’d does fold,

With wreaths of Fame and Interest.

Ah, foolish Man, that would’st debase with them,

And mortal Glory, Heavens Diadem!

But thou who only could’st the Serpent tame,

Either his slipp’ry knots at once untie,

And disintangle all his winding Snare:

Or shatter too with him my curious frame:

And let these wither, so that he may die,

Though set with Skill and chosen out with Care.

That they, while Thou on both their Spoils dost tread,

May crown thy Feet, that could not crown thy Head.

## 3.8.4 “To his Coy Mistress”

(1681)

Had we but World enough, and Time,

This coyness Lady were no crime.

We would sit down, and think which way

To walk, and pass our long Loves Day.

Thou by the Indian Ganges side

Should’st Rubies find: I by the Tide

Of Humber would complain. I would

Love you ten years before the Flood:

And you should if you please refuse

Till the Conversion of the Jews.

My vegetable Love should grow

Vaster then Empires, and more slow.

An hundred years should go to praise

Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.

Two hundred to adore each Breast:

But thirty thousand to the rest.

An Age at least to every part,

And the last Age should show your Heart.

For Lady you deserve this State;

Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I alwaies hear

Times winged Charriot hurrying near:

And yonder all before us lye

Desarts of vast Eternity.

Thy Beauty shall no more be found;

Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound

My ecchoing Song: then Worms shall try

That long preserv’d Virginity:

And your quaint Honour turn to durst:

And into ashes all my Lust.

The Grave’s a fine and private place,

But none I think do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hew

Sits on thy skin like morning grew,

And while thy willing Soul transpires

At every pore with instant Fires,

Now let us sport us while we may;

And now, like am’rous birds of prey,

Rather at once our Time dev out,

Than languish in his slow chapt pow’r.

Let us roll all our Strength, and all

Our sweetness, up into one Ball

And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,

Thorough the Iron gates of Life.

Thus, though we cannot make our Sun

Stand still, yet we will make him run.

## 3.8.5 “The Garden”

(1681)

I.

HOW vainly men themselves amaze

To win the Palm, the Oke, or Bayes;

And their uncessant Labours see

Crown’d from some single Herb or Tree,

Whose short and narrow verged Shade

Does prudently their Toyles upbraid;

While all Flow’rs and all Trees do close

To weave the Garlands of repose.

II.

Fair quiet, have I found thee here,

And Innocence thy Sister dear!

Mistaken long, I sought you then

In busie Companies of Men.

Your sacred Plants, if here below,

Only among the Plants will grow.

Society is all but rude,

To this delicious Solitude.

III.

No white nor red was ever seen

So am’rous as this lovely green.

Fond Lovers, cruel as their Flame,

Cut in these Trees their Mistress name.

Little, Alas, they know, or heed,

How far these Beauties Hers exceed!

Fair Trees! where s’eer you barkes I wound,

No Name shall but your own be found.

IV.

When we have run our Passions heat,

Love hither makes his best retreat.

The Gods, that mortal Beauty chase,

Still in a Tree did end their race.

Apollo hunted Daphne so,

Only that She might Laurel grow.

And Pan did after Syrinx speed,

Not as a Nymph, but for a Reed.

V.

What wond’rous Life in this I lead!

Ripe Apples drop about my head;

The Luscious Clusters of the Vine

Upon my Mouth do crush their Wine;

The Nectaren, and curious Peach,

Into my hands themselves do reach;

Stumbling on Melons, as I pass,

Insnar’d with Flow’rs, I fall on Grass.

VI.

Mean while the Mind, from pleasure less,

Withdraws into its happiness:

The Mind, that Ocean where each kind

Does streight its own resemblance find;

Yet it creates, transcending these,

Far other Worlds, and other Seas;

Annihilating all that’s made

To a green Thought in a green Shade.

VII.

Here at the Fountains sliding foot,

Or at some Fruit-trees mossy root,

Casting the Bodies Vest aside,

My Soul into the boughs does glide:

There like a Bird it sits, and sings,

Then whets, and combs its silver Wings;

And, till prepar’d for longer flight,

Waves in its Plumes the various Light.

VIII.

Such was that happy Garden-state,

While Man there walk’d without a Mate:

After a Place so pure, and sweet,

What other Help could yet be meet!

But ’twas beyond a Mortal’s share

To wander solitary there:

Two Paradises ’twere in one

To live in Paradise alone.

IX.

How well the skilful Gardner drew

Of flow’rs and herbes this Dial new;

Where from above the milder Sun

Does through a fragrant Zodiack run;

And, as it works, th’ industrious Bee

Computes its time as well as we.

How could such sweet and wholsome Hours

Be reckon’d but with herbs and flow’rs!

## 3.8.6 “On Mr. Milton’s Paradise Lost”

(1681)

When I beheld the Poet blind, yet bold,

In slender Book his vast Design unfold,

Messiah Crown’d, Gods Reconcil’d Decree,

Rebelling Angels, the Forbidden Tree,

Heav’n, Hell, Earth, Chaos, All; the Argument

Held me a while misdoubting his Intent,

That he would ruine (for I saw him strong)

The sacred Truths to Fable and old Song,

(So Sampson groap’d the Temples Posts in spight)

The World o’rewhelming to revenge his Sight.

Yet as I read, soon growing less severe,

I lik’d his Project, the success did fear;

Through that wide Field how he his way should find

O’re which lame Faith leads Understanding blind;

Lest he perplext the things he would explain,

And what was easie he should render vain.

Or if a Work so infinite he spann’d,

Jealous I was that some less skilful hand

(Such as disquiet alwayes what is well,

And by ill imitating would excell)

Might hence presume the whole Creations day

To change in Scenes, and show it in a Play.

Pardon me, mighty Poet, nor despise

My causeless, yet not impious, surmise.

But I am now convinc’d, and none will dare

Within thy Labours to pretend a Share.

Thou hast not miss’d one thought that could be fit,

And all that was improper dost omit:

So that no room is here for Writers left,

But to detect their Ignorance or Theft.

That Majesty which through thy Work doth Reign

Draws the Devout, deterring the Profane.

And things divine thou treats of in such state

As them preserves, and Thee inviolate.

At once delight and horrour on us seize,

Thou singst with so much gravity and ease;

And above humane flight dost soar aloft,

With Plume so strong, so equal, and so soft.

The Bird nam’d from that Paradise you sing

So never Flags, but alwaies keeps on Wing.

Where couldst thou Words of such a compass find?

Whence furnish such a vast expense of Mind?

Just Heav’n Thee, like Tiresias, to requite,

Rewards with Prophesie thy loss of Sight.

Well might thou scorn thy Readers to allure

With tinkling Rhime, of thy own Sense secure;

While the Town-Bays writes all the while and spells,

And like a Pack-Horse tires without his Bells.

Their Fancies like our bushy Points appear,

The Poets tag them; we for fashion wear.

I too transported by the Mode offend,

And while I meant to Praise thee, must Commend.

Thy verse created like thy Theme sublime,

In Number, Weight, and Measure, needs not Rhime.

## 3.8.7 Reading and Review Questions

1. How consistent are the speakers in Marvell’s poems, in terms of their positions on gender, politics, religion, etc.?
2. To what end, do you think, does Marvell yoke dissimilar images together in metaphysical conceits? Does Marvell’s poetry resolve incongruities? How do his resolutions compare with Donne’s?
3. What relationship, if any, do Marvell’s poems suggest between the ideal and the real?
4. How does Marvell use nature in his poetry, and to what end?
5. Some scholars have described Marvell’s poems as puzzles, as exercises in deduction. How do Marvell’s poems demonstrate logic, do you think, and to what end?