

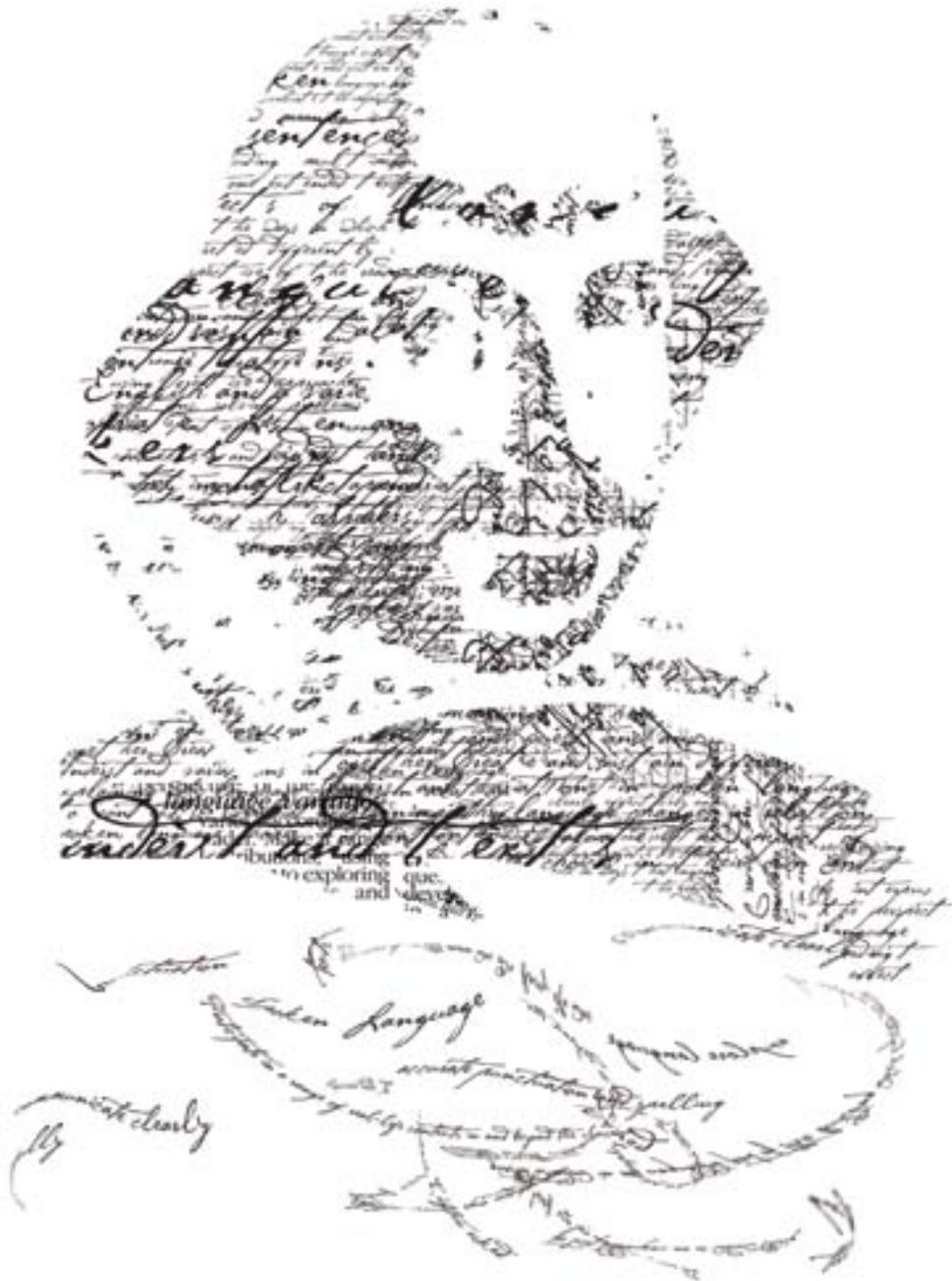
A LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE H071 H471

INTRODUCTION AND GUIDED READING

COMPLETE POEMS

Andrew Marvell



From September 2012, OCR will be introducing new set texts for unit F663. To support you and your learners through this change, OCR has commissioned senior members of the examining team to write an introduction and guided reading list for each text in Section B. You can choose to use these materials with your learners as you see fit.

Andrew Marvell Complete Poems

The Amphibious Poet

A good place to start thinking about Andrew Marvell – a poet renowned for the depth and subtlety of his imagery – is with one of his own images. At the end of 'Upon Appleton House' (st. 97) the poet-speaker notes with wonder and satisfaction the emergence of salmon-fishers from the river as night draws on. They place their leathern boats on their heads as if they were a kind of inverted footwear ('Antipodes in shoes') and advance from the water like speedy tortoises. But they remain landmen whose professional element is water ('rational amphibii'). The most recent biography of Marvell by Nigel Smith claims Marvell as a chameleon, a shape-shifter. The 'rational amphibian' – an image of charm, unexpectedness with a touch of surrealism ('a faint nonsense air' writes Alvarez) – hints at many of Marvell's characteristics as a poet: distinctive in voice, elusive in purpose, and able, apparently to exist in a number of settings, personal and political, at once. Even the spelling of his name fluctuates – Marvell, Marvel, Mervaille, Merville – from document to document. As spy he seems to have used the alias 'Mr George'.

His art is thus simultaneously at home in more than one context: on water and land (like his great religious poem, 'The Bermudas'); in great houses but also their gardens; responding to cultivation and wildness; negotiating the critical relationship between nature and artifice; between past and present; present and future; war and peace; private and public; activity and retirement. The 'rational amphibian' is also the political Marvell, living through Civil War, Commonwealth, Protectorate and Restoration; absent from England for most of the Civil War yet closely involved with two of the most significant men of the period (Fairfax and Cromwell); friend to Royalists and Republicans; a politician and accomplished diplomat who seems to have dabbled in espionage but one whose exact political ideology and practice are often veiled.

As he writes in his 1669 satire, 'The Loyal Scot', boundaries are the result of usage or need, and so flowing, not fixed. The boundary between Scotland and England, for instance, is endlessly debateable, as are so many human frontiers:

Prick down the point (whoever has the art)
Where Nature Scotland does from England part.
Anatomists may sooner fix the cells
Where life resides, or understanding dwells . . .
What ethic river is this wondrous Tweed,
Whose one bank virtue, other vice does breed (ll.
73-76; 85-86)?

Marvell's sensitivity to the openness of questions ensures he always reminds his readers to be aware of shifting perspectives. The poet-speaker at the close of 'Upon Appleton House' stands on a rise of ground that gives him a full perspective of the 'landskip' in front of him and yet which appears to elevate him above the humdrum activities of both fishermen and mowers. In all his riddling lyrics and balanced political satires Marvell always climbs to, and claims, the high ground of vision and reason, and reposes there, camouflaged, a 'rational amphibian' sunning himself.

AO2 Textual complexity
AO3 Textual ambiguity
AO4 Biographical contexts

The Chameleon Poet

As eloquent lyricist and passionate satirist, Marvell is a writer who engages equally with literary past and present. He is acutely conscious of poetic tradition, yet his imagery seems freshly coined for every age. His tone is consistently entertaining, even 'chatty' (Pierre Legouis), yet T.S. Eliot rightly commends him for 'that precise taste . . . which finds for him the proper degree of seriousness for every subject which he treats.' His extant poetry amounts to just a slim volume; yet his characteristic terseness ensures every page is rammed with meaning. He writes with profundity of consistent human preoccupations such as religion, mortality, power, love, and sexuality yet also produces bafflingly topical (prose) satires such as *The Rehearsal Transpros'd* (1672). He is celebrated in modern times for the subtlety of his literary imagination, but was best known to his contemporaries as a coffee-house 'Merry Andrew', substituting 'smutty' thuggery for theological debate.

He circulated his work in manuscript and print: anonymously, pseudonymously, and under his own name. He fulfils modern ideas of authorship by working as an individual, isolated figure yet shows himself very much an early modern poet by engaging in collaborative work. For literary critics he has been an exemplar of 'new critical' approaches, beloved for his ambiguity and masterly use of form and rhetoric, and yet also (to a lesser extent) a productive writer for 'new historicist' readings, for whom an understanding of historical context (especially for his Restoration writing) is very useful. Yet his most celebrated work possesses an inherent ambivalence that seems to transcend all contexts: 'To His Coy Mistress', for instance, might equally well present its taut syllogism with fierce seriousness, with the brutal irony of a *reductio ad absurdum*, or (more flirtatiously) as something in between.

AO2 Generic variation
AO3 Variety of approaches possible
AO4 importance of restoration contexts

Reputation

Andrew Marvell has attracted almost as much critical attention, at least since the rise of Modernism, as his more productive contemporaries, John Milton and John Dryden. By any standards, his output is limited, and the historical, political and poetic personae he presents us are alike elusive and shadowy. He was deeply involved in the political changes of the Civil War, Protectorate and Restoration but doesn't appear to have built a public reputation as a poet with his contemporaries, except as an 'opposition' satirist in his later years. Those 'coarse, quaint and virulent' satires, as Hazlitt called them, have been least favoured by posterity of all his writings. Only ten of Marvell's poems appeared in print during his life and his *Miscellaneous Poems* (the first time his poetry was collected together) was published as late as 1681, three years after his death. Soon after the first printing the touchy Cromwell poems (Marvell was now being presented as a writer loyal to the constitutional monarch) were removed altogether, and it is mostly these truncated copies of *Miscellaneous Poems* that have survived.

Marvell's reputation depended for more than two hundred years on a few favourite lyrics in Anthologies (usually 'The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn', 'The Garden' and 'To his Coy Mistress'). Major poets regularly rediscovered him, Tennyson, Edgar Allan Poe and Gerard Manley Hopkins all being sent into ecstasies by what they found. Even when a decent edition appeared, G.A. Aitken's in the *Muse's Library* (1892), admirers persisted in viewing Marvell as a purveyor of the brief lyric. The comparative smallness of his corpus was a bonus for the twentieth century New Critics, who naturally found the absence of dependable personal and political context for his work an asset rather than a deficiency. Marvell became one of the most frequently studied poets in the academy, though many were mystified that he could 'soar to such eminence on the basis of so small an output' (Arthur Pollard). Marvell was read at this time (1920-60) for his detachment, ambiguity, inventive imagery and tight versification: T.S. Eliot (1921) described the essence of Marvell's poetry as 'a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace'.

A common complaint was that some readers read Marvell as if he were an honorary twentieth century poet. The appearance of 'time's wingèd chariot' in 'To His Coy Mistress' is a Renaissance commonplace. Yet twentieth century readers became regularly over-excited by it, viewing its appearance as a 'tremendous shock' or an emblem of cultural dissonance, which is more obviously how it functions when transposed for the text of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) (ll. 196-97). Were such readers reading Marvell, or were they really reading Eliot? So Marvell began to be studied in the context of sources and analogues from his own time. The sea-change in literary studies brought about by New Historicism has supplied fresh biographical contexts and revised old ones, providing a more balanced (though far from complete) view of Marvell as a poet and polemicist who was thoroughly enmeshed in the networks of literary production, patronage and patriarchy of the 17th century. It has also tended to settle a sense of him as a moderate Puritan writer, invariably on the side of mildly anti-clerical liberty against 'Anglican absolutism', rather than a time-server or turn-coat. His characteristic attitude is expressed in a late Latin poem, 'Scevola Scoto-Britannus' (1677), about a Scottish Covenanter, James Mitchell, subjected to the judicial torture known as 'Lauderdale's Boot' by an Episcopalian Court. Mitchell looks on 'like a spectator at his own torture', presenting his foot for mutilation as if to a 'shoemaker'. In other words, Marvell's victim disdains to take part in the sorry, brutal charade of 'arbitrary government and knavery'. 'Men ought,' wrote Marvell in 1678, 'to enjoy the same Propriety and Protection in their consciences, which they have in their Lives, Liberties and Estates.' When the freshly formed Whig party hunted for a 'Laureate of Dissent' to back their campaign against 'Papistical' tyranny they needed to look no further than recently deceased Andrew Marvell.

AO2 Nature of the canon
A03 Changing critical approaches/reputation
A04 Consistent political/theological attitudes

Biography

For all the elusiveness of Marvell's literary personae, the bare facts of the poet's early life are not contested. He was born near Hull on 31 March 1621. His father (after whom he was named) was vicar of the parish of Wynestead-in-Holderness, and Master of the Charterhouse Hospital in Hull, a former Carthusian Monastery which Marvell Senior, a moderate Puritan, was trying to give an appropriate post-Reformation character. The poet's mother was Anne (nee Pease). Marvell was probably educated at Hull Grammar School (1629-33) before entering Trinity College Cambridge as 'subsizar' (a quasi-servant) in 1633. Marvell (aged 12) was a young student even at a time when boys routinely went to either Oxford or Cambridge (then the only 2 universities in England) at around the age of 14. He remained at Trinity College until 1641: he published his first verse in Latin and Greek in 1637; was elected a scholar in 1638; took his BA in 1639 (when an attempt may have been made to convert him to Roman Catholicism), and was ejected from the college in 1641 for non-performance of his college duties. This may have been related to the fact that his father died in 1641 – drowning as he was crossing the River Humber.

Marvell's mother had died in 1638, and the experience of being orphaned may well be reflected in the curious imagery of 'The Unfortunate Lover', which is drawn from a 'shipwrack' in a 'hurricane', and where a mother is split asunder in a monstrous parody of birthing:

*And there she split against the stone
In a Caesarean section (ll. 15-16).*

Inscrutable as this is, it is as close as we are likely to get to the poet's feelings on the death of his parents.

All the evidence suggests that Marvell was a wily man, evasive as his poems. His conversation, John Aubrey recalled, was 'modest, and of very few words' and he struggled to speak eloquently in public. By all accounts, including his own in numerous poems of retreat, he was a bit of a loner. Trusting others, or taking risky political initiatives, did not come easily to him. A political rival, speaking of Marvell's habit of turning up at the last moment for public business, said 'he was not a man to be found easily.' It was the motto of Marvell's life.

AO4 Biographical contexts

Civil War

The English Civil War began in August 1642 when Charles I raised his standard at Nottingham. Marvell, however, left England that same year and travelled around Europe until 1647, apparently acting as companion-tutor to aristocratic young men including (possibly) the Duke of Buckingham and his brother, Francis Villiers. Marvell's return to England, late in 1647, coincided with Charles I's attempt to escape from Parliamentary captivity in Carisbrooke Castle. If Marvell had hidden his political sympathies during his years on the continent it was much harder to do so in the volatile England of the late 1640s. Marvell was, however, unrepentant about having sat out the conflict: 'The cause was too good to have been fought for,' was his typical fence-sitting comment; and not really a cause at all, he argued in 1674, but a 'dismal effect'. During the ensuing Second Civil War (May-October 1648), Marvell published an elegy on Francis Villiers, who had been killed in a Royalist uprising, and composed 'To his Noble Friend Mr Richard Lovelace, upon his poems' which was one of the prefatory pieces to Lovelace's *Lucasta* published in 1649.

Villiers had been an icon of Cavalier beauty and Lovelace the most respected poet of the Royalist cause. Marvell's composition of these poems is the main evidence that up to this point Marvell's political sympathies were Royalist, as he was writing for a Royalist circle, and Lovelace languished in prison from June 1648 to April 1649, a Royalist martyr. However other contributors to Lovelace's volume were known Parliamentarians, introducing a hint of uncertainty as to Marvell's own political orientation. The orthodox reading of 'To his noble Friend Mr Richard Lovelace' views it as securely 'Royalist' in its mourning for a lost age in which 'honour', 'worthy men' and 'virtues' (ll. 10-11) have been banished and 'our civil wars have lost the civic crown' (l.12). Nevertheless other critics see the poem as a deliberate burial of the Cavalier ethos rather than an elegant lament for its passing: a timely rejoinder that the age of chivalry must end.

AO3 Different 'political' readings of Marvell's early poems
AO4 Marvell's political affiliation during the Civil War.

Rendering unto Caesar

Charles I was executed on 30 January 1649 and later that year Oliver Cromwell led an army into Ireland. Lord Fairfax had been commander-in-chief of the Parliamentary army throughout the Civil War but he took no part in the trial of the King, expressing his revulsion at his execution. In the summer of 1650, before Cromwell's purposed invasion of Scotland, Marvell probably wrote *An Horatian Ode on Cromwell's Return from Ireland* in which he carefully balances 'restless' Cromwell (l. 9) – the coming man – against the executed King, the 'royal actor' (l. 53). The poem seems to have been circulated only in manuscript, but has become one of the most studied of Marvell's poems, because cultivated ambivalence (and it has a good deal) is one of the most prized arts of the politician. Alvarez thinks it is one of the 'two finest political poems in the language; the other is *Coriolanus*.' It can be read as a piece of cowed panegyric, representing final capitulation of Marvell's Royalist sympathies to the now entrenched Cromwellian regime; or as purposeful puffing of Cromwell's 'active star' (l. 12), so that his most brutal campaigns become escapades of Caesar-like gallantry. The poem, after all, purports to model its praise of Cromwell on Horace's and Lucan's of Caesar Augustus (Horace, relevantly, had formerly opposed Caesar). Everything Cromwell does in the poem is brisk and decisively violent ('Caesar's head at last/ Did through his laurels blast' (ll. 23-24)); yet militant energy is Cromwell's strength, acknowledged by admirer and detractor alike. The real question, never far from the poem's rhetoric, is whether you like all this inspired brutality – or, to put it another way, are you prepared to put up with it? Alvarez believes the poem's strength is its lack of a stable, personal point of view; or the way it transcends one:

as a political poet [Marvell] works analytically, resolving at every point personal choice into a larger context of general or social responsibilities.

The stanzaic form opposes four stress and three stress lines, almost as if two slightly distinct voices (or attitudes) are engaged in conversation. Because the short lines use terse monosyllables, they tend to be more authoritative, in effect undercutting the first pair. This generates the characteristic 'reserved and ironic tone of the poem' (Nigel Smith). Though softly 'Machiavellian', the poem did help smooth Marvell's way into the inner circles of Commonwealth and Protectorate. He became tutor to Cromwell's ward in 1653, and soon after worked closely with John Milton in Cromwell's propaganda office. He wrote other panegyrics of Cromwell, too: in 1655 'The First Anniversary of the Government under his Highness the Lord Protector'; then in 1658 a Funeral Elegy of unusual intimacy, praising Cromwell as prancing Davidian King (l. 242), but also, more touchingly, as bereaved father, whose daughter's death from cancer seems to have hastened his own: 'the dear image fled, the mirror broke' (l. 78). The poem even suggests that where the majority only saw the waxen effigy that lay in State, Marvell as Secretary was close enough to the family to be shown the corpse itself: 'I saw him dead' (l. 247). By the time of the Restoration Marvell, according to Nigel Smith, had become 'the Commonwealth and Cromwellian poet.'

But the years immediately after 'An Horatian Ode' belonged not to Cromwell but to Sir Thomas Fairfax, his predecessor as chief Parliamentary General. When the Presbyterian Fairfax refused to invade Scotland he handed over the reins of the army to Cromwell and so retired from public life to Nun Appleton, his Yorkshire estate. Marvell followed him there, working as tutor to Fairfax's daughter, Mary, until mid-1652.

AO3 Ambiguity of Horatian Ode
AO4 Biographical context;
closeness to Cromwell.

Marvell on the Good Life

If the most recent work on the chronology of Marvell's poems is correct then this time in Yorkshire was one of his most productive. Not only did he write his great topographical poem, *Upon Appleton House*, *To my Lord Fairfax and its delightful satellite*, *'Upon the Hill and Grove at Bilbrough'* — but he probably also composed *'The Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers'*, three *'Mower'* poems (*'The Mower against Gardens'*, *'The Mower's Song'* and *'The Mower to the Glow-Worms'*) and *'To His Coy Mistress'* (traditionally one of his most difficult poems to date) in this period, as well as some Latin verse.

'Upon Appleton House' is Marvell's masterpiece and is also a good candidate for being one of the most significant poems of the whole 17th century. Rooted in literary origins of patronage poetry and the country house poem, Marvell expands the form, and the vision of the country-house poet to encompass a panegyric to his employer and his daughter; a history of Protestant England refracted through the lens of the Fairfax family history; a reflection on civil war and the continuous, haunting presence of random death; the seductions and impossibilities of retirement; reflections on the role of the poet as mediator between patron, genre, subject and reader, and a perspective of a radically altered future in which one must, again like *'a rational amphibian'*, exist in more than one element. The change in emphasis in Marvell studies in recent years is indicated by the way Elizabeth Story Donno, the editor of the *Penguin Complete Poems* (1972) calls *'Upon Appleton House'* Marvell's *'most disparate (non-political) poem.'* A 21st century editor would be likely to classify it - written for Fairfax, recently retired on political grounds, and saturated with imagery of war and death – as possibly his chief political work.

New Edens: The English Country House Poem

Country-house poems, like *'Upon Appleton House'*, were a staple of pre-Civil War and Caroline poets and were a product of the pervasive patronage culture of that period. The vogue began in 1611 with the publication of Ben Jonson's *'To Penshurst'* and Aemilia Lanyer's *'A Farewell to Cookham.'* The genre typically involves hyperbolic praise of the patron and his/her estate, concentrating on the beauty and fertility of gardens and family, lavish hospitality, and the general virtue of the patron. Country-house poems simultaneously represent the house and estate as a Neo-platonic paradise, a classical Arcadia, and rooted in English history. The poet is paradoxically expected to cultivate a humble tone while simultaneously displaying creative power and mastery of form. Marvell was also influenced by the newer *'prospect'* poem, in which a landscape reflects an historical and often an enhanced political perspective. The most celebrated of these had appeared recently: Sir Edward Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1641-42).

AO2 Country house poem genre;
AO4 Political contexts

AO2 Discussion of Genre

House and Garden: The Tour Begins

'Upon Appleton House' is, judged by the standard of Marvell's customary terseness, a long poem. There are 97 stanzas divided into clear sections that are united by the roving gaze of the poet-speaker as he moves from house, to formal gardens, to a less formal landscape of meadows and river, to an ancient wood, ending with a paean of praise to Mary Fairfax. Marvell begins (sts. 1-10) with praise for the house of Nun Appleton: its 'humility' in remaining small despite temptations to extension; its 'sober frame' which matches that of its master; his sensitivity to its setting and belongings, in admitting 'no foreign architect' (as most other settings for a Country House poem had done); finally, its perfect proportions 'like Nature, orderly and near'.

The first half of the poem treats the story of Nun Appleton as a microcosm of the story of England: Isabel Thwaites is rescued from the house's original use, as Catholic nunnery, by 'young Fairfax', Lord Fairfax's ancestor. Marvell shows appropriate Protestant sympathies, explaining, in praise of the current regime, that 'twas no religious house till now' (sts. 11-35). A description of the formal gardens follows (sts. 36ff), laid out to commemorate the career of their master, the very bees stinging like sentinels should they be challenged, the flowers breathing incense like musket shot, in 'fragrant volleys'. Stanza 41 includes a lament, modelled on that of Gaunt in Richard II, for the 'Garden-state' of England before the Civil War. Fairfax, who 'retired here to peace', ensures the consequences of this second Fall will be ameliorated, at least while he is at Nun Appleton. Stanza 45 shows how, amid the rigours of conflict, Fairfax's conscience pricks like a sensitive plant. The Prick of Conscience may or may not have been among the Medieval manuscripts collected by Fairfax at Nun Appleton.

AO2 Summary of poem
AO4 Historical contexts

Water Meadows or Battlefield?

From the militaristic formal gardens, with their serried ranks of botanical militia, in Stanzas 47-55 the persona moves on to the meadows ('the abyss') (sts. 47-61). This section includes Marvell's first use of the anti-pastoral 'Mower' figure, the Appleton Mowers advancing across the green ocean of the meadows as Moses once parted the red sea. The poetry becomes crammed with biblical references: the Red Sea is from Exodus 14:21-31; Isaiah 40:6 supplies 'all flesh is grass'; while the grasshoppers come from Numbers 13:33. After a few stanzas of this, it dawns on the reader that Marvell is offering an unscheduled replay of the Civil War, or something like it, with advances, retreats, 'careless victors' and innocent victims, like that diminutive bird, the rail, which is mortally wounded by a Mower's scythe (st. 50). Marvell maintains appropriate distance from the actual conflicts in which Fairfax was engaged by introducing effects of scale that anticipate Swift: giants are reduced to grasshoppers and cattle to small beauty-spots (a current fashion) on the 'levelled space' of stanzas 56-60.

AO2 Textual analysis
AO4 Historical and
biblical context

Green Thoughts in a 'Green Ark'

By this time the poem is becoming something of a quest on the part of its persona to find a location, even at saintly Nun Appleton, not compromised by bloody memories of Civil War. Stanza 59 introduces a flood, and the wanderer retreats into a 'double wood of ancient stocks' to escape it. This wood, a sort of 'green ark', is the most peaceful place discovered yet, a retreat not unlike the enveloping green shades of the later poem 'The Garden'. As in that poem Nature ministers actively to the persona: he is 'bound' by woodbines and 'gadding vines' in a seductive restraint (st.77-78). A 'hollow oak' gnawed with a 'traitor worm' (st. 69-70) makes him think briefly of Charles I, but in general symbolic traces of the War are absent from this section. The persona, again like his counterpart in 'The Garden', relaxes into peaceful 'neo-Platonist' contemplation, imagining himself an enlightened priest, 'some great prelate of the grove' (st. 74), reading the green pages of 'Nature's mystic book' as if they were Scripture.

The Young Maria Walks Tonight

The poem's conclusion is more of a coda. The significant 'action' of the poet's walk, such as it is, ends in the green grove. The last stanzas are built out of praise of the daughter of Marvell's patron, Maria Fairfax, (st. 82ff), a girl already giving 'law' to a new age, like the heroines of Shakespeare's late romances, and who is already that 'age's awe'. The conceit is strongly Neo-platonic, and some readers find it too conventional (or pre-war) to be convincing. Maria is the form of beauty on which all of Fairfax's gardens model themselves:

*'Tis she, that to these gardens gave
That wondrous beauty which they have (st. 87).*

Despite Maria's bounty and innocent grace, however, the poem ends with a final prospect of the post-war broken world, and a retrospective sigh from the poet, who has lived through it all: "Tis not, what once it was, the world' (st.96). The 'rational amphibii' troop home from the far reaches of the salmon-river, the hemisphere darkens and the extended garden stroll that is Marvell's poem 'Upon Appleton House' comes to an end. The poem has taken in half the history of England, and afforded glimpses of a wounded country beset by Civil War. It ends with a hospitable gesture. 'Let's in', Marvell's persona invites us, pointing to the house itself.

The poem is as loose and associative as an impromptu ramble: one section progresses to another as the speaker moves. However the poem is bound together by a single consciousness who is earnestly aware of the frailty and importance of Nun Appleton as a repository for the highest values that can shape Marvell's society. The poem also includes, as if in anthology, almost all the modes, concerns and images of the poet's mature work.

AO2 Textual analysis
AO4 Historical and
biblical context

Nymph or Nymphet?

Marvell's fascination with girls like Mary Fairfax is with 'nymphs', not that manifestation of immediately post-pubertal female sexuality which Vladimir Nabokov, in his influential 1959 novel *Lolita*, calls the 'nymphet'. 'The Nymph Complaining on the Death of her Fawn', 'A Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers' and 'Young Love' have nevertheless drawn upon the poet the charge of an unhealthy interest in little girls, notwithstanding he was professionally engaged in educating one at the time of their composition. These poems are surely better read, at least at the primary level, as studies of the degree of control children have over their imagined worlds. In every poem their authority, however, is challenged by external intrusions, in other words Marvell's familiar Neo-platonic theme of the vulnerability of ideal to real. In 'T.C.' the little girl's sister died at two days old, so eight-year-old Theophila (her name means 'Darling of the Gods') is comparatively lucky in being alive and at play – who knows, the last stanza suggests, how soon the Mower might come for her? So her goddess-like triumphs at flower-arranging are subject to limits. She cannot give perfume to the tulip, or dis-thorn the rose (ll. 28-30). Like the rest of us subject to the 'penalty of Adam' she cannot 'reform' (l. 27) a 'fallen' spring. Similarly, in 'Nymph Complaining', the charm is not the girl's power but its transience, packed into what Poe calls the 'vigour' of its conceits:

How exceedingly vigorous, too, is the line, 'And trod as if on the four winds!' a vigour fully apparent only when we keep in mind the artless character of the speaker and the four feet of the favourite – one for each wind.

The girl's love of her pet is thus a mixture of fancy and pedantry, an odd kind of transitory authority, much as three-year-old Letty thinks she controls the world because she can 'pat' the globe that is its model in Charles Tennyson Turner's poem 'Letty's Globe' (1880): 'old empires peep'd /Between her baby fingers.' In other words Marvell's famously obscure poem might be about no more than the great deal children learn from their pets and playthings, and the big moral lessons that arise when these get broken or die.

T.S.Eliot's influential 1921 critique of Marvell focuses on this poem. 'Marvell takes a slight affair,' writes Eliot, 'the feeling of a girl for her pet, and gives it a connection with that inexhaustible and terrible nebula of emotion which surrounds all our exact and practical passions and mingles with them.' Philip Larkin takes a different view. For him, the determination of so many critics to view this small poem as about weighty themes such as the loss of the girl's virginity betrays its 'excess of manner over matter.' The repeating pattern is that a slight but compelling poem generates extravagant, even portentous readings that seem out of all proportion to what is actually on the page, and yet which, at some level, continue to engage serious attention. So for some readers a poem about a dead pet becomes an account of gang-rape by 'wanton troopers', thus turning pastoral into war-crime reportage. The same poem gets shrouded by a very different kind of reader in so much woolly allegory – 'the fawn, anticipating Dryden, represents the Church of England' – that it makes out of a girl's garden a prime site of the English Reformation. It has even been argued that the poem is in some way about the death of Charles I. Or, in that already faintly gloomy poem, 'Little T.C.', some readers shift their gaze from the infant and her flower-balls to concentrate on the dark puritan poet watching her from the shrubbery, though as Nigel Smith points out, he will probably be dead himself before the girl is old enough for him to woo her. Marvell's terseness seems to tease the darkest, most complex imaginings out of critics. The less he does, the more we want to do for him. And, as usual, his poems express no opinion about that.

AO2 Textual complexity;
A03 Variety of readings possible;
AO4 Biographical contexts

Marvell's Pastorals

Marvell is often judged to have been a Christian Neo-platonist, holding that Plato's doctrine of ideal forms underlies all the processes of a fallen or 'evil' world, so that ideas, images and patterns occurring in literature, especially Classical literature, will also be found in Scripture and in Nature. A perfect example is to be found in the opening lines of the Nun Appleton poem, 'Upon the Hill and Grove at Bilbrough':

See how the archèd earth does here
Rise in a perfect hemisphere!
The stiffest compass could not strike
A line more circular and like;
Nor softest pencil draw a brow
So equal as this hill does bow.
It seems as for a model laid,
And that the world by it was made (ll. 1-8).

A similar hunger for the harmony of form marks Marvell's early pastoral poems and love lyrics, despite their witty pretence at libertinage. In 'Clorinda and Damon' the heart of the poem is a moral landscape ('an unfrequented cave'=the girl's chastity) rendered, like that at Bilbrough, with terse exactitude: 'Near this, a fountain's liquid bell / Tinkles within the concave shell' (ll. 13-14). Pan swells Damon's 'slender oat' (l. 23) and the poem fades out in expectation. Ametas and Thestylis get the idea for their romp in the hay from 'twisting' and untwisting hay ropes, balancing form and function. In a more tragic key, the rather self-absorbed girl in 'Mourning' turns herself into a Classical legend, her tears embodying the God's epiphany (originally Zeus descending in a shower of gold):

She courts herself in am'rous rain;
Herself both Danaë and the show'r (ll. 19-20).

After a few years 'the traditional lover of pastoral,' writes E.W. Taylor, 'is replaced [in Marvell] by the Mower, a figure at once cheerfully ingenious and darkly mysterious'. The confident mood of aspiration in Marvellian pastoral darkens too. Three of the four mower poems can be confidently dated to the Nun Appleton period, and to the brooding retrospects of Civil War Marvell indulged in his poetry of those years.

The Mower's original is that 'gloomy fellow in a mead below' who broods silently over the deposition of the King in Marlowe's *Edward II* (4:6, 29). Mowers dance, sing and couple just as readily as shepherds. But they 'shepherd' or 'husband' nothing: they merely 'massacre' spires of grass ('On Appleton House', st. 50). They work in ideal landscapes, like the meadows at Nun Appleton, but in drawing out the beauty of the underlying form of the landscape by cutting and shaping grass-plots there are collateral victims, grasshoppers, small birds, sometimes the Mowers themselves:

And there among the grass fell down
By his own scythe, the Mower mown ('Damon the Mower', ll. 79-80).

In 'The Mower to the Glowworms' the Mowers are even more reckless than Damon, wielding sharp blades outdoors at midnight and working by the light of glow-worms. But the threat in these poems is from the mysterious Juliana, just as much as from wandering blades, for the Mowers' love-lives are typically much less stable than those of the shepherds in the earlier Pastorals.

Continued

In 'The Mower's Song' the harmony of the pastoral world is undermined by the sighing rhythm of the Mower's hexameter (an heroic, not a pastoral metre), and this is precipitated in each stanza by the naming of the eponymous Juliana, with whom the poor Mower is obsessed:

For Juliana comes, and She,
What I do to the Grass, does to my thoughts and Me
(ll.23-24, 29-30).

All flesh is grass (Isaiah 40:6); but, as E.W. Taylor points out, all grass is suddenly flesh, too.

Not even the blows of Civil War are more significant in Marvell than the Mower's stroke. Death is carving the meads that were once Eden garden: a perfect image, for Marvell, of the Fall, his Mower complaining cantankerously, in 'The Mower against Gardens', of the sophisticated methods (grafting, selective breeding) that make a modern (neo-Platonic) return to Eden a forlorn hope. E.W. Taylor explains the timeless appeal of the figure of the Mower, who seems to introduce an anti-pastoral note into the heart of the poet's work: He is 'the natural man who displays a facility for both harmony and alienation, a faculty possibly shared by all men in all times in relation to nature.'

AO2 Close reading
AO4 Classical and Christian
contexts juxtaposed

Paradise Found

In his secular poems Marvell takes a naturalistic, fairly lenient view of human failure to deliver the Neo-Platonic ideal. In 'The Coronet', an explicitly religious lyric, the sense of falling short, and of nature embodying a fallen world, becomes more insistent. The speaker is going round a garden, gathering garlands to soothe the wounds on his saviour's brow. The poem's finest lines, wonderfully humble, conclude that his quest is, literally, a fruitless one; for the thought of the fruit that caused the fall will not go away:

Through every garden, every mead,
I gather flowers (my fruits are only flowers) (ll. 5-6).

Sure enough, the 'serpent old' soon enters this garden, hiding among soul-destroying 'wreaths of fame and interest' (l. 16), ensuring it remains a poem of 'Paradise Lost'. Marvell's most famous image of 'paradise regained' comes in a garden not of poetic (and other) ambition, as in 'The Coronet', but in a garden of retreat. The condition of entry to the somewhat solipsistic solitude of 'The Garden' (possibly written at the same time as Paradise Lost in the 1660s) is that you must go there 'without a mate' (as Adam may not have fallen but for Eve), which not only ensures the Garden's permanence, but doubles the pleasure: 'Two paradises 'twere in one / To live in paradise alone' (ll. 63-64). This makes the garden a bit uneventful and contemplative for some tastes (for paradise is, paradoxically, a celebration of complete inactivity). But in a 'wondrous' fifth stanza fruits offer themselves spontaneously to lips and limbs:

What wondrous life is this I lead!
Ripe apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine and curious peach
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons as I pass,
Insnared with flowers, I fall on grass (ll. 39-40).

Marvell's garden-paradise suddenly makes a world without work, where Nature itself is your lackey, very attractive indeed. Even if you stumble over a melon, there is safe landing on soft grass, cushioned with flowers. In the outside world a sudden fall can be fatal – Adam's was. Not here. This 'fall' is not a rape of nature, but a delectable commingling with it.

Pliant, self-offering vegetables also feature in 'Bermudas', a 'modern psalm' that goes beyond even 'The Garden' in envisaging paradise on earth. When an English ship making for Colonial Virginia was wrecked there in 1609, the sailors were amazed at the gentleness of the climate of these so-called 'Summer Islands', and at the uncompromising fertility of the country. Some first-hand details of the islands may have been gathered from John Oxenbridge, a fellow of Eton College when Marvell worked there in the mid-1650s, but the whole point of Marvell's Bermudas is that they represent another 'wondrous' country of the mind rather than a real locale. He writes about the shipwrecked singers (singers, rather than sailors), rowing to 'paradise' in their English lifeboat. A soft grassy wharf awaits them (l. 11); as in 'The Garden', fruit falls like a tribute, or rises to meet their mouths. Oranges glow like lamps to illuminate gloomy places (ll. 17-18). The apples are one-offs, like those in Eden: 'No tree could ever bear them twice' (l. 24). The Gospel's pearl is presented to them by the tide (l. 30). So what is there for the chorus of sailors to do? Sing, and beat the waters as they pass, to mark the time of the song: activity becomes artifice. Marvell's dipping oar, graceful and enabling as the sweep of the conductor's baton, is possibly the finest of all images of unfallen labour, work which is work no longer, gratuitous effort offered in celebration, not for effect. As Christopher Ricks has pointed out, it is a much finer image of 'work in paradise' than any of the succulent tasks Milton constructs for Adam and Eve in Paradise Lost. Milton could never quite reconcile himself to the prospect of not working, even in Eden. Marvell's sailors work as the angels work, to drive the engine of prayer: drifting onwards in endless, ended endeavour.

Continued

Sometime in the 1660s Marvell wrote a close, succinct translation of the second Chorus of Seneca's Thyestes. It seems to sum up a lifelong preference for the contemplative over the active life, retreat over the scuffles of public responsibility, civilized leisure over the interminable, often fruitless hours passed in the Commons of the Long Parliament, possibly accompanied by some hankering for the Summer Islands, or a green, secluded garden:

Climb at court for me that will
Tottering favour's pinnacle
All I seek is to lie still.
Settled in some secret nest
In calm leisure let me rest;
And far off the public stage
Pass away my silent age (ll. 1-7)

This is perhaps capped, as self-revelation, when Marvell describes the 'sacred drop' in his Latin poem 'Ros' ('Dew') wishing to return to its 'native heaven', as a human soul craves paradise. It achieves this, with a kind of militantly Marvellian shyness, by 'withdrawing completely into the fortress of its own light, / It draws inward, closing upon itself' (ll. 29-30).

AO2 Close reading
AO4 Christian and
biographical contexts



Was there ever a 'Coy Mistress'?

Biographers anxious to link the poetry to the man who produced it can find no evidence of Marvell's sexual life, try as they may (the hunt has been loud and long, given the reputation of 'To his Coy Mistress'.) After his death, the copyright in his poems was claimed by a 'Mary Marvell', who called herself his wife - she had certainly kept house for him - but no conclusive evidence has been found that they were married. At very least Marvell wanted the marriage to remain secret, since he chose one of the two churches in London where neither banns were proclaimed nor licence needed, and enjoined Mary never to speak a word of their union. The 'love poems' - or poems about love - that the poet left behind also display a curious sense of the persona's ultimate detachment from his girl, whoever - if anyone - she might have been, and (even more striking) the girl's detachment from him. 'The Gallery' is a poem pretending to be a collection of paintings, each of which represents a different mood of the beloved, captured on canvas. The trouble is that the young man's fantasies about his girl are so explicit, and so extreme. In one picture she is, disconcertingly, an 'inhuman murderess' (l. 10); in another, a nude model, with 'milky thighs' stretched across the eastern sky (ll. 19-20). What would she make of this? What would she make of her adoring young man's fantasies about her? Marvell does what he usually does: he keeps her out of her poem altogether. The final picture, as 'tender shepherdess', is the one Marvell's persona likes - or thinks she will like. But it is no more 'real' than the naked earth-mother, or (most extreme and distasteful of all) the sorceress playing with her lover's entrails (ll.25-32).

Similar distancing effects are used in the lyric 'The Fair Singer'. This is more obviously a compliment to an accomplished young lady than the dark prospects of a woman's soul in 'The Gallery'.

She is very clever: her wily voice sets traps for Marvell's persona by 'weaving fetters' of the very air he breathes. But little of this great tactician's personality emerges. What we get is a splendidly 'metaphysical' account of her military 'conquest' of her lover, never quite losing sight of the poem's musical inspiration. She gets the 'wind' and 'sun' of him, as well as the air, and so is equally able to stop his breath whether in a sea-fight (she's to windward) or land-battle (the sun is in his eyes). There is admirable technique here, as in the best Cavalier love-lyrics; but conceit drives out feeling.

Little of the Coy Mistress's feelings find their way into that poem, either, except, of course, her coyness itself. Her response, were we able to gauge it, might not be friendly to the art of that poem: 'We've been over all this before', she might say, or 'Well, it's clever, but I still don't fancy you.' If she spoke she might be the poem's witty recipient, possibly its cruel 'frost-piece'; she might even be bright enough to point out flaws in the persona's logic. But she remains a silent interlocutor in what is, in effect, a dramatic monologue. All three of these poems seem, therefore, to fit in with Rosalie Colie's comment about the 'curiously aseptic quality [of 'The Gallery']'. . . as if the situation were in fact only mental, as if there were no real lady, no real love affair. There are even suggestions in satirical attacks on Marvell that he was gay (copulating with Milton in the Latin Office), sterile, or possibly impotent, having suffered 'genital damage' - though such rumours are likely no more than the sweepings of coffee-house gossip.

AO2 Close reading
AO4 Impact of
biographical context

'Ugly' Satires

Marvell's satires in heroic couplets appear very early in his career, in the mid-1640s, but their art is even then fully formed, and none seems out of place with the work of the early 'Augustan' satirists. As E.K. Chambers writes, his 'modish handling of the decasyllabic couplet is very marked.' Marvell is characteristically less dark in tone than Rochester, his versification less smooth than Dryden, the effect often more fantastic than either. The early poem (1646), written when Marvell was on his travels as a tutor during the Civil War, 'Flecknoe, an English Priest at Rome', is an exercise in personal abuse, and comes as a shock to those familiar with the abstruse musings of Marvell's lyrics. Dryden liked the poem so much he wrote a more famous, London-based sequel. The Jesuit poetaster Flecknoe lives in a chamber like a coffin at the top of some Roman stairs (l. 10), where he composes little coffin-like 'rooms', or stanzas (l. 18). When his 'gouty' fingers crawl over his lute his hungry belly wails the accompaniment, like a singing dog (41-44). For Flecknoe never has money for dinner: it looks as if he stuck out 'his grisly tongue to dart the passing flies' (l. 50), or else fed blasphemously on 'consecrated wafers' (l. 61). Marvell then emits a protestant pun(?) on Roman Catholic notions of transubstantiation or the real presence that still has power to shock modest piety: 'the Host/Hath sure more flesh and blood than he can boast' (61-62). Another early satire, 'Tom May's Death' (1650) sees the chief parliamentary poet brutally dismissed from poet's heaven by no less than the vigorous shade of the old Court poet Ben Jonson. Turncoat May, who had formerly worked at Court, is sent off in a cloud of pitch like a witch at one of Jonson's Court Masques (ll. 99-100). It is intriguing that Marvell seems to have written this unequivocally Royalist satire at the same time as the 'Horatian Ode' in praise of Cromwell.

In 1657 Marvell was appointed Latin Secretary under John Milton, effectively becoming a prime mover in Cromwell's propaganda department, and from that moment never seems to have been too far from public affairs, entering Parliament as Member for Hull in 1659. The former Protectorate Civil Servant had to bed in with 'hard Cavaliers' after the Restoration, but his Machiavellian powers (or circumspection) seems to have facilitated this.

He established the 'Patriot' or 'Opposition' line in the Restoration 'Long Parliament', reintroducing aspects of the Commonwealth and Protectorate tradition, occasionally stirring himself up to write poetry on public events. His wit, detachment and imagination make his satire distinctive, if decidedly coarse, to modern taste. 'The Loyal Scot' (1669) includes an attack on bishops as fetid and scurrilous as anything Milton wrote. Bishops are more virulent than the plagues of Egypt (ll. 119-20), smell worse than the dung of foxes ('holy ordure', l. 160), and can curdle milk at sight (l. 126). One 'bishop-fiend', wielding his authority, has power to possess a whole diocese (or 'bishop-prick') with devils (ll. 147-48). If Marvell's ecclesiastical satire was truculent, he was just as brusque writing about secular affairs, such as the pointless, costly naval wars against the Dutch. His accomplished squib on the first of these, written under the Commonwealth in 1653, attacks the 'Character of Holland' for its status as supernumerary country:

Holland, that scarce deserves the name of Land,
As but th'Off-scouring of the Brittish Sand (ll. 1-2)

This was a 'drownèd' (l. 42) nation, where fish were often uninvited guests at table, built out of alluvial sweepings, the 'indigested vomit of the Sea' (l. 30).

Yet, somehow, in the Second Dutch War of 1667, a fleet from this land of puke (as it were) sailed up the River Thames as far as Sheerness, unchallenged by the British. Marvell describes the Dutch raid (not an invasion) in the longest and most accomplished of his verse-satires, 'The Last Instructions to a Painter' (1667, but not published until 1688). Marvell writes in a format already established in a series of critiques of the conduct of the Dutch War, where the satirist makes a wide-ranging survey of topical life, advising a timid painter what he might really show, 'warts and all', of his subject, if he were not so attached to his courtly commissions. The description of the Dutch Admiral Ruyter's leisurely progress up the Thames is deliberately lyrical, emphasising the lack of English intervention. He shaves his face using the smooth Thames water as a mirror (ll. 533-54); his crew gawp on the 'bashful' English nymphs as they bathe naked among the sedges (ll. 526-28).

Continued

Then, almost apologetically, the Dutch try their cannon on some less than formidable English fortifications, and the garrison scatters in panic. Charles II's flag-ship, the Royal Charles (that 'pleasure-boat of war' (l. 617)) is taken by a long-boat and six men.

The reason for this naval fiasco, as the poem rapidly confirms, was a spineless corrupt Government, widespread embezzlement of public funds, and shameless neglect of coastal defences. Marvell, who had insider's knowledge of the Parliamentary chicanery of the early part of 1667, wrote anonymously and circulated his poem in manuscript only, but pulled no punches. Marvell's hero, a Scot of hermaphrodite beauty, burns chivalrously to death in a conflagration of rococo imagery ('like a glad lover the fierce flames he meets' (l. 682)) that puts the squinting hypocrisy of the poem's other characters to shame. As usual, a state's instability spreads top-down, reflecting the increasingly licentious morals of the Cavalier Court. The Merry Monarch wakes up from uneasy slumbers, banishing the (allegedly) allegorical 'virgin' at his side (ll. 881-906). Lady Castlemaine, one of his cast off mistresses, is shown in the flesh - too much of it, and too old. The painter is crudely urged to paint her wrinkled skin rather than its image on canvas (ll. 79-80). There is also a snapshot of Court morals as she lusts after a 'lackey', whose legs have captivated her in tight breeches, but whose low features bring on an attack of snobbery:

And still within her mind the footman runs:
His brazen calves, his brawny thighs – the face
She slights' (ll. 85-86).

The real cause of the Dutch victory, however, does not lie in the irregularities of the royal bedroom, but with Parliament, and its self-important officials, especially the long-serving Speaker, Sir Edward Turnor:

When grievance urged, he swells like squatted toad,
Frisks like a frog, to croak a tax's load;
His patient piss he could hold longer than
An urinal, and sit like any hen (877-80).

After a day's work from this 'clattering' House of Commons naval spending is not just curbed but curtailed, and the spoils appropriated: 'The busy hammer sleeps, the ropes untwine, / The stores and wages all are mine and thine' (ll.321-22). Some of the poem's best lines are those concerning the aftermath of the Dutch 'invasion', when one Peter Pett, Commissioner of the Navy at Chatham, was scapegoated for the entire disaster (well, he was guilty of something). Marvell sets rolling a cruelly comic snowball:

After this loss, to relish discontent,
Someone must be accused by punishment.
All our miscarriages on Pett must fall:
His name alone seems fit to answer all.
Whose counsel first did this mad war beget?
Who all commands sold through the navy? Pett.
Who would not follow when the Dutch were beat?
Who treated out the time at Bergen? Pett.
Who the Dutch fleet with storms disabled met,
And rifling prizes, them neglected? Pett.
Who with false news prevented the Gazette,
The fleet divided, writ for Rupert? Pett.
Who all our seamen cheated of their debt,
And all our prizes who did swallow? Pett.
Who did advise no navy out to set,
And who the forts left unrepaired? Pett.
Who to supply with powder did forget
Languard, Sheerness, Gravesend and Upnor? Pett.
Who should it be but the Fanatic Pett?
Pett, the sea-architect, in making ships
Was the first cause of all these naval slips:
Had he not built, none of these faults had been;
If no creation, there had been no sin (ll. 765-88).

Continued

'Last Instructions', though lacking the unity of Dryden's or Pope's finest work, is clearly one of Marvell's liveliest poems - Samuel Pepys called it 'too sharp and so true', putting the poet's 'spying' proclivities to good use - but difficult to fit in with his other major work. As George deForest Lord wrote in 1967, it is surprising 'That a lyrical poet of unexcelled grace and sensitivity could have produced such a poem, a poem that is often derisive, tendentious, cynical and ugly.' Surprising, yes. But the 'rational amphibian' in Marvell never ceases to surprise us - in this case by anticipating by half a century the lyrical intensity and inventiveness of Pope's *Dunciad*, and writing just as 'ugly', too.

AO2 Close reading
AO4 Social and literary contexts

Envoy

Marvell died, probably as the result of a mixture of stroke and medical bungle ('an ounce of quinine would probably have saved him' wrote a contemporary medical authority), on 16 August 1678, at the age of fifty-seven. 'For Death thou art a Mower too.' Let 'Epitaph upon -' (the subject has been identified as a thirty-nine year old unmarried Puritan lady) be downbeat Andrew Marvell's final word on lost perfection. For Frances Jones was only half esteemed, like paradise, while she was with us. Then Death came for her, as Marvell tells us in the *Thyestes* translation (l. 14) it does to wise people, as 'a strange surprise':

Modest as morn, as mid-day bright,
Gentle as evening, cool as night:
'Tis true: but all too weakly said;
'Twere more significant. She's dead.

AO4 Biographical context

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