CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

1

Introduction

Andrew Marvell died on 16 August 1678. He was commemorated in some anonymous verses as 'this island's watchful sentinel' and 'the people's surest guide and prophet too' – a man whose unfailing 'truth, wit, and eloquence' had defended his country against 'the grim monster, arbitrary pow'r'. The epitaph composed by his nephew, William Popple, alludes to 'his inimitable writings', but pays more attention to his 'unalterable steadiness in the ways of virtue' and his twenty-year service as Member of Parliament for Kingston-upon-Hull. On the title-page of *Miscellaneous Poems*, the volume in which his poetry was printed (most of it for the first time) in 1681, he is described as 'Andrew Marvell, Esq; Late Member of the Honourable House of Commons'. Although he was remembered as 'an excellent poet in Latin or English' in John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* and honoured in another set of anonymous verses as a 'Prodigy of Wit', whose achievements with a pen placed him far above 'the scribbling crowd', it was his career as a politician and controversialist that shaped his reputation in his own day and for many years afterwards. But that career did not begin until he was appointed Latin secretary in the office of John Thurloe, Secretary to the Council of State, in 1657. During the thirty-six years of his life before that, he had had, in his own words, 'not the remotest relation to public matters'. It is true that his further assertion, in the same passage from *The Rehearsal Transpros'd: The Second Part* (1673), that he had had no 'correspondence with the persons then predominant, until the year 1657' (p. 203), does not quite square with his previous employment by both Lord Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, but the broad contrast between his later activities as civil servant, M.P., and diplomat and his earlier life as a student and private tutor still holds good. And indeed, most commentators assume a similar chronological transition in his literary work from mainly lyrical poetry in the 1640s and early 1650s to political verse and controversial prose. The search for lines of continuity between the poet of gardens and meadows and the champion of liberty and toleration exercises biographer and critic alike, and it is evident that the conflicting demands of the self and the world, which in one guise or another inform many of his most celebrated poems, need to be seen not only in relation to his own enigmatic personality, but also in the context

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

of what one historian has dubbed the Century of Revolution.

The facts of his life can be quickly rehearsed. He was born on 31 March 1621 at Winestead-in-Holderness, Yorkshire, where his father was rector. In 1624, the family moved to Hull, following the Reverend Andrew Marvell's election as Master of the Charterhouse (an almshouse) and as lecturer in Holy Trinity Church. Young Andrew probably attended Hull Grammar School, and from there proceeded to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1633. Having graduated B.A. in 1639, he abandoned his M.A. studies soon after his father's accidental death by drowning in 1641. Two of his three older sisters had married into the families of well-to-do Hull merchants, and there is a local tradition that he entered the trading-house of one of his brothers-in-law to learn the business after leaving Cambridge. Recently discovered documents, however, indicate that he was not in Hull, but in London in February 1642. Two further documents reveal that he was present in person to complete the sale of some family land and other property in Meldreth, Cambridgeshire, in November and December 1647. It must, therefore, have been between these two dates that Marvell spent the 'four years abroad in Holland, France, Italy, and Spain' mentioned in a letter written in 1653 by John Milton. It is usually assumed that he travelled as tutor to some young man of rank and wealth, but this has not been proved, and it may be that he was able to finance his continental tour from the sale of family property after he came of age in 1642. At the end of the 1640s he was back in London, but by early 1651 he had taken up a post in Yorkshire as tutor to Mary Fairfax, the twelve-year-old daughter of the successful general who had resigned as commander of the parliamentary armies in June 1650 and retired to his northern estates.

Marvell had left Fairfax's service and returned to London by February 1653, when Milton wrote to John Bradshaw, Lord-President of the Council of State, recommending him for government employment and explaining that 'he comes now lately out of the house of the Lord Fairfax, who was General, where he was intrusted to give some instruction in the languages to the Lady, his daughter'. His application for a post in Whitehall was not successful, but he had apparently come to the attention of Oliver Cromwell, Fairfax's successor. In July 1653, Marvell was writing to Cromwell from the house of the Reverend John Oxenbridge, a fellow of Eton, where he had just been installed as private tutor to William Dutton, a young protégé of the great soldier. During 1656 Marvell and Dutton were in France at Saumur on the Loire, where there was a famous

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

Protestant academy. In September of the following year, however, a public appointment at last came his way as assistant to Cromwell's Secretary of State. He retained this office until late 1659 or early 1660, although by this time Cromwell was dead and preparations were being made for the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. He was first elected M.P. for Hull in January 1659 and again in April 1660 to serve in the Convention Parliament which recalled Charles II from exile; and he was returned for a third time in May 1661 to the Cavalier Parliament, in which he continued to represent his native town until his death. During his long career in the House of Commons, he sat on various committees and reported regularly to the Hull Corporation and Hull Trinity House on general parliamentary affairs and matters of particular interest to his constituency. He was absent from the House during the second half of 1662 on what seems to have been clandestine political business in Holland, and from July 1663 till January 1665 he was abroad again as secretary to the Earl of Carlisle on an extended diplomatic mission which took him to the court of the Czar in Moscow, to Stockholm, and to Copenhagen.

Once back in England, Marvell became associated with the Opposition forming itself around the Duke of Buckingham, husband of Mary Fairfax, and contributed both in speeches in the House of Commons and in satirical verses to the campaign which led to the overthrow of the king's chief minister, the Earl of Clarendon, in 1667. Five years later, he was again active politically, supporting Charles II's attempt to extend toleration towards religious dissenters in the work for which he was most renowned in his own lifetime, *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*. With the rise to power of Sir Thomas Osborne, the future Earl of Danby, however, Clarendon's policy of maintaining the supremacy of the Church of England was revived. Throughout the rest of his life, Marvell was a leading member of the opposition Country Party, and may even have been involved in a Dutch intelligence organization which aimed at breaking the Anglo-French alliance and ending the war against Holland in 1673–4. He spoke in the House of Commons in March 1677 against a bill which would have strengthened the intolerant Anglican establishment, and later in the same year wrote *An Account of the Growth of Popery, and Arbitrary Government in England*, setting out his fears for the future of constitutional government and his suspicions of a Roman Catholic, pro-French conspiracy.

Marvell died suddenly of a fever, after returning from a visit to Hull, in a house which he had leased in 1677 as a hide-out for two bankrupt friends. Eight months after his death, his former landlady,

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

Mary Palmer, in whose name he had taken the house in Great Russell Street, claimed that she was his widow. This seems to have been part of a stratagem to prevent a sum of five hundred pounds belonging to one of the bankrupts from falling into the hands of the creditors. It was, perhaps, to reinforce her claim to have been married to the poet that 'Mary Marvell' published the *Miscellaneous Poems* of 1681, prefaced by a declaration that 'all these Poems, as also the other things in this Book contained, are Printed according to the exact Copies of my late dear Husband, under his own Hand-Writing, being found since his Death among his other Papers'. Although she succeeded in obtaining administration of Marvell's estate, there is no indisputable evidence that this woman was his wife and most biographers believe that he remained a bachelor to the end of his days.

Before one can begin to guess at the personality that might animate this bare recital of facts, it is necessary to call to mind some of the main features of the world in which Marvell lived. Men of his generation grew to maturity in what one of his contemporaries at Trinity College – Abraham Cowley – was later to describe as 'a warlike, various, and a tragical age'. It was an age which saw radical changes in the institutions of church and state and the questioning of many fundamental beliefs about the nature of man and the society and universe he inhabits.

Neither the Church of England nor the monarchy, those twin pillars of the established order of things, survived the revolutionary decade of the 1640s. Already before the end of the sixteenth century, the more radical members of the national church were making known their antagonism towards the ruling hierarchy of bishops and their conviction that the process of reformation had not gone far enough. The ecclesiastical policy fostered by Charles I and ruthlessly implemented by William Laud alienated the Puritan faction within the church even further. First as Bishop of London, and then from 1633 as Archbishop of Canterbury, Laud used his authority to enforce strict conformity to the Prayer Book of the Church of England and to introduce religious practices which many regarded as steps on the path back to Roman Catholicism. The Long Parliament, which assembled for the first time on 3 November 1640, imprisoned Laud in the Tower and over the next few years undertook what Milton was to call 'the reforming of Reformation itself': the episcopacy was abolished, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer was replaced with the Directory of Public Worship, and a Presbyterian system of church government

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

– with elected elders rather than appointed priests and bishops – was adopted. Laud was eventually brought to trial and beheaded in January 1645.

The struggle for political power between king and House of Commons, which had dominated the earlier years of Charles I's reign, entered a new phase in 1640. Since 1629, Charles had contrived to raise the money necessary for government without summoning a parliament. The grievances that had built up over those eleven years of personal rule now burst upon him, and, given the obstinacy of his character and the zeal of his opponents, it was inevitable that the constitutional debate should turn into armed conflict. The Civil War, which began with the indecisive Battle of Edgehill in October 1642, culminated in victory for Parliament and the New Model Army under Fairfax and Cromwell at the Battle of Naseby in June 1645. After the defeat of Royalist risings in 1648 – the Second Civil War – the king was tried and executed on 30 January 1649. Monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished in March, and in the new Commonwealth authority was vested in a Council of State made up of M.P.s and army officers. Cromwell was appointed commander of the army in July 1650 in place of Fairfax, who had resigned rather than lead a campaign against Charles II and the Scots. Having beaten a Scottish army at Dunbar, Cromwell followed Charles and his remaining forces down through England and finally defeated them at the Battle of Worcester on 3 September 1651. The rest of the 1650s were dominated by a policy of mercantile expansion abroad and a series of abortive attempts to find a constitutional settlement at home. Cromwell was made Protector at the end of 1653, but when he died in September 1658 he had not succeeded in establishing a form of government that could survive his departure from the political scene. After a period of confusion caused by the abdication of the new Protector, his son Richard Cromwell, order was restored in the person of Charles II, who landed at Dover in May 1660.

Under Oliver Cromwell, there had been a large measure of religious freedom. Like many of his colonels, he was an Independent, and must have shared John Milton's disillusioned judgement of 1646 on 'the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament' – '*New Presbyter* is but *Old Priest* writ large'. But the restoration of the monarchy also saw a return to the policy of conformity to the restored Church of England. In a series of acts of Parliament known as the Clarendon Code various restrictions were imposed upon the activities of both Catholic recusants and Nonconformists or Dissenters, as the Presbyterians and members of the Puritan sects that had proliferated

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

during the previous twenty years were called. Foreign affairs were dominated by relations with the France of Louis XIV, with whom Charles II entered into the secret Treaty of Dover in 1670, and with Holland, England's great trading rival, against whom two wars were fought in 1664–7 and 1672–4. At home the question of religious toleration was complicated by the avowed Roman Catholicism of Charles II's brother and heir, James, Duke of York, and by the king's own Catholic sympathies. Marvell died on the eve of Titus Oates's spurious revelation of a Popish Plot to murder Charles and set James on the throne.

The protracted battles for power between the supporters of uniformity and freedom of conscience in the church and between absolutism and constitutional parliamentary government in the state were naturally accompanied by an ideological war of words and ideas, in the course of which new philosophical positions were hammered out. Biblical texts and historical precedents were called upon to validate theories as diverse as the Divine Right of Kings and the egalitarianism of such groups as the Diggers and Levellers, which held that 'the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he'. Thomas Hobbes's systematic analysis of the nature of man and the state – 'that great Leviathan' – swept aside older notions of natural or divinely ordained rights in favour of a rational theory of absolute sovereignty based on effective power; and James Harrington's *Oceana* (1656) argued along similarly secular and rationalistic lines for a republican constitution that would safeguard the liberties achieved in the Civil War, while avoiding the dangers of more radical democracy.

Advances in the physical sciences and the growing spirit of scepticism promoted even more fundamental changes in man's conception of the universe and his place in it. The medieval belief in a system of concentric spheres carrying the planets and stars round the earth had been gradually discredited by developments in astronomy associated with the names of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, which were to culminate in the publication of Sir Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* less than a decade after Marvell's death. It was still possible for a writer like Sir Thomas Browne to perceive the world around him as a hierarchical continuum – 'a Stair, or manifest Scale of creatures, rising not disorderly, or in confusion, but with a comely method and proportion' – or as a network of beautiful and significant relationships or 'correspondencies' (*Religio Medici* (1643)). But such a view, which could find meaningful parallels between the microcosm

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

and the macrocosm and discover in the natural world emblems of moral and metaphysical truth, was giving ground during Marvell's lifetime in the face of Hobbes's materialistic conception of the human creature – 'For what is the *Heart*, but a *Spring*; and the *Nerves*, but so many *Strings*; and the *Joints*, but so many *Wheels*, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer?' (*Leviathan* (1651)) – and the Newtonian conception of the universe as a great machine, operating according to mathematical principles. And while the seventeenth-century inventions of telescope and microscope were extending the range of human perception, they were also underlining the deceptiveness of appearances and the elusiveness of truth. Both the life and the writings of Andrew Marvell can be interpreted as the responses of an intelligent and sceptical mind to the need to find new bearings amid the confusions and the challenges to inherited assumptions of a period of revolutionary change.

The earliest influences on the young Marvell must have been the moderate Puritanism of his father, who had been educated at Emmanuel, the most Puritan of the Cambridge colleges, and who was later to be described by the poet as 'a Conformist to the established Rites of the Church of *England,* though I confess none of the most over-running or eager in them' (*The Rehearsal Transpros'd: The Second Part*). As lecturer at Holy Trinity, the Reverend Andrew Marvell did not hold a church living, but was hired by the congregation in the capacity of a preacher. His attitude to the Anglican establishment is indicated by the reprimand he received from the Archbishop's court at York in 1639 for not making sufficient use of the Book of Common Prayer with his weekly sermons. The Cambridge of the 1630s, when Marvell was a student at Trinity, was less compliant with Laudian policy than Oxford, where Laud himself was Chancellor. There was, however, some infiltration by Jesuits, particularly at Peterhouse. Richard Crashaw, who was to become a convert to Roman Catholicism, was elected a Fellow there in 1635 and may well have been acquainted with Marvell, since they published poems in the same collection of Cambridge verse in 1637 and Marvell's later poetry shows a close familiarity with the work of the older man. However that may be, there is some evidence to support a family tradition that Marvell temporarily embraced the Roman religion and ran away to London in 1639, where he was found by his father and sent back to college. By the early 1650s, his religious views must have been such as to make him acceptable to John Milton, the chief propagandist for the Puritan cause, who considered him 'a man whom both by report and the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

converse I have had with him of singular desert for the State to make use of', and to Oliver Cromwell, who entrusted him with the education of William Dutton. In a letter written on taking up his post as tutor in July 1653, Marvell expresses gratitude to Cromwell 'for having placed us in so godly a family as that of Mr Oxenbridge whose Doctrine and Example are like a Book and a Map'. Although he had a consistent record of opposition to the penal measures taken against Nonconformists after the Restoration, he does not seem himself to have belonged to a dissenting congregation. A letter of 1675, however, contains a passing jibe at the Book of Common Prayer in an account of a Privy Counsellor who died suddenly, 'notwithstanding his Church's Litany, *From sudden Death, good Lord,* &c', and the description of him written soon after his death in the journal of a contemporary physician as 'a man not well affected to the Church or Government of England' is near enough to the mark.

His disaffection towards the 'Government of England' under Charles II is readily substantiated not only from his actions as an M.P. and his public writings, but also from his private letters, in which we find him in 1670 condemning one piece of legislation as 'the Quintessence of arbitrary Malice' and another as 'a Piece of absolute universal Tyranny'. That Cromwell earned his respect, and indeed his admiration, is clear from poems written to celebrate the first anniversary of his rule as Protector in 1654 and to lament his death in 1658. Much more problematic is the question of his earlier political allegiance. His four years of travel in the 1640s saw him out of England during much of the Civil War, and the debate over his commitment to the royalist cause at the time of the king's execution continues to this day. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the evidence of the poetry, which is all there is to go on in this period of his life, points to a crisis of adjustment to the new political realities of the Commonwealth in 1650.

His famous comment on the turmoil of the 1640s, as he looked back from the vantage point of 1672, characteristically refuses to simplify the tangle of human experience and introduces a note of paradox into the moral evaluation: 'Whether it were a War of Religion, or of Liberty, is not worth the labour to enquire. Which-soever was at the top, the other was at the bottom; but upon considering all, I think the Cause was too good to have been fought for' (*The Rehearsal Transpros'd*, p. 135). The same wary distaste for partisan fervour, which created the stance of detached amusement in so many of the poems, but which also led him eventually to commit himself to the struggle against ecclesiastical intolerance and political oppression, is evident in a remark in *A Short Historical Essay* (1677): 'Whereas truth for the most

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

part lies in the middle, but men ordinarily look for it in the extremities' (p. 155). The cumulative impression made by the poetry, the prose works, and the letters is of a man who preferred to stay in the background and to keep his own counsel – partly because of his own temperament, partly because he lived in dangerous times, but perhaps above all because he was acutely conscious of the human capacity for misunderstanding, distortion, and over-simplification. His letters to the Hull Corporation, for instance, confine themselves to a scrupulously objective record of the proceedings in the House and other matters of public interest in the capital. On one of the rare occasions when he allows a more personal note to intrude, it is to urge caution with regard to what he has written:

> These things I have been thus careful to give you a plain account of, not thinking a perfunctory relation worthy your prudence but must in exchange desire you will not admit many inspectors into my letters. For I reckon your bench to be all but as one person: whereas others might chance either not to understand or to put an ill construction upon this openness of my writing & simplicity of my expression. (Letter dated 8 November 1670)

In the more informal letters to his favourite nephew, William Popple, Marvell does permit himself to convey the alarm and disgust he feels at the turn of political events, and now and then reveals a glimpse of that tendency to hold aloof from an intransigent situation which may have kept him abroad during the Civil War:

> It is also my Opinion that the King was never since his coming in, nay, all Things considered, no King since the Conquest, so absolutely powerful at Home, as he is at present. Nor any Parliament, or Places, so certainly and constantly supplied with Men of the same Temper. In such a Conjuncture, dear *Will,* what Probability is there of my doing any Thing to the Purpose? (Letter dated 21 March 1670)

Most of Marvell's prose works were printed anonymously, although he was stung into putting his name defiantly on the title-page of the Second Part of *The Rehearsal Transpros'd.* Anonymity was a natural precaution in books critical of the establishment, but his practice of covering his tracks in his private correspondence by referring to himself in the third person and omitting a signature also seems to have something in common with his habit of concealing himself behind a persona in the poetry. Writing to Sir Edward Harley on 1 July 1676, he places his tongue firmly in his cheek to comment on the reception of *Mr Smirke: Or, The Divine in Mode,* a pamphlet attacking the Anglican hierarchy:

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27722-8 - Andrew Marvell
Robert Wilcher
Excerpt
More information

The book said to be Marvell's makes what shift it can in the world but the Author walks negligently up & down as unconcerned. The Divines of our Church say it is not in the merry part so good as the Rehearsal Transpros'd, that it runs dregs: the Essay they confess is writ well enough to the purpose he intended it but that was a very ill purpose. The Bishop of London's Chaplain said it had not answered expectation.

The bulk of his poetry remained in manuscript until after his death, and although the political satires of his later years were widely circulated, the lyrical poems on which his reputation now chiefly rests might well have been lost but for Mary Palmer's publication of *Miscellaneous Poems*. The few poems printed during his lifetime – such as the commendatory verses on Richard Lovelace's *Lucasta* (1649) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), the elegy on Lord Hastings (1649), and the panegyric on Cromwell's Protectorship (1655) – can be dated, as can other occasional pieces that relate to specific public events. The majority of the lyrics, however, can only be assigned to a particular period by biographical inference. *Upon Appleton House,* 'The Garden', and the Mower poems, for example, probably belong to the years when he was in Yorkshire as tutor to Mary Fairfax, and the Puritan tone of 'Bermudas' and 'The Coronet' may derive from the time of his residence with the 'godly' Oxenbridges. Some of the poems associated with Marvell's name – notably post-Restoration satires, but also the elegy on Lord Francis Villiers and the very early pastoral, 'A Dialogue between Thyrsis and Dorinda' – are even of doubtful attribution.

Given the many gaps in our knowledge, the discussion of Marvell's work in the chapters that follow will concentrate on the detailed analysis of individual poems, arranged according to theme and literary method rather than along some hypothetical line of development. Further historical information – and in particular that relating to the literary traditions that lie behind Marvell's writing – will be introduced as it becomes relevant to the consideration of specific texts. The overall intention is to put together a coherent picture of the poet's characteristic manner of turning his experience of his seventeenth-century world into literary form.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org