

MARVELL AND THE QUALITY OF WIT

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Abstract: This paper discusses the quality of wit in the poetry of 17th century English poet Andrew Marvell and why Marvell's philosophy and technique of wit has earmarked his poetry to be the wittiest poet among his contemporaries. The main question is: how the quality of wit in Marvell's poetry is deeply layered and how does it reveal the multiplicity of images that depicts the socio-political and socio-cultural aspects of 17th century England.

Keywords: Marvell, language, wit, metaphysical, 17th century English poetry, philosophy

Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) was born in Winestead-in-Holderness, near Hull. The son of a clergyman, Marvell studied at Trinity College, Cambridge until 1640 and was a man of much travel experience as he traveled to countries such as Holland, France, Italy and Spain for 4 years. When England experienced its first civil war between Charles I and his parliamentarians, Marvell returned home and in 1650 wrote "Horation Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland". The ode was later considered to be one of the greatest political odes by Marvell, from the depth of emotions to the clarity and forcefulness of the tone used, depicts the ingenuity and brilliance of Marvell in framing real human emotions at their moments of tribulations.

Marvell remains much a private poet than a public one as not much is known of his work. His collected poems appeared only in 1681 and it was then that he achieved some fame. Nevertheless, he remains a minor poet as compared to his contemporaries (Donne and Milton) and was best known to some for such works as "To His Coy Mistress", "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure", "The Definition of Love", "The Garden", "Horation Ode", the pastoral

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dialogues and “mower” poems, “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Faun”, “On a Drop of Dew”, and “Bermudas”.

Barbara Everett in her essay “The Shooting of the Bears: Poetry and Politics in Andrew Marvell” states that Marvell is an “unusual elusive poet”¹ resurfacing again 50 years ago and drawing with it interest by great poets such as T.S. Eliot. It was until the 300th anniversary of the death of Marvell (1678-1733) that his work was concluded as having one of the best lyrics in poetry. Far from being just recognized as an MP for Hull, Marvell was a public figure but in his works as a poet he was a private one. It was concluded that he wrote most of the poems for himself and not for the general public; such works encompasses poems, lyrics and satires. With Ben Jonson as Marvell’s great predecessor and mentor, Barbara Everett comments:

Marvell’s own ‘true’ lyrics possess something like the Jonsonian lucidity-but they inform it, ironically, with a private personality that is wholly different: self-mocking, subtle, and permanently reserved. It is this private character which gives lives to Marvell’s verse its chief endowment (after its obvious literary skills): a strikingly original sensibility.²

Marvell wrote extensively during his lifetime, from topics ranging from politics, his love for nature, philosophy, nature’s contempt of men, satires and pastorals. Marvell constantly uses his brilliance of language coupled with his wit and wealth of imagination to produce some of the wittiest works of his age.

This paper discusses Marvell’s use of wit in his selected poetry and how this technique not only reveals the metaphysical brilliance of the poet but also the socio-political dimensions of Marvell’s era. But firstly, the definition of wit of whom Alexander Pope describes it as “that which has been often thought, but never before so well expressed”³ while Samuel Johnson defines it as “a kind of ‘discordia concors’, a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit thus defined they

¹ Barbara Everett (1998). “The Shooting of the Bears: Poetry and Politics in Andrew Marvell”, in *Poets in Their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.32.

² *Ibid*, p.36.

³ *Johnson’s Lives of the Poets. A Selection*. Edited by J. P. Hardy (1971). Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.12.

have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions".⁴ T.S. Eliot meanwhile describes wit simply as "a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace".⁵

Thus, in Marvell's most well-known love poem "To His Coy Mistress" we shall see how the author uses wit to its full potent force. Often described as a "*carpe diem* poem", this work shows "the belief in the virtue of enjoying oneself while one is still young"⁶. Marvell deals with the treatment of time in his most imaginative and humorous way, portraying the persona desperately coaxing his beloved to give in to his entreaties. The success in the dealing of time was owed to what Frank W. Bradbrook calls the antimony of "rhythm and ambiguity" in the lines:

My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow.⁷

Here, Marvell's clever play of words comes into force as one could see the wit in Marvell's choice of words. He had chosen the Latin word *vegetabilis* meaning speed or haste, which would then be contrasted with the words "more slow" that become the anti-climax. Frank W. Bradbrook comments that the "anti-climax is gained by the contrast between the size of the love and the time it takes to grow, and rhythmically this is given in the verse by the sudden pause in the middle of the second line, and the three dead, mono syllables, emphasized by the long-drawn-out vowels"⁸.

The second section of the poem is packed with detailed images, which are run by the reader in quick succession, with a dramatic ending:

At my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lie

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.12.

⁵ T.S. Eliot, "Andrew Marvell". In John Carey (ed.) (1969). *Andrew Marvell: A Critical Anthology*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, p.48.

⁶ Frank W. Bradbrook. "Marvell and the Line of Wit." In Boris Ford (ed.) (1982). *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: 3.From Donne to Marvell*. Penguin Books Ltd., p.276.

⁷ All quotations from the poems of Andrew Marvell are from Marvell, Andrew. *The Complete Poems*, edited by Elizabeth Story Donno (1972). Penguin Education; p.51.

⁸ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op.cit.*, p.276.

Deserts of vast eternity.⁹

Marvell thus transforms the conventional image of “Tempus Fugit” or “time flies” to a mechanized monstrous contraption, “Time’s winged chariot hurrying near”, such personal images by Marvell distorts the conventional image of time to something horrible and before we know it, the image of death and the vastness of decay encroaches in the form of the desert. Another example would be the horrible graphic image of decomposition in which Marvell tries to instill the emotion of fear in his beloved:

Then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity:
And your quaint honour turns to dust;
And into ashes all my lust.¹⁰

Such is the clever use of wit by Marvell, ushered with the argumentative tone; his style portrays his inventiveness and innovation with a show of contrast between love and the coldness of the tomb. Marvell places importance on time as humankind itself is susceptible to it. Similarly, love too lies at the mercy of time and to the poet, time is ticking away. Marvell has indeed provided a penetrating insight to the powers of his wit and imagination which proves to be the unifying force of his work and as Eliot comments:

It will hardly be denied that this poem contains wit; but it may not be evident that this wit forms the crescendo and diminuendo of a scale of great imaginative power. The wit is not only combined with but also fused into, the imagination.¹¹

And the last stanza of Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”:

Let us roll 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

⁹ Donno (ed.), p.51.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.50.

Stand still, yet we will make him run.¹²

Here, Marvell's strength of thought is unleashed; he reaffirms his stand that their act of consummation will be life-giving and definitely time-resisting. Marvell's punning of the word *sun*, the use of hyperbolic conceits in the adoration of his beloved's beauty and the flurry of rapid changing images all culminate to the poem truly being a masterpiece by Marvell. A.J. Smith in "Marvell's Metaphysical Wit" says that "The finely judged irony of Marvell's poem is the stance of a mind which sees little else to hold on to in our commitments of passion than the suppleness of its own wit, the exquisite assurance of its poise"¹³.

Another of Marvell's great, "The Garden" reminds us of the solitude of the Garden of Eden but with a more structured and neat hold. Serene, peaceful and illuminating, historians pointed that Marvell drew inspiration from the alluring gardens of Lord Fairfax at Nun Appleton House of where Marvell was a tutor to the 11-year-old daughter of the aristocrat for 2 years. The poem was described by Frank W. Bradbrook as "opposition in every way to ambition and to the coarser worldly amusements"¹⁴.

Marvell's poem deals with the idea of an Edenic garden on earth still in its pristine state of innocence where one could find peace and tranquility. Its meditative qualities are its overflowing greenery and its variety of trees that offer man a refuge from the ravages of sin. Marvell's love for nature is evident as he weaves a web of serenity and gives a voice for nature to chide the foolishness of men in their worldly pursuits:

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the palm, the oke or bays,
And their uncessant labours see
Crown'd from some single herb or tree.¹⁵

There's a sense of timelessness in the poems of Marvell that can be seen in "The Garden". The poem reaches out to man and endow a kind of reminiscence that once was, Adam's. More often than not, men have

¹² Donno (ed.), p.51.

¹³ A.J. Smith, "Marvell's Metaphysical Wit". In C.A. Patrides (ed.) (1978). *Approaches to Marvell: The York Tercentenary Lectures*. London/Boston: Routledge, p.65.

¹⁴ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, p.279.

¹⁵ Donno (ed.), p.100.

forgotten nature's pleasures and thus "The Garden" offers a heaven on earth for humankind. Marvell's wit and adoration can be seen from his appraisal for the colour green, the beauty of trees and his hatred for the mutilation of trees by "Fond lovers". The beauty of nature is unparalleled so much so that it supersedes those of any women, Marvell also drew examples from Greek gods finding, according to Bradbrook "Solace in nature for frustrated sexual passion, and it is even hinted, in a characteristically witty paradox, that the quiet of nature was what they were really seeking."¹⁶ This example can be seen from the lines:

Apollo hunted Daphne so,
Only that she might laurel grow,
And Pan did after Syrinx speed
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.¹⁷

Such is the "discordia concors" of Marvell. His notion of a great life filled with luxuriant nature that materializes flesh and blood to woo the poet encroaches in the following lines:

What wond'rous 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 nectarene, and curious peach,
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,
Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass¹⁸

Marvell succeeds in stimulating our tactile sense of the fleshy ripeness of the apples and the sound of their falling; the poet willingly accepts the ensnarling of nature to become one with it, a spiritual transcendence of mind and spirit. This is indeed the Garden of Eden that Frank Kermode describes as "a paradise of perfect innocence"¹⁹. In the poem Marvell has successfully conjured various images such as the flight of the human soul that speaks of his great mastery of words and ideas:

My Soul into the boughs does glide:

¹⁶ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, p.280.

¹⁷ Donno (ed.), p.100.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.101.

¹⁹ Frank Kermode, "The Argument of Marvell's Garden". In John Carey (ed.) (1969), *op.cit.*, p.260.

There like a bird it sits, and sings²⁰

Coupling this is his love for trees rather than the love of a mistress that truly amazes us. Just as the garden is alluring to the poet, so is the wit of Marvell that draws us into his world of greenery without ceasing once to worry about time. It is the sight of nature in its entire splendor, that life is seen to be more alluring than death. Nature is not only seen to be just trees and plants but as a provider of solace, hope, and happiness that will enable it to pacify the anxieties of Men.

Marvell's poem "On a Drop of Dew" is another poem laced with more moral conceit than wit but nevertheless it depicts Marvell's ingenious play of the imagination. The poem follows the trail of a drop of dew that aspires to return to the skies above. The dew reflects the "little globe's extent" and gazes solemnly to the skies as it believes its rightful place is in the heavens. It feels uneasy from its separation from the "sphere" and of the impurities of the earth:

Scarce touching where it lies,
But gazing back upon the skies,
Shines with a mournful light,
Like its own tear,
Because so long divided from the sphere.
Restless it rolls and insecure,
Trembling lest it grow impure²¹

It is quite amazing that Marvell could go on for a long period of time conversing about a single drop of dew with all its simplicities.

Being a great metaphysical poet, Marvell would never discard his metaphysical wit and conceit to play along the lines of conventional poetry.

He develops the conceit of the dew by picturing it as magnifying the world, and then shedding tears of longing due to its displacement. The roundness of the dew is a reminder of its purity and like the soul; it has but one desire, to transcend to the skies above.

Similarly, Marvell shows his wit in describing the dew like the manna in the last stanza:

Such did the manna's sacred dew distill,
White and entire, though congealed and chill,
Congealed on earth: but does, dissolving, run

²⁰ Donno (ed.), p.101.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p.102.

Into the glories of th'almighty sun.²²

Thus, Marvell shows the similarities between the manna and the dew, his wit here is in connecting the evaporation of the dew to the returning manna, which in turn shall return to what George Def Lord calls “longed-for consummation with ‘the glories of th’almighty sun’”.²³

Marvell’s political poem “An Horation Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland”, written between May and July 1650, was considered by Barbara Everett as “one of the greatest political poem in English, a poem that stands like a landmark at the center of the age: grave, weighty, and unshakably judicious”.²⁴

The “Horation Ode” shows Marvell expressing sympathy for the king but thinks Cromwell would be a better ruler. Marvell’s interest is in the human drama that unfolds rather than the political aspect. As an individual, he supported the parliamentarians and, in the ode, his support was for Cromwell, but he does so without disregarding King Charles who appears to be a character the poet has shed more light on. In principle, Marvell supported the taking of arms in the revolution and his attitude, Bradbrook notes, is one of “tolerant approval rather than of enthusiasm”²⁵ :

The forward youth that would appear
Must now forsake his muses dear,

Nor in the shadows sing
His numbers languishing.
‘Tis time to leave the books in dust,
And oil the unused armour’s rust:
Removing from the wall
The corslet of the hall.²⁶

It was from Cromwell’s “private Gardens” that he (Cromwell) rose and with strength and “industrial valour”, to overthrow Charles from the throne and put in its place, a new government.

²² *Ibidem*, p.103.

²³ George de F. Lord. “From Contemplation to Action: Marvell’s Poetical Career.” In George de F. Lord (ed.) (1968). *Andrew Marvell: A Collection of Critical Essays*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, p.56.

²⁴ Barbara Everett, *op. cit.*, p.38.

²⁵ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, p.282.

²⁶ Donno (ed.), p.55.

To ruin the great work of time,
And cast the kingdoms old
Into another mould.²⁷

Marvell laces the ode with the various puns as well, seen in the lines:

Where, twining subtle fears with hope,
He wove a Net of such a scope,
That Charles himself might chase
To Cares brooks narrow case.²⁸

The meaning “subtile” could mean, in the old sense, “finely woven” and “case” could refer to “cage” or “plight”. The lines could well mean the capture of the king by Cromwell and here Marvell expresses some form of sympathy for Charles. He pictures the coming of the royalty to the executioner’s block as a sort of an act that well shows the king’s bravery in embracing the hour of his execution.

One could not help but to feel for the king, even at the hour of death, Charles showed nobility, grace and manner that even moved the soldiers rallying for his death with their “bloody hands”. The King did not lament his unfortunate condition or “called the gods with vulgar spite” but only looked at the executioner’s blade with ease. The king was a picture of poise and grace bowing his head gently, such grace Marvell notes is in contrast with the “forced power” of the new powers that be. Marvell feels that Charles died with pride and dignity and it is with this understanding on the part of Cromwell and Charles that Marvell wrote this poem with impersonality and detachment. Marvell sees the argument on both sides and perhaps it is this virtue that the poem is capable of drawing our emotions into the psyche of Cromwell and King Charles.

Frank W. Bradbrook puts it eloquently by saying that the ode “relates the grim realities of contemporary history to the timeless permanence of nature, which provides the stabilizing background to Marvell’s poetry as a whole. It is the subtle interplay between the actual and the ideal, or nature and art, which frequently lies behind Marvell’s wit and gives his poetry characteristic depth.”²⁹

Another of Marvell’s much-studied poem is “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn”. The poem has a similarity

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp.55-56.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p.56.

²⁹ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, pp.283-284.

with “An Horation Ode” in the sense that the “fawn” reminds us too of the beheaded Charles, an image that grace the opening lines of the poem.

The wanton troopers riding by
Have shot my fawn, and it will die.
Ungentle men! They cannot thrive-
To kill thee! Thou ne'er didst alive
They any harm: alas, nor could
Thy death yet do them any good.³⁰

The nymph mourns for the dying fawn as it lies wounded next to her in her “little wilderness”³¹ of roses and lilies. In the nymph’s little Eden, she speaks of her sorrow that echoes well in the garden far away from any disturbances. Many critics had suggested that the poem has religious overtones with the fawn as a symbol of Christ; the imminent death of the fawn represents the coming ravages of war and its detrimental devastation. Marvell portrays the nymph celebrating her love for the fawn from the Song of Solomon but laces it towards the end, with a witty paradox in the lines:

The tears do come
Sad, slowly dropping like a gum.
So weeps the wounded balsam: so
The holy frankincense doth flow.³²

In the poem “Balsam” is a balm intended for the healing of wounds and its texture is as smooth flowing as water, the only difference being the balm was oilier. Hence, one can see the paradox between the tears of the fawn being balsam-like, and the meditative qualities of the balm. Marvell also infuses an irony in the last 2 stanzas of the poem, depicting the nymph anticipating her coming death. Such irony reflects the web of complexity between the levels of sorrow and detachment of the nymph. Thus, the “ironical detachment is maintained, and the subtlety is in the deliberate ambiguity about the extent of the irony and detachment”³³. The poem reflects the diversity of “reserves of

³⁰ Donno (ed.), p.67.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p.69.

³² *Ibidem*, p.70.

³³ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, p.285.

meaning”³⁴, therefore the wit of it lies in the poem, according to Eliot “They are part of the ‘wit’ of the poem, a ‘wit’ involving, probably, a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience which are possible”. Thus, Marvell’s poem embodies wit in the sense that the meaning shifts and changes with the imaginative capacity of Marvell’s mind, from the paradox, irony and finally ending with the detachment of the nymph towards the fawn.

Another great masterpiece, “The Definition of Love” demonstrates Marvell’s handling of puns, double-meanings, conceit and paradoxes with the greatness and flexibility befitting a metaphysical poet. This poem is a true example of the strength of thought that Marvell unleashes, exhibiting his brilliance of conceiving ideas of the unthinkable. The poem deals with a pair of lovers that can never unite as fate has decreed so herself in the lines:

For fate with jealous eyes does see
Two perfect loves, nor lets them close:
Their union would her ruin be,
And her tyrannic power depose
And therefore her decrees of steel
Us as the distant Poles have placed,

(Though Love’s whole world on us doth wheel)
not by themselves to be embraced³⁵

Thus, the lovers are kept apart by the “iron wedges” of Fate. There is no hope that they could be together because hope is personified as a “feeble” creature that “vainly flapped its tinsel wing”. Such is the impossibility of the unification of the lovers that even Fate herself will be destroyed if they are united. Their souls are facing one another and are “fixed”, they are like poles being placed apart but yet they are considered whole. Even as “Love’s whole world” does circulate, they can never embrace, this is done so that their love will be perfect according to the wills of the heavens. Marvell ingeniously describes that in order to unite them both, the earth itself will have to be flattened by an iron bar, and they will still be separated. Their love is similar like “oblique” lines, though parallel and “infinite”, they can never be connected. It is with this great ability that Marvell merges puns,

³⁴ Karina Williamson, “Marvell’s The Nymph Complaining: A Reply”. In John Carey (ed.) (1969), *op.cit.*, p.287.

³⁵ Donno (ed.), p.50.

paradoxes, ambiguities and the imagination with his indwelling quality of wit to produce a great poem transcending the senses.

Similarly, his ability to conceive images like the oblique and parallel lines that symbolically represent the lovers are the powers of his observation that merge the objects of the external world with the internal world of Marvell's metaphysical world.

Marvell's next poem "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body" is another example of his witty play of language that Frank Bradbrook claims, leans towards the style of Alexander Pope in the context of its couplets and personifications³⁶. In the poem, which is in a form of a dialogue, the soul and the body take turns castigating one another for each other's misery. It begins with the soul who charges the body in a beautiful speech laced with one of the best-described conceits by Marvell:

O, who shall from this dungeon raise
A soul, enslaved so many ways,
With bolts of bones, that fettered stands
In feet, and manacled in hands.
Here blinded with an eye; and there
Deaf with the drumming of an ear,
A soul hong up, as' twere, in chains
Of nerves, and arteries, and veins,
Tortured, besides each other part,
In a vain head, and double heart?³⁷

Marvell describes brilliantly the bones, binding the entire body together, keeping it firmly in place. The soul sees itself like a slave that has been tied to the body, its hands are shackled and its feet "fettered" in chains. The soul blames the eyes and the ears for leading it astray into the depths of sin, and the last 4 lines is the beautiful conceit of the soul being hung up forcefully by the body and its net-like web of "nerves", "arteries" and "veins". The soul replies adamantly that it is bothered by the conscience of the "tyrannic soul" that "impales" the body with much moral scruples, qualms and principles. Such values that the soul embodies has harassed the body into restlessness. The soul laments being tied to the body and desires to be in the heavens. If the body were to be cured of any sickness then the soul is again

³⁶ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, p.275.

³⁷ Donno (ed.), p.103.

“shipwrecked” in the body. The concluding speech by the body specifies that the soul impose various rules on the body, including the consciousness of sin. By doing this, the soul has brought the downfall of the physical body:

What but a soul could have the wit
To build me up for sin so fit?
So architects do square and hew,
Green trees that in the forest grew.³⁸

The dialogue between the body and the soul has been put antithetically by Marvell to highlight the use of “paradox and exaggeration to create an effect verging on comedy”³⁹. The combination of the two of whom Eliot describes as “an alliance of levity and seriousness”⁴⁰ ultimately intensifies the seriousness of the poem and portrays the ingenuity of the wit of Marvell. The quality of wit is existent in the language of the poem from the various devices to the core of the poem that provides an organic unity and continuum in the flow of thought despite the antithetical ideas of the body and soul.

In conclusion, one could not deny the quality of wit in Marvell’s poetry to be the essence that never could be separated from him. As a metaphysical poet in 17th century England, it is his foresight that demands such quality and coupled with those of conceit, irony, paradox, pun and proportioned lyrics, Marvell has presented to us the wonders of the infinite boundaries of imagination. With such strength of thought and ingenuity, Marvell’s portrayal of life and the relativeness of things (A. J. Smith) seem to be richer and even if he presents the contradictions that follow, it only blends in with the unities of his mastery. And finally in the words of Eliot on the wit of Marvell:

The quality, which Marvell had, this modest and certainly impersonal virtue-whether we call it wit or reason, or even urbanity-we have patently failed to define. By whatever name we call it, and however we define that name, it is something precious and needed and apparently extinct; it is what should preserve the reputation of Marvell.⁴¹

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p.104.

³⁹ Frank W. Bradbrook, *op. cit.*, p.275.

⁴⁰ T.S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.57.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p.58.

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