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## **“Introduction: Theory, Practice, and Critical Agency in Andrew Marvell’s Poetry**

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## Essay

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ESSAY

# Introduction: Theory, Practice, and Critical Agency in Andrew Marvell's Poetry

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An introduction for the special issue on theoretical approaches to Andrew Marvell.

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The appearance of new editions and biographical materials have made the past fifteen years particularly productive for the study of Andrew Marvell from historicist and political perspectives. The following special issue, in turn, offers a reminder of the contributions that theoretical approaches can make to Marvell studies. As we approach the third decade of this century, 'theory' has ceased to mean a particular project of continental, deconstructive, postmodern analysis. Rather, the theoretical frameworks brought to bear in these essays connect responsible, richly contextualized study of the past to the concerns of the present. Philip Sidney advocates precisely this method in *The Defence of Poesy*: in the absence of philosophy, he observes, 'the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied ... to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine'.<sup>1</sup> So too would purely historical approaches to early modern literature become mere antiquarianism in the absence of theory, which

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 221.

binds them not only to the broader patterns of their own age, but also to more recent developments in politics, society, and culture.

Sidney, of course, is also keen to remind us that philosophy, on its own, is remarkably sterile, requiring the *energeia* of verse truly to teach anyone anything.<sup>2</sup> The essays in this special issue thus exhibit not just another salvo in a long simmering war over method in literary study, one extending back to Sidney and beyond, but also an invitation to reconsider our sometimes narrow understanding of what 'theory' means. Indeed, what's most striking about these essays may well be how they put into question the theory-praxis distinction, including the one that haunted our call for papers. 'Theory' has never been mere Frenchified abstraction threatening the hard-nosed truth of historical research and the social uplift of aesthetic appreciation. It's always been an explanation of how our world works, how the praxis we think is transparent isn't.

Such questioning is in keeping with Marvell's own complex negotiation of the line between thinking and acting. As a member of parliament, prolific letter writer, pamphleteer, and satirist, Marvell commits his literary talents to concrete action. In the remarkable and often uncirculated lyrics, however, he is also, like Milton, a poet who contributes to the demarcation of distinct spheres: political and aesthetic, public and private, active and reflective. Marvell is not a writer who turns from praxis to theory or vice versa, but one whose writings demand that we see a more complex relationship between the two than that of manifestation, actualization, or, conversely, abstract commentary. His descriptions of Archibald Douglas's death are just one example of this phenomenon. Read in the context of 'The Last Instructions to a Painter' and 'The Loyal Scot', the figure of Douglas is unquestionably topical and politically motivated, yet Marvell's description of him reads as if it were drawn from lyrics like 'Upon Appleton House' or, better yet, 'The Unfortunate Lover'. A current event becomes an elaborate conceit, the Second Anglo-Dutch War an unlikely locus for reflecting on youth, purity, and desire. It is perhaps this propensity to imagine the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 246.

relationship between theory and praxis as something other than a progress, one way or the other, that made Marvell flexible enough to shift repeatedly between political regimes.

Theory helps us draw out those elements of early modern texts that were least easily articulated in their own day: the inchoate sexual categories of the writer personally and the culture more broadly; the ecological intuitions of a highly anthropocentric age; the endless making-do of practical politics; the nuances of belief and skepticism. In both providing and questioning categories, theory not only supplements historicism, but encourages us to delve into the subtle half-articulations of the figurative, the allusive, and the merely suggestive: theory leads back to the heart of literature itself. Particularly in a figure so subtle, so reserved, so contradictory as Marvell, theory has a crucial role to play in our probing of his poems and prose. Yet theory also points us toward the importance of Marvell's writings beyond the framework of his life and times. He's an author of theoretical and historical importance for the modern age because he's an enemy of elite glibness about reason's inevitable triumph, as well as a skeptic in matters of conviction. That is, what an earlier criticism labeled 'elusiveness' is precisely what makes him so theoretically important now.<sup>3</sup> Marvell shows how earnest conviction, commitment, and belief are not the prelude to and ground of all worthwhile action: the theory-practice distinction is much more complicated and interesting than that.

The essays in this issue each tackle a conceptual problem with immediate social purchase: recognizing vulnerability as a structure of being and not a product of power; the overlooked connection between objectification and transcendence; ecological and environmental preservation as a fracturing of individual agency and as their own brand of class warfare. Despite their different foci, these essays all respond to the theoretical present, one shaped by a pervasive questioning of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Augustine Birrell, *Andrew Marvell* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 2: 'A more elusive, non-recorded character is hardly to be found'. For a recent modification of this claim that still acknowledges Marvell's complex notions of political commitment and poetic distinction, see Nigel Smith, *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 8–10.

utility of high-theory models, especially those working through the logic of critique, immanent or otherwise.<sup>4</sup> Each essay also uses theory to approach the question that is, perhaps, at the center of Marvell's poetry and our continuing biographical interest in him: how are we to conceptualize the individual (Marvell himself and humans more broadly), and how are we to understand the individual's relationship with the broader social and material world? These essays probe the nuances of Marvell's various approaches to these questions—a fitting use of theory to re-read the work of a poet known, not least, for being personally unknowable. In doing so, they make Marvell a site for testing the limits of agency and critique, key concepts in the study of both early modern poetry and political prose.

Jason Kerr's 'Vulnerable Life in Marvell's Mower Poems' shows how vulnerability is not just an effect of power, a political category, but an inescapable ontological condition. As such, vulnerability can't be assuaged by violent domination, on the one hand, or critical consciousness-raising, on the other, but it can lead to genuinely mutual relationships. That means that a poem like 'The Garden' does away with the adolescent fantasy of an invulnerable, fortress-like power that undergirds prelapsarian nostalgia. The recognition of that fundamental fact allows Marvell's verse to reveal vulnerability's potential to foster joy, care, and shared fruition that resist both masculine aggression and commodification.

John Garrison exposes the limitations of critique's standard objections to objectification and shows how Marvell struggles to free the individual human from narrow forms of agency and identity. Drawing on the new materialism and queer theory, 'Eros and Objecthood in "Upon Appleton House"' argues for the permeability of the boundary between person and thing and argues for Marvell's desire to escape both the teleological futurity of heterosexual reproduction and the constraints of all interpersonal relationships by reimagining his own self as a material object. Through these critical lenses, Garrison rethinks key elements of the poem like the

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<sup>4</sup> For an examination of the limitations of critique as an intellectual style, see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 182–86.

nunnery, the motif of glass, and bondage to present an account of retreat, passivity, and pleasure that transcend the human and the individual.

Brendan Prawdzik's account of greenwashing in some eco-criticism hints at the ways in which critique always carries its own untouchable, *bien-pensant* truths. His essay, 'Greenwashing Marvell', like Garrison's, takes issue with the teleological cast of modern criticism, in this case eco-criticism's complicity with a capitalist notion of progress. Prawdzik locates this tendency even in modern editorial decisions. For example, the modern edition of John Evelyn's *Fumifugium* presents only its criticism of urban pollution, not its much less palatable (from a modern perspective) solutions, including what we'd probably label today a gentrifying class war. Prawdzik sees Marvell as a poet keenly aware both of the uncertainty—even the unlikeliness—of progress and of the way in which we all too easily substitute human conceptions of natural beauty for the speechlessness of nature itself. What results in Marvell is an individual subjectivity that uncomfortably straddles the divide between materiality and aesthetics, a subjectivity that is simultaneously alienated from and complicit in the ecological landscape. This essay concludes by suggesting, provocatively, that we should imagine nature as a sense of transition, not as a felt or projected stability, and that this sentiment is most clearly present in Marvell's georgic and country-house poems.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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