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REVIEWS

Nicholas Murray, *World Enough and Time: The Life of Andrew Marvell* (London: Little, Brown 1999) 304 pp.

It is easy in reading the poetry of Andrew Marvell to regard the man himself as something of a weirdo, a talented but odd poet who liked lying about in the grass and peeping at little girls in prospects of flowers. Like his slightly elder contemporary, Robert Herrick, Marvell dazzles with his technical skill but then leaves his reader feeling slightly embarrassed, not knowing quite what to make of his depictions of an unconventional sexuality, whether real or imagined.

It is thus useful to be reminded that many of the poets we read—however eccentric they appear in their creative work—show great shrewdness in making a name for themselves in their public lives. The publishing history of Marvell's poetry may at first seem to belie this statement, as he apparently took little care in preserving the lyrics that were gathered up posthumously by his housekeeper, but we should remember that Marvell died unexpectedly, within a week's time of coming down with a fever, and couldn't put his poems in order as he had his other published material.

This negligence concerning the lyric poetry was, after all, something of an anomaly in Marvell's life. More typically he made careful, successful decisions in his career as politician and seventeenth-century business consultant. In fact, the poetry survived in large part because of his renown as a politician; in the two centuries following his death most readers would have known the lyric poems only as a curious side note in the life of a great Whig patriot. For the last twenty years of his life, until he died at the age of fifty-seven in 1678, Marvell held major positions of responsibility in both the Interregnum and Restoration governments, serving as MP from Hull, his hometown, and advising the Trinity House Corporations, or port authorities, of both Hull and Deptford. In these capacities as politician and adviser to two powerful commercial organizations, Marvell showed uncommon diligence, attending thinly populated sessions at the beginning and end of the Parliamentary season and sending off lengthy summaries to his constituents in Hull. Unlike many of his well-heeled peers, who disdained to collect the modest daily sum of 6s 8d typically allowed an MP, Marvell cashed his paychecks; his public service was his livelihood, and he belonged to what Christopher Hill has identified as a new class of men who rose through the ranks of the modern bureaucratic state that emerged during the Restoration.

Nicholas Murray's new biography of Marvell goes a long way in showing how this practical side of the poet manifested itself on a year-by-year basis. Murray selects many of the most interesting passages from the letters (which in their bureaucratic and mercantile concerns will discourage most readers) and skillfully integrates them into the historic context of the 1660s and 1670s. Much of this task, one must admit, was completed long ago by Pierre Legouis in his 1928 biography of Marvell, in French; many of the details of this work did not survive the later abridged translation of it, though, so Murray performs a valuable service in laying out much of this ground for the English reader.

Inevitably, a biography of Marvell will have more to say about the later years of the poet since so many more documents exist for this period. The work

of New Historicist scholars in the last twenty years, however, has illuminated a good deal of Marvell's earlier writing as well, especially the great poetry of the 1650s. Critics such as Michael Wilding, Blair Worden, and David Norbrook have connected Marvell's attitude toward the Levellers in *Upon Appleton House*, for instance, to the pamphlet literature of the Civil Wars, and Steven Zwicker and Paul Hammond have argued provocatively how the character assassination Marvell experienced as a politician in the 1670s may affect our understanding of the persona of the pastoral poems. Curiously, Murray ignores this recent scholarship, quoting mostly sources from the 1970s and earlier. His preference seems to be for scholarly work of the New Critical variety (J. B. Leishman's *The Art of Marvell's Poetry* [1966] comes up for special praise), and the book concludes with homage paid to the spell of Marvell's poetic voice. Yet Murray has little to say about Marvell's poetics (indeed, he devotes only some thirty pages to the lyric poems), and, in his emphasis on the political and historical background to Marvell's life, could have profited from recent New Historicist research. The oddness, indeed, the perversity of the verse will probably never square completely with the worldliness of the life, but more clues have been unearthed than Murray acknowledges.

In one of the earliest twentieth-century biographies of Marvell, Vita Sackville-West rather held it against the poet that he succeeded so well in his political career. His "genuine but shallow vein of inspiration," she thought, explained why he allowed his muse to languish as he hurried off to the halls of Westminster or the counting houses of Hull. This romantic notion of what makes (or unmakes) a poet continues to lurk behind most discussions of the prosaic phase of Marvell's life. Although Nicholas Murray has not permanently disabled it, the material of his biography does hint that the drives of the poet and the politician aren't so very different, that Marvell's careerist spirit created rather than suppressed his strange tales of gardens, mowers, and young mistresses.

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