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## Review of Matthew C. Augustine, *Andrew Marvell: A Literary Life*

Gregory Chaplin, Bridgewater State University, US, [gchaplin@bridgew.edu](mailto:gchaplin@bridgew.edu)



**Matthew C. Augustine. *Andrew Marvell: A Literary Life*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Pp. xvi + 234; Softcover \$29.99**

At first glance, Matthew Augustine seems to have given us a streamlined biography of Andrew Marvell, one designed to appeal to general readers and undergraduates who might be deterred by the extensive and wide-ranging historical detail of Nigel Smith's *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon* (2010). Augustine views the ongoing renaissance in Marvell studies as having shifted so much attention to the second half of Marvell's career, to the less immediately accessible "civil preoccupations of panegyric, satire, and animadversion," that it has obscured "the domains of lyric invention and lyric possibility" that have traditionally drawn readers to the poet (1). He counters this trend by dedicating the bulk of *Andrew Marvell: A Literary Life* to the remarkable but slim body of poetry that Marvell wrote between 1646 and 1659.

But how does one write a "literary life" of a shadowy figure whose most famous works revel in irony and ambiguity? Augustine makes each chapter a gateway into a period of Marvell's life, breaking them variously into multiple subsections focusing on biographical narrative, historical context, or literary interpretation. In chapters two and three, the basic biographical details and negligible literary production of Marvell's early years give the biographer little with which to work. Augustine wisely uses this problem as an opportunity to provide background on the grammar-school education that Marvell would have received and on the humanist practice of *imitatio* that is so central to his poetry, highlighting the possibilities for "wayward variety, self-reflexive play, [and] creative subversion" that it offered (21). He also gives us an overview of the university education that Marvell would have received at Trinity College, Cambridge, employing its emphasis on disputations as a segue into a surprisingly detailed examination of his pastoral and philosophical dialogues. For readers looking for narrative momentum, these opening chapters will seem like a sluggish start, but they set out valuable frameworks for understanding Marvell's later poems.

Augustine soon hits his stride and maintains it throughout the rest of his study. The interplay among biographical, historical, and literary materials becomes more fluid and compelling, and the middle chapters consist mainly of detailed, biographically informed readings of key poems. In chapter four, Augustine examines "Flecknoe, an English Priest at Rome" as a product of Marvell's continental tour, noting how the poet "must have glimpsed a possible future" for himself in the sordid life of Flecknoe (62). Focusing on the royalist poems that Marvell wrote upon his return, he suggests that the Villiers elegy provides "the beginnings of a figural map of Marvellian sexuality" (70). The chapter concludes by foregrounding the interpretive challenges of "The Unfortunate Lover" and "The Nymph Complaining." Chapter five opens by juxtaposing

“An Horatian Ode” with “Tom May’s Death” to highlight the complexities of Marvell’s political realignment and then pivots to an engaging twenty-page reading of “Upon Appleton House” as an example of “queer form” (107). Chapter six lingers on the summer of 1652 long enough to look at the Mower poems as “a screen for sexual and psychological alienation” (132) before moving forward to address Marvell’s service to Cromwell and the poems associated with it: “Bermudas,” “The First Anniversary of the Government under His Highness the Lord Protector,” and “A Poem upon the Death of His Late Highness the Lord Protector.” These are agile and engaging readings. Augustine attends to both classical backgrounds and seventeenth-century literary contexts; he demonstrates his extensive knowledge of Marvell criticism and uses it judiciously; and he displays theoretical sophistication without letting it cloud his arguments.

Although Augustine eschews an equally detailed treatment of Marvell’s later works, his final chapters offer an efficient overview of the turbulent political world that the poet negotiated after the Restoration and features valuable subsections that contextualize and discuss “The Last Instructions to a Painter” (1667) and *The Rehearsal Transpros’d* (1672), the works from this period that readers are most likely to study. These prudent pedagogical choices underscore the ultimate purpose of this volume: it is an introduction to Marvell that subordinates biography to the goal of teaching new readers how to approach his poetry. As such, it is an ideal ancillary text for an undergraduate seminar on Marvell or a graduate course in which he figures prominently. Teachers and scholars new to Marvell will find this book an excellent place to start. Augustine is writing for scholarly peers as much as he is for students, if not more so.

*Andrew Marvell: A Literary Life* does not come together like a traditional literary biography, it seems, because Augustine does not want it to. He takes aim at the habit of reading Marvell through the lens of “his posthumous reputation as a Whig hero and incorruptible patriot” (187), arguing that it threatens to oversimplify the complexities of his life and verse. But Augustine pushes this legitimate concern too far when he encourages us to imagine Marvell’s career “without the *Account of the Growth of Popery*” or suggests that the study of his prose endangers the appreciation of his poetry (“Recognition of Marvell as a prose writer of great style and substance was [...] essential and overdue, but this should in no way inhibit our continued investment in the lyric inheritance” [220])—as if we need to wall off the lyric Marvell from his own later works to protect him from himself or secure our own interpretive “delight” (3). This anxiety seems misplaced. The fact that this habitually secretive man felt compelled to endanger his privacy by writing pamphlets that “resisted the forcing of conscience, cast light on court corruption, and sounded the alarm against tyranny and popery” makes his earlier poetry more urgent and fascinating, not less (187). In practice, Augustine

has no difficulty using Marvell's prose to illuminate his poetry or the reverse, such as when he employs "The Unfortunate Lover" to contend that *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* "is a work animated [...] by forces and sympathies that go beyond matters of conscience or politics, brandishing wounds even as it plays at sharp with cruel guardians and would-be tyrants" (219). It is only when he feels the need to justify his devotion to Marvell's poetry by reaching for a polemical stance that he stumbles.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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