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Andrew Marvell's "Bermudas," Paradisal Places, and the Protestant Critique of Sacred Space

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In this article I look at Andrew Marvell's "Bermudas" (1653–54), a work that continues to puzzle us. The poem describes an idyllic paradisaical landscape, identified with the tropical Bermudas but which the reader knows belongs only to a cartography of the imagination. In what sense are we supposed to believe in this patently fictional paradise, and what is the relationship between the Bermudas of Marvell's fiction and the islands of history?

Here I suggest that an answer to these questions lies in Protestant attitudes toward space and the sacred. The Reformation challenged the idea that particular spaces contained any intrinsic holiness—the shrines of Catholicism, the churches of the Laudian era, and the temples of the pagans were all cited as idolatrous confusions of the holy with special places. Reading "Bermudas" against the backdrop of such critiques allows for an alternative perspective on its elusive symbolism. In Marvell's time, the Protestant criticism of sacred spaces extended to the sacralization of localities by the godly, who in some cases believed that places (such as colonies in the New World) were marked out by providential favor. I suggest that in "Bermudas" Marvell extends the critique of special places to the providentialism of the godly mariners in his poem.



I

In *Religio Medici* (1642), Thomas Browne asks whether a “resolved conscience may not adore her Creator any where, especially in places devoted to his service.”¹ Browne’s question is not merely rhetorical, although it is phrased somewhat quizzically. Browne subscribes to the Protestant principle that all places are equally sacred, as opposed to the Catholic and Laudian understanding that places of worship should be ritually consecrated for the proper worship of God. Characteristically, though, this statement of principle is followed by a qualification as Browne allows that there may be benefits to worshipping in places that are specially devoted to God’s service, if these promote inward piety. The author of *Religio Medici* reflects on some of the contrasting positions held by his contemporaries on space and the sacred, from a non-polemical stance. For many Protestants, the church was emphatically “not a building but the congregation of the elect,” in the words of Alexandra Walsham.² By contrast the Catholic and Laudian practice of consecration supposed that some locations were holier than others—a position that Browne describes elsewhere as the “circumscription of [God’s] ubiquity,” a false assimilation of the author of Creation with parts of the material world.³ This erroneous belief led Christians to identify the divine with physical sites and material objects, including ritually consecrated buildings, religious art, relics, and places of pilgrimage. For all that, Browne does not mock such superstitions or attack them polemically. Inclined to recognize the weakness of the imagination in confrontation with the divine, he also writes that he cannot laugh at the “fruitlesse journeys of pilgrims.”⁴

Here I am interested in the notion of sacred space as a context for Andrew Marvell’s “Bermudas” (1653–54).⁵ “Bermudas” presents us with a familiar Marvellian theme in the depiction of a real or imagined paradise, this time in the setting of the New World. Marvell depicts a group of Puritans who find refuge from religious persecution in the Bermudan islands, where they can practice true religion without the obstruction of the Anglican church. Somewhat notoriously though, this poem has given rise to widely differing evaluations. For some readers, “Bermudas” manifests the author’s

¹ Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Kevin Killeen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

² Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of Landscape: Religion, Identity & Memory in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 90.

³ Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Kevin Killeen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 410. In context, this phrase refers to images of God.

⁴ Browne, *Religio Medici*, 7.

⁵ On the dating, autobiographical background, and sources of the poem, see Nigel Smith, ed., *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (New York: Longman, 2007), 54–6. All references to Marvell’s poems are to this edition. Line numbers will appear in parentheses.

sympathy with the motives of Puritan emigration to the New World in the 1630s. For others, Marvell wants us to question these Puritans' conviction that they have found an authentic paradise in the New World, under the sign of providential favor. In the second case the poem can be read as a critique of Puritan faith in providential guidance and the legibility of the divine will by the elect.⁶

My reading is closer to the second, skeptical line of argument, although I also want to consider how the ironies of the poem might be understood from within a religious context, as motivated by religious concerns. In what follows I consider how "Bermudas" can be read against the background of conflicts within Protestantism in the 1640s and 1650s over the role of the invisible as opposed to the visible church and the Puritan stress on inner faith as opposed to the church building as a place of dedicated worship. There are different parts to this argument, but the question I want to ask is whether the islands of Marvell's poem are implicitly subject to the critique of exceptional places in Protestant theology. Making use of the work of Walsham, Peter Lake, and other historians on Protestant attitudes to space, I look again at the motif of the sanctified retreat in "Bermudas" and other works of Marvell in which "paradisal" nature is taken as a refuge from the complexities of the fallen world. I begin with a discussion of how the perception of space is problematized in "Bermudas" and some of the points of critical contention. In the second part of this article, I consider how studies of space and the sacred can be helpful in evaluating some of these differences of opinion, as well as in making connections between the historical setting of the poem in the 1630s and the times of its composition in the mid-1650s.

II

"Bermudas" presents us with a paradisal space that we have difficulty locating, either generically or geographically. The poem describes an idyllic landscape identified with the Bermudan islands, but which the reader knows belongs to a cartography of the imagination. "Bermudas" combines beauty with a lingering sense of unreality in its depiction of tropical islands blessed by a natural abundance that verges on the supernatural. Whatever we think we know of these mysterious islands is conveyed by the song of the mariners which makes up thirty-two of the forty lines in the poem. Their song offers us a sort of floating vision in which wholesome figs press themselves into the mariners' mouths and lush melons drop at their feet (21–2). Despite the note of sensuality, the Puritans interpret the symbolic landscape as a sign of divine favor for their enterprise. They give thanks to a God who has rescued them from both physical

⁶ For an example of this position, see Tay Fizdale, "Irony in Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" *ELH* 42, no. 2 (1975): 203–13.

and spiritual dangers: “He lands us on a grassy stage; / Safe from the storms, and prelates’ rage” (11–12). This is a place where God intervenes to protect the faithful: “Where He the huge sea-monsters wracks, / That lift the deep upon their backs” (9–10). For the authors of the song, the benevolence of the Creator manifests itself directly in the natural world, the islands themselves being a kind of natural temple (32). The poem presents us with a striking mixture of the religious and the sensual, of scriptural and human metaphor (like the figure of the sea-monster, an imaginative fusion of the biblical Leviathan and prosaic beached whales, hence a poeticization of scripture).

The pious perspective of the mariners is one that the reader cannot easily share, if only because the fantastic spaces that they describe are only available to us in the format of fiction. For the reader of Marvell’s poem, these enchanted islands belong to the domain of poetic invention rather than history or geography; they are the symbol of a reality that exists apart from the world that we inhabit. One indication that Marvell’s “Bermudas” are not to be mistaken for those of our world is that the mariners imagine themselves as the first arrivals, assuming that the islands were previously uninhabited. This signals an obvious departure from the historical record since, by the 1630s when the poem is set (the persecuting “prelate” of line 12 refers to the church hierarchy under Archbishop Laud), the Bermudas were a well-established English colony. The poem thus sets up a basic tension between the piety of the mariners and our perception of literary codes and conventions, the workings of metaphor and hyperbole in their song of praise. For the reader, these wondrous islands only exist within the confines of poetic fiction; for us, this is a place that exists exclusively within the “second world” of the human imagination.⁷

This leaves us with a puzzling question: what kind of symbolic credibility can we grant this fictional paradise? For some commentators, “Bermudas” can be understood as a tribute to Puritan religious idealism. For Nigel Smith, such a reading is supported by Marvell’s personal connections at the time of the poem’s composition.⁸

⁷ The most sustained treatment of Marvell’s poetry as world-building is Harry Berger, Jr., *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 9–10, 251–323. R.I.V. Hodge describes “Bermudas” as “a fantasy,” and similarly R.V. Young speaks of Marvell as “mythologizing” the Bermudas, but they do not tell us to what end Marvell mythologizes the islands. See R.I.V. Hodge, *Foreshortened Time: Andrew Marvell and Seventeenth Century Revolutions* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1978), 98; R.V. Young, “Andrew Marvell and The Devotional Tradition,” *Renascence* 38, no. 4 (1986): 222. For Christine Rees, “Bermudas” portrays the world of the senses “sanctified by the imagination,” but for Puritans it is God rather than the imagination that sanctifies things. See Christine Rees, *The Judgement of Marvell* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989), 52. On islands as autonomous realms of fiction in early modern writing, see Roland Greene, “Island Logic,” in *The Tempest and Its Travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (London: Reaktion, 2000), 138–45.

⁸ Nigel Smith, *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 113–14; and Smith, ed., *Poems*, 54–6.

“Bermudas” may have been written as a compliment to Marvell’s acquaintance, the preacher John Oxenbridge, who had lived in the colony. Oxenbridge’s evangelistic efforts may be recalled by the parallel zeal of Marvell’s fictional Puritans who anticipate spreading the good news to other shores of the Americas (33–36). In this reading, the islands are a metaphor of spiritual felicity, a metaphor that is deliberately abstracted from the troubles—religious and otherwise—of the small English colony of the first half of the 1600s. The ambivalence of “Bermudas” is not denied in this interpretation, but the poem is read in terms of the writer’s biography and his support of the Cromwellian church settlement of the 1650s. Along similar lines, Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker write that “The poem, with its providentialist spirituality and geographic specificity, is obviously a tribute to the conscience and career of his godly host,” referring to Oxenbridge.⁹

Thus “Bermudas” can be interpreted as a tribute to the religion of others, if not as the expression of Marvell’s own religious persuasions. The reading of “Bermudas” as an essentially sympathetic portrait of Puritan religiosity has come to prevail in recent years, although different lines of argument are involved.¹⁰ Among recent commentaries, those of Jonathan Sawday and David Norbrook have highlighted the significant place of the Bermudas in projects of evangelization in the 1640s and 1650s.¹¹ Both authors situate the colony in relation to religious and intellectual ferment in England and the organization of Protestant missionary activity. As Sawday points out, the spreading of the gospel in the tropics was the subject of ongoing discussion and pamphlet wars during the Civil Wars and into the Commonwealth period. For Sawday, these debates over the “true religion” that was to be promoted in the Caribbean provide the “animating context” of Marvell’s poem.¹² This approach has the virtue of placing the apparently “remote” (1) islands of Marvell’s poem into contact with debates in the public sphere in England, debates that continued into the mid-1650s when Marvell is thought to have written it.¹³ The research of Sawday, Norbrook, and others allows us to read the poem

⁹ Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 34.

¹⁰ One influential contribution is that of Annabel Patterson, who sees “Bermudas” as Marvell’s overwriting of parts of his source material, converting secular pagan paradises into psalmic poetry. See Annabel Patterson, “*Bermudas and The Coronet: Marvell’s Protestant Poetics*,” *ELH* 44, no. 3 (1977): 478–99.

¹¹ Jonathan Sawday, “Marvell’s ‘Bermudas’ and the History of the Eleutherian Republic,” *English Literary Renaissance* 48, no. 1 (2018): 60–97; David Norbrook, “‘A Fleet of Worlds’: Marvell, Globalisation, and Slavery,” in *Imagining Andrew Marvell at 400*, ed. Matthew C. Augustine, Giulio J. Pertile, and Steven N. Zwicker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 89–108.

¹² Sawday, “Marvell’s ‘Bermudas,’” 88. Sawday argues that the Eleutherian colonial project (which involved Independents migrating from the Bermudas to the Bahamas) provides the “animating context” of the poem. The disastrous outcome of the attempted Bahaman settlement, however, hardly matches the idyllic scene of the mariners’ song in “Bermudas” and so the basic discrepancy between the idealism of the poem and the history of the colonies remains.

¹³ See *ibid.*, 96. As part of his broader argument on the links between the situation of the Independents in the Bermudan

as an expression of Marvell's sympathy with the position of Independents such as Oxenbridge and their evangelical mission in the New World.¹⁴ Still, recent scholarship on the poem's historical background does not necessarily resolve the strange and layered allusivity of "Bermudas." Even if we are in the position of saying that the poem's historical references are clear, its language and imagery—the way the poem as poem constructs an evangelical utopia—remain opaque.¹⁵

Other critics have insisted on the blatant fabulism of Marvell's poem. For Rosalie Colie, the magical islands can only exist as "a state of mind," not a terrestrial destination.¹⁶ For Robert Cummings, the mariners' piety is not in doubt but what is questionable is "the strain of ideality, refined toward impossibility, which is supposed to sustain the poem."¹⁷ There is no doubt that Marvell departs from the historical record in depicting the islands as a kind of Puritan sanctuary; the question is how this knowledge contributes to our interpretation of the poem.¹⁸ As Sawday remarks, "The Bermudas were not an insular utopia, of the kind that Marvell's singing rowers seem to evoke."¹⁹ The islands were beset by the same religious divisions that affected the homeland in the 1640s, and this prompted a number of Independents to immigrate once more in search of other New World territories where they could enjoy freedom of worship.²⁰ There is a pointed divergence between the islands of Marvell's description and the colony of history. Somewhere along the pilgrims' way there is a discrepancy, perhaps because it is in the nature of symbols to be discrepant from the things they stand for. Critics largely agree that Marvell has crafted a symbol of religious significance, but the strange

and Bahaman colonies, Sawday suggests an earlier date than the one generally accepted.

¹⁴ Critics use the generic terms "Puritan" or "the godly" for Marvell's mariners. I have followed this usage here for convenience, although this passes over the obvious distinction between Presbyterians and those who were open to greater religious toleration, such as Oxenbridge. I refer to religious toleration as a context for "Bermudas" in the conclusion of this article.

¹⁵ For critiques of and reservations about the "ironic" interpretations of Marvell's island paradise, see Timothy Raylor, "The Instability of Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" *Andrew Marvell Newsletter* 6, no. 2 (2014): 3; Sawday, "Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" 97; and Norbrook, "A Fleet of Worlds," 93, 95, 98. Matters aren't helped by the vagueness of the term "irony," but this article is written on the premise that the opposition between "religious" or "Puritan" readings and those that highlight "literary" or "secular" ironies is potentially unhelpful. Marvell's poetry has been persuasively discussed as a response to the secularizing tendencies that developed out of conflicts within mid-century Protestantism. See Young, "Andrew Marvell," 204–27; Clinton Allen Brand, "'Upon Appleton House' and the Decomposition of Protestant Historiography," *English Literary Renaissance* 31, no. 3 (2001): 477–510.

¹⁶ Rosalie L. Colie, "Marvell's 'Bermudas' and the Puritan Paradise," *Renaissance News* 10, no. 2 (1957): 79.

¹⁷ R.M. Cummings, "The Difficulty of Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" *Modern Philology* 67, no. 4 (1970): 331.

¹⁸ Marvell writes of the "troubled island of Bermuda" in his epitaph on Jane Oxenbridge, the wife of the minister. Smith, ed., *Poems*, 195 (the epitaph is dated to 1658). The reference is passing and oblique, but the discrepancy with the paradisaical scene of "Bermudas" is notable.

¹⁹ Sawday, "Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69–72.

ability of this poem to lend itself to alternative readings prevents us from locating its meaning. We cannot even be sure that the godly mariners ever arrived at the place that they describe in such glowing terms. Perhaps their arrival on the “grassy stage” is only an imaginary forecast, or a “mythopoetic landfall” as David Ormerod writes, and not the description of a past event.²¹

A Puritan paradise, or a utopia that exists “nowhere” in this world? The puzzles begin with the introductory quatrain. The poem opens with an unusual act of scene-setting:

Where the remote Bermudas ride
 In th’ocean’s bosom unespied,
 From a small boat, that rowed along,
 The list’ning winds received this song. (1–4)

The affirmative “Where” and the name of the islands make us think of a specific locale, but this impression is countered by the vastness and indeterminacy of the “ocean’s bosom.” The islands are compared to ships that ride the ocean, as if they were not bound to the stability of geography—the language of metaphor allows them to float on the oceans like the boat of the mariners. Further, the location of the mariners in the boat cannot be identical to the “where” of the islands, so we are left to guess the proximity of the boat to its destination. The opening quatrain withholds desired information from the reader, as Barbara Everett comments: “If the Bermudas are *remote* we are not near them; if they or the ocean’s bosom are *unespied* we do not see them; if the *listning Winds receive* the song we do not hear it; if there are individual persons in the boat we are not told of them.”²²

We can try to locate the islands according to the generic and other internal cues that Marvell provides. These include the scriptural idiom of the mariners. The journey across the waters of the Atlantic is described in language that recalls the passage of the Hebrews through the wilderness to the Promised Land:

‘What should we do but sing his praise
 That led us through the wat’ry maze,
 Unto an isle so long unknown,
 And yet far kinder than our own? [’] (5–8)

²¹ David Ormerod, “Type, Icon and Number in Marvell’s *Bermudas*,” *Parergon* 9, no. 2 (1991): 109. The “grassy stage” is one of Marvell’s departures from his known sources, since they describe the approaches of the Bermudas as rocky and uninviting. See the relevant line note in Smith, ed., *Poems*, 58.

²² Barbara Everett, “The Shooting of the Bears: Poetry and Politics in Andrew Marvell,” in *Andrew Marvell: Essays on the Tercentenary of His Death*, ed. R. L. Brett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 100.

Here is a version of the Puritan “errand into the wilderness,” and the joyful song of praise the mariners offer up is an expression of their “cosmic optimism.”²³ These Puritans interpret their voyage to the New World typologically, in terms of correspondences with events in the Old Testament. The prominent references are to the books of Genesis (the paradisaical garden), Exodus and Numbers (the escape of the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt and their journey to the promised land), and the Psalms, which provide the model for the song of praise and thanksgiving.

We expect the generic traits of the poem to orientate us, but Marvell provides us with different cues. Alongside the Christian schema of the poem, we recognize several sources from classical antiquity. These include the legend of the “fortunate isles,” the islands of the blessed that were thought to exist far in the Atlantic, a place of symbolic repose after the trials of this world. Horace and Pliny the Elder are among the likely sources for the myth of the fortunate isles, adapted in “Bermudas” into Marvell’s religious retreat.²⁴ Another classical source is the legend of the golden age, the pre-historical time when humankind enjoyed nature as a state of plenty and the burden of labor was unknown. This legend informs Marvell’s depiction of the natural, or supernatural, bounty of the islands. The lines “He gave us this eternal spring / Which here enamels ev’rything” (13–14) evoke themes familiar from Virgil and Ovid. The golden age was a time when, in the words of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,

The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful. [...] Then spring was everlasting, and gentle zephyrs with warm breath played with the flowers that sprang unplanted. Anon the earth, untilled, brought forth her stores of grain, and the fields, though unfallowed, grew white with the heavy, bearded wheat.²⁵

The trope of natural abundance has a corollary in the absence of cultivation, an idea that Marvell develops in surprising ways. The mariners conceive the islands as a virgin territory which is exclusively reserved for them by providence—as mentioned earlier, this is a deliberate anachronism on Marvell’s part, who must have been aware that the English colony pre-dated the 1630s. The mariners’ mistaken belief that they are (or will

²³ Perry Miller uses the phrase to describe the attitude of New England Puritans. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), 34.

²⁴ Cummings considers these classical sources in “The Difficulty of Marvell’s ‘Bermudas,’” *Modern Philology* 67, no. 4 (May 1970): 331–40. On the political connotations of the fortunate isles for the Elizabethan and Stuart periods, see Josephine Waters Bennett, “Britain Among the Fortunate Isles,” *Studies in Philology* 53, no. 2 (1956): 114–40.

²⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, rev. trans. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), ll. 101–10.

be) the islands' first occupants shows the influence of the classical myth. The legendary first age can be experienced once again on the far shores of the Atlantic where the bounty of a pristine, unspoiled nature awaits them. The "a-historicism" of the poem then points us in the direction of classical literature as well as later elaborations of the first age, re-imagined here as a place in the Americas that has been spared the taint of civilization.

The idyllic picture of a life of ease is a blatant poetic license, since it is hard to imagine Puritans intending to establish a colony without the aid of agriculture and, thereby, wholly reliant on the assistance of the Lord. The premises of the golden age myth help explain why the mariners are the passive beneficiaries of the islands' cornucopia:

He makes the figs our mouths to meet
And throws the melons at our feet;
But apples plants of such a price,
No tree could ever bear them twice. (21–4)

The sensuality of the figs that press themselves on the pilgrims' mouths is an instance of the unexpected "Hesperian primitivism"²⁶ of Marvell's poem, to use Harry Berger's phrase. In this Christianized version of the golden age, the islands offer a terrestrial paradise in which all the needs of the faithful are provided for. The passivity of these fictional pilgrims recalls the life of ease of the shepherds of Arcadia, known for their token or symbolic work in the fields. The emphasis on passivity is in striking contrast to the Puritan idea of life as a spiritual struggle, as expressed in the trope of the Christian soldier, the *miles Christianus*, or in the commonplace figure of the husbandry of the soul, which joins spiritual cultivation to that of the soil (as in *Upon Appleton House*, ll. 353–54).

The surprising sensuality of "Bermudas" is one of the paradoxical features of the poem, one which cannot be dismissed as a failure of the author to rise above his source materials.²⁷ There is an evident contradiction here between the pleasure principle and puritanism,²⁸ between the *jouissance* of these pastoral Puritans and the tropes of spiritually motivated labor that we would expect from members of the godly community. Arguably, we are not meant to be persuaded by the depiction of a primeval state of

²⁶ Berger, *Second World and Green World*, 268.

²⁷ See Raylor, "The Instability of Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" 6: "There are clearly internal oddities in the presentation of Marvell's ostensibly Puritan paradise: a paradise which seems to carry slightly too many traces of the sybaritic and morally questionable classical and romance tradition of the Fortunate Isles." See also *ibid.*, 8, 9.

²⁸ Toshihiko Kawasaki, "Marvell's 'Bermudas' – A Little World, or A New World?," *ELH* 43, no. 1 (1976): 48.

nature. We might recall the commentary of Raymond Williams on the country house genre, in which figures of the golden age serve to dissimulate the presence of labor in the country estate. In this genre, the convention of spontaneous natural bounty could be more honestly described as an abundance of poetic hyperbole, a sustained poetic fiction that conceals the efforts of cultivation and manual labor.²⁹ Williams cites Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" (1611) as an example of the country house poem, and there is a touch of "To Penshurst" in "Bermudas." In Marvell's work, nature spontaneously donates produce to its human masters but in this case it is to Puritan immigrants rather than aristocratic landowners. The observation that the commonplaces of the golden age serve to mask the effort of cultivation has an interesting bearing on the poetry of Marvell, which often deals with the dissimulation of labor by his pastoral protagonists. While Williams proposed a Marxist analysis of the trope of natural abundance in "To Penshurst," Marvellian pastoral raises the question of the dissimulation of labor in the terms of Christian theology. We infer that the retreats of Marvell's speakers have not been miraculously spared the universal effects of the Fall and the necessity of cultivation. In all likelihood, we are simply not meant to believe that his pastoral personae can inhabit a world where fruits fall into their laps, grapes turn themselves into wine on the poet's behalf ("The Garden," 33–8), and birds volunteer themselves as food for the sea-borne Puritans ("Bermudas," 15–16).

The subtle line between the crude and the cooked, between indifferent and domesticated nature, is dissolved by the wonder of myth, if we are willing to accept it as such. The detached reader, however, might think that Marvell's version of the golden age draws attention to itself as a literary convention, an artful contrivance of language that euphemistically avoids naming the elementary fact of cultivation.³⁰ In other words, the portrait of the enchanted islands suffers from the latent implausibility of its pastoral primitivism. The Bermudan paradise refers us to a literary "place," as well as a physical place, to the commonplaces of the *locus amoenus*. The presence of paradisaic commonplaces in the mariners' song raises the question of whether their depiction of a life free from labor should be taken as the transferral of poetic vocabulary from the domain of the literary to a place notionally identified with the Bermudas. In this reading, the tropes of the *locus amoenus* are transposed from a secular context (such as the country house genre) to a sacred, or sacred-seeming, one: the islands on

²⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 27–34. Discussion of "The Garden" appears on page 31. Norbrook notes the connection of Marvell's poem to the country house tradition. See Norbrook, "A Fleet of Worlds," 96.

³⁰ The paradox is present in the description of the eternal spring that "enamels ev'rything" (14); in an authentic golden age, there would be no arts of any kind, so no enamelling.

the far side of the Atlantic. This process of transference contributes to the enigmatic quality of Marvell's poem, since it is impossible to determine whether these borrowed figures refer us to a nature that is "out there" or to nature as a poetic contrivance, to a country that is "measured in the mind."³¹

One way of assessing Marvell's use of such commonplaces is to say that it reflects back on the longstanding use of Edenic tropes to describe the territories of the New World in Western travel writing and other literature. Colonizers and explorers had long used paradisaic imagery drawn from both classical and Christian sources to describe the phenomena of the New World. The imagery of Eden and of classical paradises had been combined in accounts of the New World since the times of Christopher Columbus, and Marvell's poem certainly participates in this tradition.³² The description of the Americas in the language of paradise has recently been taken up by Jefferson Dillman in his study of the Caribbean colonies of the Spanish and English. The marvellous natural fertility that Europeans encountered in the tropics meant that the golden age and cognate myths were especially attractive in their accounts of this part of the continent. Dillman comments on the use of paradisaic commonplaces drawn from scriptural and classical sources and how this "paradisiacal language" served a range of purposes from the evangelical to the frankly commercial.³³ This commentary applies suggestively to Marvell's poem, in which we encounter the familiar tropes of Eden and the golden age redux. In this case, though, there seems to be a latent perception of the discrepancies between the sources of this "language of paradise." Rather than a compound of classical and Christian imagery, "Bermudas" presents us with a generic *contaminatio* which allows for the incongruity between its scriptural and extra-scriptural source material. Thus the mariners' song recalls the biblical land of milk and honey, but it also summons up memories of languorous this-worldly paradises, those of the Fortunate Isles and the legendary first age. For instance, the wonderful "apples" of lines 23–24 recall the fruit of the garden of Eden, allowing us to place this imagery within a familiar Christian context. But the same lines also evoke the apples of the Hesperides, an enchanted

³¹ Angus Fletcher attributes the phrase "the poet measures countries in the mind" to Francis Bacon. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1964), 180.

³² On this combination in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, see Isabel Rivers, "The Golden Age and the Garden of Eden," in *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry: A Student's Guide* (London: Routledge, 1979), 9–20. Rivers takes "Bermudas" as an example of the use of the myth of the golden age to speak of the New World (18).

³³ Jefferson Dillman, *Colonizing Paradise: Landscape and Empire in the British West Indies* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 22, 41. The phrase "paradisiacal language" appears on page 41.

garden that lies in the remote West, a terrestrial paradise belonging to pagan literature rather than scripture.³⁴

From this point of view, the paradisaic imagery of “Bermudas” is a kind of diglossia, a combination of vocabularies. The much-commented upon symbolic overabundance of the poem—its ability to “[summon] up more associations than [it] can contain”³⁵—can be taken as a reflection on the varied uses of the trope of Eden as it was commonly employed by colonists and authors of promotional literature as well as poets in their discussion of the Americas.³⁶ Taking the poem as a reflection on the Edenic tropes applied to the New World is one way of accounting for the tension between the geographical specificity of the title and the presence of hyperbole in the text that follows. Still this does not help explain in what sense this is supposed to be an authentic paradise from which the curse of labor has been lifted, as the mariners claim. And if we doubt the reliability of their song, then the implied question seems to be: in what sense is it possible to speak of paradisaic places as actual places without resorting to hyperbole? The problem of the disguising of human activity reappears in the poem’s closing lines. These are voiced by the anonymous narrator:

Thus sung they, in the English boat,
An holy and a cheerful note,
And all the way, to guide their chime,
With falling oars they kept the time. (37–40)

The effort of rowing across the ocean with their “falling oars” is not like toiling in a fallen world, apparently, since these Puritans do not feel the obligation of labor. Some critics have remarked that they row in order to keep time to their song of praise rather than the other way around—they are not rowing or laboring out of necessity and thus are exempt from the common curse of mankind.³⁷ The joyously singing (as opposed to laboring) Puritans are like the inhabitants of a recovered Eden, if we adopt their point of view. They are unlike the inhabitants of Eden if we disbelieve them—as well we might because the song is identified with the occupants of a boat rather than the inhabitants

³⁴ See the relevant line note in Smith, ed., *Poems*, 57.

³⁵ Cummings, “The Difficulty of Marvell’s ‘Bermudas,’” 331.

³⁶ Another twist on the idea of a life without labor has been provided in recent criticism by the discussion of slavery and the Bermudan economy by Sawday and Norbrook. Sawday, “Marvell’s ‘Bermudas,’” 69–71, 77, 80, 89, 94; and Norbrook, “‘A Fleet of Worlds,’” 89–108. As these authors detail, slavery featured in the career of Oxenbridge, Marvell’s acquaintance to whom the poem is sometimes thought to be informally dedicated; indeed the possession of slave labor was one of the attractions of life on the island for the minister.

³⁷ As Leona Spitz puts it, “the oars must count time because man has lost eternity.” Leona Spitz, “Process and Stasis: Aspects of Nature in Vaughan and Marvell,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1969): 143.

of some idyllic islands. If they enjoy their state of beatitude while rowing on the oceans, what need is there for the paradisaic islands, of the New World or the imagination?

A poem that celebrates a magical, mysterious locale closes with an indirect reminder that, for Protestants, no space was to be considered sacrosanct and the holy was not be identified with material objects or places. Marvell's pilgrims enjoy their state of beatitude independently of place, offering up their song of praise from a boat in the midst of the ocean. The mariners want to distinguish between the space of the ocean—symbolically, the fallen world—and the islands where nature is supposed to preserve its Edenic integrity (where nature is “far kinder” [8], or different in kind). Yet the distinction between the “maze” of this fallen world and the sanctity of the Bermudas is hard to maintain, if only because the singers describe this magical place from a distance, that is, from the outside.³⁸ So far we have considered different answers to the question of what kind of space this poem invites us to imagine. We can continue this argument by asking why space should be an issue for religiously motivated irony. In the second part of this article, I want to suggest that the ironies of “Bermudas” relate to theological disputes over the sacralization of space, arguments between those who claimed to locate the sacred within the physical world and those who saw the sacred as transcending it.

III

Protestant opposition to the sanctity of place is one of the central features of confessional polemics. Leading figures of the Reformation, such as Luther and Calvin, held that there was no intrinsic holiness of place, as supposed by the Catholic cult of shrines and its traditions of pilgrimage and ritually consecrated holy ground.³⁹ As Walsham puts it, the reforming impulse involved an “uncompromising rejection of the idea that the material world was capable of containing and transmitting salvific grace.”⁴⁰ To use the words of the Puritan divine, William Perkins,

³⁸ On the theological ramifications of the figure of the maze or labyrinth for Marvell's contemporaries, see Huston Diehl, “Into the Maze of Self: The Protestant Transformation of the Image of the Labyrinth,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 16, no. 2 (1986): 281–301.

³⁹ The cult of the saints had traditionally conceived places where relics were held to be “clearly indicated *loci* where Heaven and Earth met.” Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 10. On Catholic sacred architecture as a response to the Protestant denial of immanence in church buildings, see Giuseppe Scavizzi, *The Controversy on Images from Calvin to Baronius* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 5–6, 121–31, 248, and 254–5. John Martin writes of the Roman church of Santa Maria in Campitelli: “it is as if the creators of these Baroque interiors were consciously trying to conform to the recommendation of the theologian Joannes Molanus [...] ‘Let the Christian think, when he enters the temple, that he is entering a kind of heaven on earth, where God fills the whole edifice.’” See John Rupert Martin, *Baroque* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 118.

⁴⁰ Walsham, *The Reformation of Landscape*, 82.

And it is a practice very idolatrous, to bind adoration to any particular thing, or to any particular place: that is, to determine, that God is to be adored, and that he hears us in any set place, in which he has not expressly commanded himself to be worshipped [...] For it is idolatry to turn, dispose, or direct the worship of God [...] to any particular place, or creature, without the appointment of God.⁴¹

A number of studies have highlighted the extent to which the disputes leading up to the Civil Wars involved disagreements over the conceptualization of space.⁴² Promoters of the Laudian position held that the holy could indeed be identified with the material space of buildings or with portions of the church, as in the case of the altars which Laudians wanted to segregate from the space of the congregation by means of altar rails. The physical space of the church and altar was thus imbued with sacrality as an extension of the episcopal church, the institution of the Church of England. In the words of Lake,

According to a whole chorus of writers from the 1630s the church, conceived as a physical structure, a specific place or site of worship, was the house of God [...] As Thomas Laurence told the University of Oxford in 1634 God's "presence is indeed everywhere but his residence especially there" [...] God's presence in the church suffused the whole structure and all the physical impedimenta used in his worship with an aura of holiness.⁴³

Likewise, Andrew Spicer comments that, for the Laudians, the church was a place "where God's presence on earth was more intense, literally the house of God. The furniture, decoration and ornamentation of the building should ensure that the building glowed with 'the beauty of holiness.'"⁴⁴ In contrast to the Laudian emphasis on ceremony and the sanctity of place, Puritans maintained that the physical places and objects involved in worship possessed no inherent holiness. It was widely held that "the community of

⁴¹ William Perkins, *A Warning Against the Idolatrie of the Last Times. And an Instruction touching Religious, or Divine Worship* (Cambridge, 1601), 28–30.

⁴² Besides Walsham, *The Reformation of Landscape*, see also Peter Lake, "The Laudian Style: Order, Uniformity and the Pursuit of the Beauty of Holiness in the 1630s," in *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642*, ed. Kenneth Fincham (London: Palgrave, 1993), 161–85; several contributions in *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Andrew Spicer, "'God Will Have a House': Defining Sacred Space and Rites of Consecration in Early Seventeenth-Century England," in *Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer (London: Routledge, 2006), 207–30, and Margaret Aston, *Broken Idols of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 74–107, 258–358.

⁴³ Lake, "The Laudian Style," 164.

⁴⁴ Andrew Spicer, "'What kinde of house a kirk is': Conventicles, Consecrations and the Concepts of Sacred Space in Post-Reformation Scotland," in *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*, 102.

the godly was [...] independent of place”;⁴⁵ the true church was the invisible one known to God rather than the visible one represented by the offices of the Church of England.

The interest in space and the sacred is not of course limited to the 1630s, when Marvell’s poem is set, but extends to the time of its composition under the Commonwealth government. By the 1650s the criticism or defense of built places of worship featured in the theological conflicts that played out between Presbyterians, Independents, sectarians, and others. For some Puritans the landscape itself was suspect as a “repository of error and falsehood,”⁴⁶ a suspicion that was based on fears over the failure to eradicate popery and popular superstitions. At the same time, the critique of buildings as designated places of worship was taken up in increasingly vocal form by the sectaries, as in the derisory Quaker term “steeple-houses” for churches. The spread of independency and sectarianism coincided with a new reverence for the natural world, understood as infused with the immanent presence of the divine. The religious radicals of the 1640s and after looked to nature as a divine text that was free of the instrumentality of the human authority that had been imposed on God’s other book, that of scripture. For the most radical of these groups, the natural world held out a promise of spiritual regeneration outside the channels of religious orthodoxy (Anglican or Presbyterian).⁴⁷

It is interesting to read Marvell’s nature poems against the backdrop of such theological conflicts. It has been pointed out that Marvell’s verse responds to the “desacralization of the material creation”⁴⁸ effected by Protestant theology and its radical separation of the spheres of nature and grace. There is nothing sacramental in this author’s attitude to nature, or as R.V. Young puts it, “God does exist for Marvell, but He does not invest creation with his presence.”⁴⁹ Yet perhaps just because of this radical separation, the characters in Marvell’s poems are imaginatively inclined to re-invest the world with a sense of presence, reconstituting an intimate sense of the sacred in the setting of nature. His pastoral personae express a kind of nostalgia for tangible figures of the divine, and one instance of this is their repeated attempts to constitute “sacred spaces” in isolation from the fallen world. For example, it has been suggested that in “The Garden” Marvell responds to the Protestant de-sacralization

⁴⁵ Derek Hirst, *England in Conflict 1603–1660: Kingdom, Community, Commonwealth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 40.

⁴⁶ Walsham, *The Reformation of Landscape*, 81.

⁴⁷ On the sectaries and nature, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (London: Penguin, 1983), 123, 138–9, 166, 301; Peter Elmer, “Medicine, Religion and the Puritan Revolution,” in *The Medical Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roger French and Andrew Wear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10–45. For examples of the tendency to view nature as suffused with the immanent presence of the divine, see Nigel Smith, ed., *A Collection of Ranter Writings: Spiritual Liberty and Sexual Freedom in the English Revolution* (New York: Pluto Press, 2014).

⁴⁸ Young, “Andrew Marvell,” 216.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

of nature by recreating a “lost world” of emblematic signs, imagining a place where nature is once again invested with a magical sense of immanence.⁵⁰

Similar patterns are explored at much greater length in *Upon Appleton House*. In the middle section of this poem, Marvell seeks out a personal woodland “sanctuary” (482) that will isolate him from the chaos of the Civil Wars. The tranquillity of the wood is a refuge from the landscape of the estate of Nun Appleton, which is marred by jolting, discordant memories of warfare. The speaker tries to maintain stable boundaries between this provisional “sacred space” and the external world, whose martial threats are diminished to the status of the “darts” of poetic convention:

How safe, methinks, and strong, behind
 These trees have I encamped my mind;
 Where Beauty, aiming at the heart,
 Bends in some trees its useless dart;
 And where the world no certain shot
 Can make, or me it toucheth not. (601–6)

But if the wood provides the speaker with an enchanted enclave, this is only because it has been temporarily cut off from everything that exists outside it. As Robert Wilcher writes, the poet discovers “emblems of a natural order that has been lost to the world outside.”⁵¹ The magical nature that the poet enjoys is only magical *here*, in this unique locale; the enchantment of this place rests on the premise that it is separated by an imaginary cordon sanitaire from the rest of Creation. A work that is notably preoccupied with permeable boundaries, *Upon Appleton House* invites us to think of the poet’s idyll as an impossible one, a fantasy of seclusion that cannot be sustained. The hermetically enhanced landscape of the forest is a compensation fantasy, a place that exists for the delighted contemplation of one person alone. Abandoning the wider world, the poet consoles himself with a personal microcosm, a privileged retreat that is cut off from the macrocosm of the body politic.

The escapist vein of Marvell’s woodland has often been commented on, together with the political implications of his need for seclusion.⁵² But might this gesture of retreat also be interpreted in light of the Protestant critique of sacred space? The Protestant preoccupation with the corralling of the holy into terrestrial spaces informs

⁵⁰ Eugene Cunnar, “Names on Trees, the Hermaphrodite, and ‘The Garden,’” in *On the Celebrated and Neglected Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 130–31.

⁵¹ Robert Wilcher, *Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 158.

⁵² For a recent discussion of the political implications of space in *Upon Appleton House*, see Julianne Werlin, “Upon Appleton House,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Martin Dzelzainis and Edward Holberton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 481–98.

the desire of Marvell's persona to conceive of the forest as an exceptional place that is imbued with supernatural presence. There are plenty of signs in *Upon Appleton House* that his "temple green" (510) is not a temple of Protestant virtue.⁵³ In the woods, the tokens of false religion abound. These include references to both paganism and Laudian ritualism. The Laudian preoccupation with outward signs and ceremonies is parodied by the speaker's description of himself as an Anglican bishop or "prelate of the grove" (592) who comes equipped with an "antic cope" (591) made of greenery—as if Marvell were imaginatively enthralled by the liturgy of the Church of England. Other signs of false religion include references to oracles (548), augury (572), and sibyls (577) from the ancient world together with the religion of the Aztecs (580), and, plausibly, druid human sacrifice (617–18 and 623–24).⁵⁴ The poet's idyllic seclusion is tainted by figures of false worship, and as Christopher Hill points out, the word "grove" (592) would have conjured up scenes of Old Testament idolatry for seventeenth-century readers (so the phrase "prelate of the grove" could be reworded as "bishop of paganism").⁵⁵

The pagan coloration of this grove implies that Marvell is criticizing the idea that any part of nature can be specially identified with the sacred (while the mocking conflation of Anglicanism and paganism reprises familiar patterns from Protestant polemics, which assimilated false forms of Christianity to the idolatry of the heathens). The principle that there was no "secret sanctity"⁵⁶ in places is negatively illustrated by Marvell's woodland interval, and not only because the fantasy unwinds so easily when the poet is called back to his duties in service of the Fairfax household (at stanza 82). The idolatrous figures that populate the forest can be read alongside contemporary preoccupations with the survival of "pagan" superstitions in the countryside, and the undue reverence that was still given to shrines, crosses, and church buildings.⁵⁷ The

⁵³ See the line note for l. 510 in Smith, ed., *Poems*, 231. There is a similar pun on the word "temple" (which could be understood as either pagan or Protestant) in "Clorinda and Damon" (6).

⁵⁴ On the druidic symbolism of these lines, see Robert Cummings, "The Forest Sequence in Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House': The Imaginative Contexts of a Poetic Episode," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1984): 193–200; Charles Larson, "Fairfax's Wood: Marvell and Seventeenth-Century Trees," *Durham University Journal* 80, no. 1 (1987): 28, 33–5; Leah Marcus, "Pastimes with a Court," in *Andrew Marvell*, ed. Thomas Healy (New York: Longman, 1998), 89–90. None of these critics treats the poet's druidism as a type of idolatry.

⁵⁵ Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), 391–3. Harold Toliver comments on the poet's need to affirm the "scriptural symbolism" of the grove in order to purge it of "reclusive, Catholic connotations." See Harold E. Toliver, *Marvell's Ironic Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 121. I would add that the poet does not obviously succeed in purging the grove of its idolatrous connotations.

⁵⁶ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion. 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 73.

⁵⁷ Walsham, *The Reformation of Landscape*, 80–152; Spicer "What kinde of house a kirk is," 87–88. The episode of the Cistercian nunnery (stanzas 13 to 35) is likewise intended to dispel superstitious concepts of place—in this case, the curse that was supposedly attached to Catholic sites (consecrated places) that had been re-purposed during the Reformation. On this curse, and Protestant repudiations of claims of sacrilege, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin, 1991), 112–21.

example of the forest sequence in *Upon Appleton House* illustrates the ambiguity of enclosure in Marvell's poetry, as the poet tries to establish sacred spaces which are better described as safe spaces, transitory refuges of the imagination. Since these locations only mimic the sacred (there is no intrinsic holiness there), they signify not by what they include but by what they exclude, by keeping the external world at bay. These places have to define themselves as separate from the fallen world in order to maintain their veneer of sanctity.⁵⁸

Turning back to "Bermudas," how might thinking about such issues help in interpreting the poem? To make the case for a connection, it is worth considering that the Protestant attitude to space was not without its own contradictions. Those among the godly who emigrated to the New World read the landscape in scriptural and providential terms, regarding the colonies as places that featured in the history of salvation, by analogy with the Hebrews of the Old Testament who were led to the Promised Land. Walsham observes of the New England colonies that those settlers who migrated out of religious motives regarded these places as specially designated by God and favored by divine grace:

Set aside by Providence as a shelter for the saints, this terra incognita became in their minds a sacred territory. It was sacralized by the presence of those the Lord had determined to save from the judgements and plagues that had engulfed the iniquitous nation they had abandoned in an act of symbolic spiritual as well as geographical separation.⁵⁹

Likewise, James Walsh comments of the colonies that,

From the start, New England Puritans spoke of living in a "New Jerusalem," of inhabiting "a New Heaven and a new earth." In their sermons, the clergy pictured New England as a confined space, enclosed by the grace of God in the metaphor of a hedge, or, more dramatically, a pillar of fire. In their eschatological speculations, the New England Puritans gave their chosen land a central position.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Marvell's language implies as much when he describes his woodland sanctuary as excluding the world beyond: "Dark all without it knits" (505). This echoes the description of the Cistercian nunnery (identified with Catholic idolatry) as a place that exists to "restrain the world without" (99); "The cloister outward shuts its gates" (103). On the symbolism and psychology of restriction in Marvell's poetry, see John Carey, "Reversals Transposed: An Aspect of Marvell's Imagination," in *Approaches to Marvell: The York Centenary Lectures*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Henley & Boston, 1978), 136–54; John Creaser, "'As one scap't strangely from Captivity:' Marvell and Existential Liberty," in *Marvell and Liberty*, ed. Warren Chernaik and Martin Dzelzainis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 145–72.

⁵⁹ Walsham, *The Reformation of Landscape*, 243.

⁶⁰ James P. Walsh, "Holy Time and Sacred Space in Puritan New England," *American Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (1980): 91–2.

Further, claims of divine favor for the colonial enterprise were simultaneously critiques of the situation that they had left behind in the Old World. If providence had led the godly to the shores of America, it was because England (and not just the Caroline Church) had collectively forsaken God's favor. Summarily put, true religion could not be identified with two places at once—an attitude that was expressed in phrases such as “True religion is going westwards” and “God is leaving England.”⁶¹ Thus, as Avihu Zakai writes, the “sacralization” of land in the New World was also conceived as the “de-sacralization of England,” according to the providential reading of the phenomenon of emigration.⁶² It is useful to recall that this reading did not go unchallenged by the godly who stayed in England. For many Puritans who preferred to remain, the claim that providence favored emigration to the Americas was presumptuous or even blasphemous. The onset of the Civil Wars in the 1640s highlighted the disparity between those who claimed to be following the guiding hand of providence leading them to the New World and those who saw providence as intervening in English history.⁶³

The position of qualified sympathy that Marvell seems to take vis-à-vis the mariners in “Bermudas” invites comparison with the attitude of those for whom true religion was not going westward in the 1630s, or even at a later date. It is also worth emphasizing the variety of positions that existed on the Protestant side; the existence of these different attitudes means that there is no reason to identify the optimism of Marvell's pilgrims with *the* devout perspective on immigration to the New World. His other writings show no sign of endorsing the sacrality of physical locations and boundaries, if anything the contrary.⁶⁴ Bearing this in mind, it is worth asking if the much-debated ironies of “Bermudas” coincide with the irony in Walsh's comment that, “In order to think of themselves as pilgrims [the Puritan immigrants] had to make New England a shrine.”⁶⁵ Alongside that of the paradisaical place, another key metaphor in the poem is that of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. The rowing mariners are often described as pilgrims in the critical literature, but we do not know where they are or why they are traveling by boat, whether they are near or far from the islands they claim to describe. “Bermudas” is a poem of non-arrival, which leaves its godly voyagers out

⁶¹ On the use of these and other similar phrases, see Hill, *The English Bible*, 138–40, 284–97.

⁶² Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.

⁶³ On the criticism of the New England project by those who saw the work of the Reformation as taking place in England rather than abroad, see David Cressy, *Coming Over: Migration and Communication between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 29, 91–2, 193, 200–1.

⁶⁴ Besides the poems mentioned above, Smith writes on “The Loyal Scot” that it is “remarkable for its claim that national boundaries are human inventions, and should at least in some circumstances be removed.” Smith, *The Chameleon*, 222.

⁶⁵ Walsh, “Holy Time and Sacred Space,” 92.

on the ocean waters rather than in the delightful place they have imagined. Clearly this is something different from a providential sense of purpose,⁶⁶ and we might suspect that the mariners take the symbolism of paradise more literally than they should. They are intent on a worldly destination, and here again we might find an echo of the 1630s, when the Atlantic crossing was described in terms of the metaphor of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. Formulas such as “Paradise is our native country”⁶⁷ were used as coded expressions of discontent, implying that true religion was no longer welcome in Stuart England but had found a home in the American colonies. To insist on an obvious point, the metaphor of the Christian experience as a pilgrimage becomes redundant if it refers to terrestrial locations. Marvell’s poem leaves open the possibility that the mariners have mis-identified their destination as a physical one, the islands they conceive of as an idyllic place of rest after the storms of this world (12).

A hint that Marvell’s godly mariners are infringing upon the principle of divine ubiquity comes from a likely source of “Bermudas,” Lewis Hughes’ *A Letter, Sent into England from the Summer Ilands* (1615). In this short text, Hughes informs the reader about the inviting conditions of the islands and identifies these as signs of providential favor to the English occupant. The *Letter* opens with an assertion that the Bermudas had been divinely selected for colonization by the English alone: it is thanks to the

goodnes of Almighty God, in keeping these Ilands secret, from all people of the world (except some that haue come hither against their willes, to their losse, by meanes of shipwrack) till now that it hath pleased his holy Maiesty, to discouer and bestow them vpon his people of *England*.⁶⁸

Colie, who first made the connection between the *Letter* and “Bermudas,” pointed out that the description of the islands as kept “secret” by God could have encouraged Marvell’s conception of the Bermudas as “unspied” (2), an idea which in his poem has an air of mystery.⁶⁹ While Hughes conceives the islands as set aside by providence on

⁶⁶ As Hirst and Zwicker write, this is pointedly not a poem of refuge and arrival, despite the paradisaic imagery: “How odd and how typical that Marvell should withhold from these purposive pilgrims both arrival and a new beginning.” See Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, “Marvell and Lyrics of Indifference,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell*, 402. Nothing in the text confirms that the mariners are headed in the direction of the Bermudas, a reticence that leads Colie to write that “These singing oarsmen go about their business, perhaps also about their Father’s, but they do not tell us just what their errand is.” See Rosalie L. Colie, “My Echoing Song”: *Andrew Marvell’s Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 141.

⁶⁷ The phrase is Richard Greenham’s. Richard Greenham, *Works* (London, 1612), 645. Qtd. in Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 130.

⁶⁸ Lewis Hughes, *A Letter, Sent into England from the Summer Ilands* (London, 1615), unnumbered page.

⁶⁹ Colie, “Marvell’s ‘Bermudas,’” 77–8.

behalf of English settlers, Marvell adapts this to the case of a group of Puritan refugees—the divine blessing is no longer jointly shared by the metropole and the colony but rather by the colony at the expense of the metropole. Despite this shift in emphasis, both Hughes' *Letter* and Marvell's poem share the idea that God has designated special places from the beginning of time on behalf of favored categories of people, a claim that Marvell's mariners seem to take literally but that the author of the poem presumably does not.

The question of the sacrality of space is also raised by the biblical reference in lines 31–32. Marvell's pilgrims conceive of the islands as a temple made by God himself, as opposed to the work of human hands: "And in these rocks for us did frame / A temple, where to sound His name" (31–2). The allusion is to the words of Saint Paul on the Areopagus, Acts 17:24: "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands."⁷⁰ This was one of the key texts in the Protestant case against the Catholic attribution of special sanctity to places of worship and was taken up by those who insisted that the church was made not of "dead stones" but of the living members of the congregation. According to radical preachers of the times, the words of scripture had been falsified to say that people should worship in "houses of lime and stone."⁷¹ The words of Paul were used in defense of open-air worship and they also featured in radical Protestant appeals for the destruction of churches.⁷² In "Bermudas," the description of the islands as an inviolate temple makes for a potent contrast with Laudian places of worship—buildings designed by human hands and designated as holy by false rites of consecration, the excesses of ritual, and other forms of embellishment. Ormerod writes of these lines that "Marvell stresses the simplicity and naturalness of the new ecclesiastical edifice in which the puritans offer their devotions. It is not, in fact, a man-made building at all."⁷³ Likewise for Norbrook, "The island is the true temple of God, in contrast to the prelates' closed spaces."⁷⁴

The memorable description of the islands as a temple framed by God's hand epitomizes the pilgrims' claim to find a new home that is free from the impurities of religion in the Old World. These lines could be read "straight," as a poetic illustration of how Calvinists conceived the divinely authored images of the visible world as a reproof

⁷⁰ All references to the Bible are to the Authorized Version.

⁷¹ Samuel How, *The Sufficiency of the Spirit's Teaching without Humane Learning* (Fleet-bridge, 1655), 33.

⁷² Walsham, *The Reformation of Landscape*, 90–3, 234; Aston, *Broken Idols*, 74–105.

⁷³ Ormerod, "Type, Icon and Number," 99–100.

⁷⁴ Norbrook, "A Fleet of Worlds," 95. See also Sawday, "Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" 91–3 on the imagery of the temple in the poem, which may include a reference to a "natural temple" in the Bahamas.

to the false images of so-called religious art.⁷⁵ But in order to do so, we would have to take them out of context. In context the claim to return to a pristine state of nature is suspect. One reason is that Marvell has brought together two kinds of primitivism in his poem. One of these is what Theodore Bozeman calls “the primitivist dimension” of Puritanism, referring to the characteristic attitude of the godly in valuing the original word of scripture over later human inventions, and the simplicity of the early Christian church over the long history of error that followed.⁷⁶ Then there is the pastoral primitivism of Marvell’s classical sources, which as discussed above include the golden age myth of natural abundance, the depiction of a life of ease prior to the advent of cultivation. Both of these narratives involve a contrast between primitive purity and a later state of degeneration and artifice, but in terms of content they can hardly be confused with each other. In “Bermudas” these strands of “primitivist” thought are made to imaginatively coincide in a way that is not wholly credible. For instance, we could respond to lines 31–32 as an eloquent adaptation of Paul’s words in Acts; the couplet gives us an admirably appropriate combination of the works of God and his word, since the mariners describe the natural world in the idiom of scripture. Then again, we could also think of the islands-as-temple image as an extension of the golden age myth. As it turns out, Puritans who don’t need to cultivate the soil don’t need to construct a place of worship either: such an effort would be superfluous since the islands constitute a sacred space, a temple that God has already made on their behalf.

Another problem with this temple is that it is identified with the Bermudas, rather than the natural world in its totality. The separateness of the islands corresponds to the Calvinist confidence of the mariners in their own elect status: “With cedars, chosen by His hand, / From Lebanon, He stores the land” (25–6). Like the cedars, the Puritan saints have been chosen in advance. But this amounts to a claim that nature in the islands enjoys a special blessing, like the saints themselves. Similarly, when we read the lines, “He hangs in shades the orange bright, / Like golden lamps in a green night” (17–18), we might think of God’s placing of lights in the sky “to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years” in Genesis (1:14), signs which provide all humankind with a means of knowing the Creator. In Christian

⁷⁵ On this contrast in the writings of Calvin, see Randal C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 5. For a reading of the poem along these lines, see A. D. Cousins, *Andrew Marvell: Loss and Aspiration, Home and Homeland in Miscellaneous Poems* (London: Routledge, 2016), 72–84. Cousins takes the Puritan use of the Psalms and Calvinist natural theology as the relevant contexts of the praise of the natural world in Marvell’s poem.

⁷⁶ See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 356–9. Bozeman compares his definition of “Puritan primitivism” with the primitivist ideal of the golden age myth.

theology, all of Creation is a testament to the Creator, “the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein” (Acts 14:15). In Marvell’s poem, on the other hand, the scriptural reference is employed to express something more parochial, the mariners’ delight in a scene of orange groves. The scriptural allusion is odd because the idea of divinely disposed lights has been re-purposed. The reader can make the association between the “golden lamps” and the celestial lights of Genesis, but for the singers the phrase is only a metaphor for Bermudan oranges. In the imagination of these thanks-giving Puritans, the biblical sun and moon have been replaced by luminous fruit, a curiously terrestrial substitution for the original heavenly bodies (otherwise, why would fruit be described as shining in the dark?).⁷⁷

It is not nature that the pilgrims are praising in their song, but a very select portion of it that is destined for the spiritually regenerate. Their Canaan is conceived as a “sacred space [...] appointed only for God’s chosen people whose election in God’s providence is revealed through their settlement of a holy, sacred land” (to use Zakai’s comment on the great migration of the 1630s).⁷⁸ In this paradise enclosed, the divine presence is more intensely felt than elsewhere and He even intervenes to drop melons at the mariners’ feet—a strange claim that is hard to interpret either as authentically religious or as poetic license. The hyperbolic vein of the mariners’ song invites comparison with the divine hyperbole of the book of Psalms. For the psalmist, all of nature joins in singing God’s praises: “And the heavens shall praise thy wonders, O LORD” (89:5); “The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.” (65:13).⁷⁹ The mariners of “Bermudas” on the other hand are intent on praising nature in the Bermudas in a drastic restriction of the compass of natural theology. The vision of God’s power and majesty manifest in his works has been substituted for something quite different—the celebration of nature in this unique locale. Another example of the poem’s dissonant registers is lines 27–28, which tell us that God “makes the hollow seas that roar / Proclaim the ambergris on shore.” The phrasing recalls the psalmist who proclaims God’s glory, but this should be the other

⁷⁷ Everett comments on the surprising sensuality of Marvell’s oranges. See Everett, “The Shooting of the Bears,” 101–2. The couplet is an interesting case of metaphor as “seeing as,” or intellectual pseudo-fusion, since Marvell switches around the expected contexts of the fruit trees and the starry sky. The fruit of line 17 appear luminous against the dark of night, while stars or planets (metaphorically speaking, the golden lamps) resemble fruit as seen against the pastoral backdrop of the “green night.” Metaphors (the golden lamps) stand in for other metaphors (the stars taken for oranges) in a poem that is itself, presumably, an extended metaphor.

⁷⁸ Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom*, 168.

⁷⁹ George Sandys’ *A paraphrase upon the Psalms of David* (1636)—often discussed as one of the sources of “Bermudas”—displays a sympathy for Laudian church reforms, including the reverence for place. See James Ellison, *George Sandys: Travel, Colonialism and Tolerance in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 26, 30, 175–211.

way round: Creation should proclaim God's glory, not God the ambergris.⁸⁰ It is as if the mariners were praising the Creator of the Bermudas at the expense of the author of "all that's made" ("The Garden," 47).

IV

Here I have considered some of the ways in which the author of "Bermudas" complicates the notion of space. While the poem points back to the 1630s, summoning up memories of the Laudian versus Puritan debates of the pre-Civil War period, the question of space and the sacred was still a focus of controversy in the mid-1650s, when the poem was composed. The terms of the debate distinguished Catholics from Protestants, Presbyterians from Independents, and other movements such as the Quakers that emerged in the 1650s, providing differential markers of various group identities. Puritan preachers vociferously opposed the idea that God was present in material images and special places, cautioning against the tendency of the human imagination to bind the infinite to the finite. To use the words of Perkins again, these preachers insisted that "the true God being infinite [He] must be in all places; which when the heart of man denieth, it imagineth God to be such a one as he is not, & so turneth him into an Idoll."⁸¹ Or if we want to cite one of Marvell's contemporaries, we can quote from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674). In book XI, the archangel Michael explains to Adam that, after the Fall, the space of the garden of Eden is only one place among others; since it is no longer a distinct or exceptional place, its decay and eventual disappearance is not to be specially lamented. Michael's intention is "to teach thee that God attributes to place / No sanctity, if none be thither brought" (11.836–7), a very Protestant lesson.⁸² The Christian epic of course moves towards the affirmation of a "paradise within" (12.587) to replace the physical paradise that has been lost. Milton's insistence on the unimportance of Eden's location after the Fall has a corollary in his aversion to "consecrated earth,"⁸³ a term that he uses to indicate the false shrines of idolaters, be they Catholic, Anglican, or pagan.

⁸⁰ Michael Craze points out that the phrasing of line 28 recalls the proclamation by the town crier of saleable goods. See Michael Craze, *The Life and Lyrics of Andrew Marvell* (London: MacMillan, 1979), 271.

⁸¹ William Perkins, *A Treatise of Mans Imaginations* (Cambridge, 1607), 37.

⁸² John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (New York: Longman, 2007). All references to *Paradise Lost* are to this edition. Book and line numbers appear in parentheses. Milton's position is also opposed to the use of maps in Protestant bibles, which claimed to identify the location of Eden. On the scriptural literalism behind such maps, see Justine Walden, "Global Calvinism: The Maps in the English Geneva Bible," in *Shaping the Bible in the Reformation: Books, Scholars and Their Readers in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Matthew McLean (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 187–215.

⁸³ John Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," in *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 113, l. 189.

I have made the case that Marvell questions the spiritual exceptionalism that led some of the godly to identify special locations with an exclusive community of believers, in what amounted to a Protestant version of the sanctification of space. There is an interesting analogy here to the position of another of Marvell's contemporaries, Roger Williams. In his disputes with the Puritan authorities of New England, Williams objected to their description of the American settlements as a land of Canaan or Israel. For Williams, the identification of the colonies with the biblical prototypes of Canaan and Israel was a misunderstanding of sacred history. What could such a literal identification mean, he asked: were the countries of the Old World which the colonists had left behind to be literally understood as Egypt or Babylon? To quote from a written response to John Cotton of Massachusetts,

if *Babel* be *locall* now, whence Gods people are called, then must there be a *locall Iudea*, a Land of *Canaan* also, into which they are called [...] But Mr. *Cotton* having made a *locall* departure from *Old England* in *Europe*, to *New England* in *America*, can he satisfie his owne soule, or the soules of other men, that he hath obeyed that voice, *come out of Babel my people, partake not of her sins, &c.* Doth he count the very Land of *England* literally *Babel* [...] and the Land of new *England* *Judea*, *Canaan?* &c.⁸⁴

Williams opposes the interpretation of contemporary history as an extension of the sacred history of the Old Testament with the argument that "The Lord Jesus [...] clearly breaks down all difference of *places*."⁸⁵ What was true under the dispensation of the Old Testament no longer holds under the dispensation of the New. As Deborah Madsen observes, this argument was meant to "discredit the entire linkage between geographical location and spiritual events"⁸⁶ in typological narratives of Puritan migration to the American continent. In this account, New England possessed no exceptional status since the "wilderness of the world"⁸⁷ encompasses creation in its entirety; within it, there is no Canaan as opposed to Egypt, no promised land as opposed to the wilderness. For Williams, these scriptural places were to be understood in a mystical and not in a local or material sense. If Canaan signified the eternal rest

⁸⁴ Roger Williams, *Mr Cottons Letter Lately Printed, examined and answered*, (London, 1644), 26. David Como discusses the publication of this text in the context of a network of printers and writers in London, including Milton, who were advocating for greater freedom of the press as well as religious worship. See David Como, "Print, Censorship, and Ideological Escalation in the English Civil War," *Journal of British Studies* 51 (2012): 832.

⁸⁵ Williams, *Mr Cottons Letter Lately Printed*, 26.

⁸⁶ Deborah L. Madsen, "The Sword or the Scroll: The Power of Rhetoric in Colonial New England," *American Studies* 33, no. 1 (1992): 50.

⁸⁷ Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (London, 1652), 65.

in heaven, then to speak of an earthly Canaan was to literalize the figures of scripture, resulting in a false sense of sacrality.⁸⁸

The parallels between Marvell's poem and the position of Williams are suggestive. Like Williams, Marvell uses religious metaphor self-consciously in order to convey the disjunction between literal and spiritual paradises. Marvell's poem also invites comparison with Williams' insistence on the invisible church of true believers, as opposed to the visible church identified with human institutions and physical spaces. It is interesting that Williams makes his argument against "sacred spaces" in the course of a plea for the separation of civil and religious power in the Massachusetts colony. To deny the identification of the promised land with terrestrial spaces is to deny the claims of Puritan authorities to exercise the powers of the civil magistrate, including the power to identify and punish the religiously unorthodox. This seems to be taking us far from the elusive symbolism of "Bermudas," but it does remind us that Marvell, who in the Restoration became a defender of religious toleration for dissenters, was not necessarily on the side of theocratic Puritans.⁸⁹ The theme of religious toleration features prominently in the history of the Bermudan colony, a point that has recently been underscored by Sawday, whose reading of the poem explores the links between tolerationism in England and the situation of Independents in the Bermudas.⁹⁰ Along similar lines, Norbrook highlights the place of the Bermudan colony in the project of "godly globalisation" promoted by the Cromwellian regime and other actors, which favored a greater freedom of worship in both Old and New Worlds.⁹¹

This recent criticism emphasizes the relevance to Marvell's poem of the Independent cause, and the arguments over religious toleration in the 1640s and 1650s—arguments that intimately linked the experiences of the Caribbean colonies to that of the homeland. It is worth pointing out that, in the context of tolerationist thought, the possibility of religious error is not necessarily an evil but something of a given. To acknowledge that believers have the right to worship according to conscience and not according to the

⁸⁸ On Williams' criticism of providentialism and the sacrality of place, in addition to Madsen, "The Sword or the Scroll," see Sacvan Bercovitch, "The American Puritan Imagination: An Introduction," in *The American Puritan Imagination. Essays in Reevaluation*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 11–12. Keith Stavely compares the symbolism of the garden and the wilderness in Williams' writings and in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. See Keith W. F. Stavely, "Roger Williams and the Enclosed Gardens of New England," in *Puritanism: Transatlantic Perspectives on a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Faith*, ed. Francis J. Bremer (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 257–74.

⁸⁹ On Marvell's attitudes in favor of toleration in the Restoration period, see Nicholas von Maltzahn, "Milton, Marvell and Toleration" in *Milton and Toleration*, ed. Sharon Achinstein and Elizabeth Sauer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 86–106.

⁹⁰ Sawday, "Marvell's 'Bermudas,'" 60–97.

⁹¹ Norbrook, "A Fleet of Worlds," 92–8, 107. Norbrook borrows Polly Ha's phrase "godly globalisation." See *ibid.*, 93; Polly Ha, "Godly Globalisation: Calvinism in Bermuda," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 66, no. 3 (2015): 543–61.

dictates of a national church is to accept some degree of religious error as a concomitant of liberty of worship—and this is said bearing in mind the unprecedented plurality of religious worship under the Protectorate, the period in which the poem was written. The tolerationist position emphasizes civil liberties rather than divine mandates, since it presupposes diversity of beliefs and practices. The most forthright defenders of the principle of toleration held that religious liberty was a civil liberty, and not only a means to protect one faction—those who defined themselves as the godly or orthodox—against the impositions of another.⁹²

We might then see the tantalizing ironies of this poem as irenic rather than judgemental in tone, as resulting from a position of sympathy that doesn't require alignment with the mariners' providential certainties. This is congruent with the description of Marvell's position on toleration in the 1650s as one where "allowance is made for [...] the rule of contingency, and for the coexistence of contending truths,"⁹³ in the words of Nicholas von Maltzahn. Viewed in this light, the contrast in the critical literature between sympathetic and ironic readings of "Bermudas," or between truth and falsity in the mariners' song, becomes less significant than it would be if we took "religiosity" as synonymous with conviction. A poem may perfectly well express religious preoccupations without providing us with a positive statement of conviction after all. The reading of "Bermudas" in religious terms does not require us to contrast piety and fiction, truth and error—just as the tolerationist position does not stand on the diametrical opposition of true and false religion. Setting this work in the broad context of tolerationism helps us to think about the poetics and politics of this author, and to see them working closely together.

⁹² I borrow the comments of Polly Ha, "Religious Toleration and Ecclesiastical Independence in Revolutionary Britain, Bermuda and the Bahamas," *Church History* 84, no. 4 (2015): 809. For overviews of tolerationism in the 1640s and 1650s, see Blair Worden, "Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate," *Persecution and Toleration: Studies in Church History* 21 (1984): 199–233; John Coffey, "The Toleration Controversy During the English Revolution," in *Religion in Revolutionary England*, ed. Christopher Durston and Judith Maltby (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 42–68.

⁹³ Nicholas von Maltzahn, "Liberalism or Apocalypse? John Milton and Andrew Marvell," in *English Now*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (Lund: Lund Centre for Languages and Literature, 2008), 44.

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