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ESSAY

What's the Problem with the Dutch? Andrew Marvell, the Trade Wars, Toleration, and the Dutch Republic

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You could be excused for thinking that rather than an Englishman, Andrew Marvell might better have been born a Dutchman in the republic's golden age – an era of religious toleration and commercial ascendance, of fiscal accountability and civic transparency, and of particular brilliance in the painterly arts of landscape and portraiture. There are moments in his career when Marvell seems in thrall to Dutch naval prowess, a strong advocate of confederacy with the States General against the universal monarchy threatened by the French crown, and admiring too of a religious toleration that characterized Dutch society. But that is not the whole story for his 'The Character of Holland' is filled with denial and excoriation, and the contradictions within Marvell's attitude towards England's mercantile rival and religious confederate call out for resolution. This paper explores the ways in which those inconsistencies and contradictions arise from Marvell's apprehensions of sameness and otherness: that the proximity and distance of Britain and the States General is also the story of Marvell's own sense of contradictory selfhood.

Keywords: Marvell; toleration; mockery; commerce; conscience; selfhood; sameness; difference; dialectic

You could be excused for thinking that rather than an Englishman, Andrew Marvell might better have been born a Dutchman in the republic's golden age – an era of religious toleration and commercial ascendance, of fiscal accountability and civic transparency, and of particular brilliance in the painterly arts of landscape and portraiture. For sure, there are moments when Marvell seems, for all his ambivalence about that 'off-scouring of the British sand', rather in thrall to Dutch naval prowess, a strong advocate of confederacy with the States General against popery and the universal monarchy threatened by the French crown, and admiring too of a religious toleration that characterized Dutch society – that 'civility which is decent [...] to be used in speaking of the differences of Human Opinion about Divine Matters [...] were it either open Judaism, or plain Turkery, or honest Paganism' (*An Account of the Growth of Popery*, 1677).¹ But this is not the whole story. There are striking inconsistencies in Marvell's attitude towards England's mercantile rival and religious confederate, and I want in this essay to explore some of these inconsistencies, these contradictions.

Marvell's written encounters with the States General began in 1653 with 'The Character of Holland' – a verse satire that has seemed a rather crude (though, for some, a rather witty) exercise in chauvinism and stereotyping.² The satire includes what seems, from the vantage point of a polemical career in which Marvell held high the banner of liberty of conscience, a surprising mockery of Dutch religious toleration, and to that passage I shall return in a moment. But first to origins: by all

¹ Citations to and quotations from Marvell's prose refer to *The Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, 2 vols., ed. Annabel Patterson *et al.* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2003), hereafter abbreviated *Prose Works* and cited parenthetically by volume and page number in the text. *Prose Works, An Account*, 2: 227.

² Nicholas von Maltzahn refers to 'the incessant wit' of 'The Character of Holland': 'Adversarial Marvell', in Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 180; for another assessment, see Warren Chernaik, *The Poet's Time: Politics and Religion in the Work of Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), or Nicholas Murray, *World Enough and Time: The Life of Andrew Marvell* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 69. Nigel Smith summarizes the bibliographical history of the three editions of 'The Character of Holland' in Smith, ed., *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (Harlow: Longman, rev. ed., 2007), 247. Citations to and quotations from Marvell's verse throughout refer to this edition, hereafter abbreviated *Poems* and cited parenthetically by line number in the text.

accounts the 1653 'Character' was a trial balloon, a job application for employment by the Cromwellian government, though nothing much came of that in the early 1650s.³ After the Restoration the 'Character' was touched up for print publication, likely by Marvell himself, and perhaps again for professional advantage.⁴ When the original 'Character' showed up in print, in 1665, the final 51 lines of the poem with their celebration of the newly formed Commonwealth went missing, and the original conclusion of the poem with its praise of 'those piercing heads, Deane, Monck and Blake' (l. 150) was switched out for lines admiring Prince Rupert, the Earl of Sandwich, and the Duke of York.⁵ The substitution might give pause – republican honor turned into royal celebrity – with Marvell's satire now seeming to draw rather close to John Dryden's lavish panegyric, 'Annus Mirabilis', with its similar assault on Dutch honor and its own celebration of the heroism of the Restoration navy, and in particular of Prince Rupert and the Duke of York.⁶ What might further heighten the sense of facile contradiction in Marvell's performance is the proximity of the repurposed 'Character' to the poet's own 'The Last Instructions' where the administration of the Royal navy is mercilessly ridiculed, its heroes not Rupert and York but captains of the Dutch Fleet, and where the humiliation of the Royal navy at Chatham, though officially regretted by the poem, seems rather a point of disinterested observation than outrage or elegy.

In 'The Last Instructions' the humiliation of the Royal navy is set off against images of Dutch military prowess that unfold into the poem's striking pastoral

³ *Poems*, 246.

⁴ See John Barnard, 'The 1665 York and London Editions of Marvell's "The Character of Holland"', *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America* 81: 4 (1987): 459–64.

⁵ Martin Dzelzainis argues convincingly that it was Marvell who substituted Rupert, Sandwich, and York for the republican trio, 'Marvell and the Dutch in 1665,' in Edward Jones, ed., *A Concise Companion to the Study of Manuscripts, Printed Books, and the Production of Early Modern Texts* (Chichester; Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 258–9.

⁶ *The Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols., ed. E. N. Hooker, H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. et al. (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 1956–2000); see 'Annus Mirabilis', which Dryden describes as 'An account,' '[...] the conduct and valour of a Royal Admiral, and of two incomparable Generals' (1: 50); for Dryden's celebration of Prince Rupert and the Duke of Albermarle in the poem see ll. 73–4 and 213–84.

interlude where Dutch martial valor is translated into masculine sexual authority; the only hero now to be found on an English ship turns out to be a Scottish sailor, Archibald Douglas, in Marvell's presentation a mere slip of a boy, and likely a Catholic at that.⁷ Whatever else this passage from 'The Last Instructions', and the poem as a whole, reveals of September 1666, we might think that its longing admiration for the authority of the Dutch navy rather contradicts the recycled 'The Character of Holland' of June 1665. Of course repurposing itself need not be read as contradiction for Marvell often seems happy enough to recycle materials; the celebration of Archibald Douglas in 'The Last Instructions' was itself recycled when Marvell wrote 'The Loyal Scot', and, as Martin Dzelzainis has shown, the anticlerical epigram on Colonel Blood was similarly spliced into 'The Loyal Scot'.⁸ Such repurposing need not, of course, be read as evidence of slippage for there seems no inconsistency in the uses to which Marvell put the figure of Douglas in the two poems. Where we might look more closely for argumentative and ideological slippage is that passage in 'The Character of Holland' where Marvell takes up the theme of religious toleration as practiced in Amsterdam, especially when we set it against his advocacy of religious liberty in the 1650s and his polemical warfare against the forces of intolerance, the forcing of conscience in the 1670s.

Here is Marvell's verse on Dutch toleration, and it is identical in each iteration of the 'Character':

Sure when religion did itself embark,
And from the east would westward steer its ark,
It struck, and splitting on this unknown ground,
Each one thence pillaged the first piece he found:
Hence Amsterdam, Turk-Christian-Pagan-Jew,

⁷ Margaret Anne Doody first noticed the baroque, indeed Roman Catholic, aesthetic in Marvell's description of Douglas's death; see Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 24; see, also, Martin Dzelzainis, 'Marvell and the Earl of Castlemaine', in Warren Chernaik and Martin Dzelzainis, eds., *Marvell and Liberty* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 298–9.

⁸ Dzelzainis, 'Marvell and the Dutch in 1665', 260.

Staple of sects and mint of schism grew,
That bank of conscience, where not one so strange
Opinion but finds credit, and exchange.
In vain for Catholics ourselves we bear;
The universal Church is only there.
(ll. 67–76)

It is hard, of course, to miss the casual jokiness of the passage, the Marvellian puns, the conflating of coins and conscience, the mockery of a universal church, the sensitivity to the perils of mixture with Marvell connecting and deriding commercial ambition and spiritual negligence, or indeed to miss the poem's broader critique of a '*Half-anders*' (l. 53) world where everything is fungible and no opinion so improbable or indifferent but finds credit and exchange. How similar, in one way, to Dryden's own ridicule of dissent, that send-up, in his wonderfully caustic formulation, of relations between dissenting commerce and conscience, 'Thus, heaping Wealth, by the most ready way/Among the *Jews*, which was to Cheat and Pray.'⁹

But Marvell's passage – unlike Dryden's portrait – also seems sensitive to the social dangers of commerce, its power to level difference. He not only equates dissenting conscience with commerce, but regrets an entire nation where credit (*i.e.* belief) has been narrowed to a financial term, and conscience functions as a mere bank, where money is in fact not only the coin of this realm, but its only measure of value. What seems at stake here is the dissolutive power of money, socially and spiritually. The Dutch deserve English contempt because the worship of money dissolves social bonds and levels hierarchy – that pillaging force of splintered religion. And in gauging the significance of that accusation, we might remember Marvell's attachment to the world of great men: Lord Fairfax, Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, the Duke of Buckingham, Lord Wharton, the Earl of Carlisle. Whatever else we might say about Marvell and the aristocracy of the spirit, his world was defined by social hierarchy and its bonds of trust.

⁹ *The Works of John Dryden*, 2: 23: *Absalom and Achitophel*, ll. 591–2.

In commenting on this passage, scholars have nicely caught its word play, but what they seem not to have heard is the echo of language from that strangest of all of Marvell's strange poems, 'The Unfortunate Lover', where the ark of the mother 'split[s] against the stone,/In a Caesarean section' (ll. 15–16). In 'The Character of Holland' it is the ark of religion that strikes and splits on unknown ground. Such is Marvell's account of estranged origins: the unfortunate lover born of Caesarean section amidst the storms and 'quarr'ling elements' (l. 26); the shipwreck and splitting of religion's ark that spawns an unholy, indifferent, unnatural and pillaging mixture of sects and schisms. The passage from 'The Unfortunate Lover' is one of the poet's strangest accounts of origins, and one of Marvell's weirdest pieces of self-reflection, for this poem is Marvell's own story, a narrative of violent origins, abandonment, and estrangement in the world.¹⁰ I am not suggesting that the account of the origins of sects and schism in the 'Character' is some kind of allegory of the self, but rather that what Marvell discovers, discloses, here is a shadow of selfhood, the passage raising what is always, in our appreciation of Marvell's topics and occasions, the puzzling relation between internal dramas and external events, between selfhood and the theater of the world.

This might seem rather to overburden a brief passage on the origin of sects, schisms, and strange opinion, but in fact the poem as a whole derives its power not from the jingoistic abuse of the foreign other – a program no doubt originating in the Anglo-Dutch rivalry that eventuated in the first of the trade wars in 1652 and one repeated in the second and third trade wars between England and the Dutch Republic – but even here (amidst the noise of pamphlets and characters) from the exploration of selfhood. That term has a national meaning as Marvell explores the proximities and differences between these two Protestant, trading nations, but also, and more obscurely, a deeply personal sense in which the work of self-imagining is somehow folded into the poem's program of nationhood and national self-definition.

¹⁰ See Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 74–102.

On the question of nationhood, scholars have worked in a very illuminating way, demonstrating how the very sympathies of religion and politics, the very proximity in the 1650s of English and Dutch mercantilism and religious zeal, prompted the work of national self-definition in the poem.¹¹ That program begins with a confession of sameness – of near-indivisibility – for Holland is fashioned from British soil, a mere off-scouring of Britain, Marvell engaged by what Marjorie Rubright has called ‘the Doppelgänger dilemma’.¹² In this and similar readings, Holland functions as a reflection of England, the project of difference driven by the fear of sameness, the ‘elasticity of the self-other divide’.¹³ The punning on ‘Half-anders/half-flanders/holl-anders’ is a wonderful emblem of this project, turning England itself into the other ‘half’ of Flanders, a verbal and visual pun in which the anagram asserts the proximity and half-identity of England and the Dutch republic by pressing sameness into the very matter of difference.¹⁴ In this account, Holland functions as ‘a sort of perverse mirror to England’, and with mirrors, doubles, reflective surfaces, and doppelgangers – boomerangs for Nigel Smith – we are deep into Marvell land.¹⁵ That the poet uses a variety of such figures for self-imagining and self-reflection, that reflexivity is the very essence of both his lyric and satiric work – this we have been appreciating since the publication of Rosalie Colie’s wonderful book, *My Echoing Song*.¹⁶ And many others have contributed to our understanding of not just the complexity but the difficulty of this work, which seems at times a source of entertainment for the poet,

¹¹ See John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics, 1603–1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 7, ‘The Archipelago Enlarged: Milton and Marvell to 1660’.

¹² Marjorie Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

¹³ Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas*, 18.

¹⁴ On Marvell’s puns in ‘The Character of Holland,’ see also Richard Todd, ‘Equilibrium and National Stereotyping in Marvell’s “Character of Holland”’, in Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, eds., *On The Celebrated and Neglected Poems of Andrew Marvell* (Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 190–1; and Michael Schoenfeldt, cited in Rubright, *The Doppelgänger Effect*, 18.

¹⁵ See Nigel Smith, ‘The Boomerang Theology of Andrew Marvell’, *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 29: 4 (2001): 139–55.

¹⁶ Rosalie Colie, *My Echoing Song: Andrew Marvell’s Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

almost hi-jinx, but at other moments a matter of pain and self-estrangement, a confrontation that seems close to a shudder.

The national reflecting, that 'othering' by which Marvell figures distinctions between England and its distorted double, is of course the occasion and ostensible purpose of a poem which derides Holland as the 'vomit of the sea', a 'wat'ry Babel', a land where 'Earth and Water play at level-coil', ruled by a 'King of Spades', boasting a 'water-Hercules butter-coloss', a land of hogs and boars that fights with 'case-butter shot and bullet-cheese' – a land altogether of the liminal, shifting, and melting self (ll. 7, 21, 28, 50, 94, 120). And in these terms, the program of derision allows reflection on Holland's better self, her other half – the soil of her origins – that nation 'To whom their weather-beaten province owes/Itself' (ll. 109–10). As Holland owes itself to English labor and English soil, what England sees in Holland is a piece of itself, an image distorted, but in its porous, shape-shifting character, a reflection nevertheless. The national-other turns out to be the national-self.

How like Marvell to curl so brilliantly and self-reflexively around his subject in this manner. And the porous, indeterminate, melting, shape-shifting self is, as I have suggested, not only a national story, but also a story told by Marvell – brilliantly and often – of the individual self. For self-division is in some sense the floor plan of Marvell's poetry with its exploration of eyes and tears, bodies and spirits, resolved souls and created pleasures, its unfortunate lover 'Torn into flames, and ragg'd with wounds', its abject hero famished and feasted, consumed and increased, the very 'amphibium of Life and Death' (l. 40). 'The Unfortunate Lover' is of course an operatic version of the divided self, but we can observe the figure in less melodramatic forms elsewhere in the poet's double-mindedness and self-contradiction. Here is the '*Half-anders*' world of England and the Dutch Republic reimagined by, and as the story of, Andrew Marvell, whom we might think of, by means of a play upon his own name, as half-anders: so, in a fashion, he signed himself in the commendatory verse he wrote for Dr Witty's translation of *Popular Errors*, published in 1651, 'Andrew Marvell. A. F. [Andreae Filiae]: Andrew Marvell, son of Andrew, half-Andrew, half-anders.¹⁷ And

¹⁷ *Poems*, 175.

further, for a poet with a knowledge of ancient languages and a sense of multilingual puns, perhaps there is more play concealed in the phrase, *'Half-anders'*; in Dutch, Danish, and Norwegian Anders or Andres or Andreas is the same as the English 'Andrew', the variants all derived from the ancient Greek for 'man' or 'masculine': half-anders, half Andrew, half man. Perhaps as well the Dutch meaning of 'anders' as other, or alien, or different is also haunting the word. The 'Marvel of Peru' ('The Mower Against Gardens', l. 18) has turned into the Anders or *'Half-anders'* of the Dutch Republic: a hero of toleration, of liberty, of tender conscience, who defames the very principle of religious difference.

I have suggested that this scheme of self-imagining – this splitting and projecting – is a kind of floor plan for Marvell's lyric poetry, but it functions in powerful and disturbing ways in the polemic prose as well. Listen as Marvell is engaged by and engages his chief adversary Samuel Parker in *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*, ridiculing the narcissism, sexual ambivalence, and self-conceit of that 'Platonick Knight-Errant', a figure who might well remind us, in a distorted way, of the poet glancing his image in the shimmering splinters of his own verse, glancing his image, as it were, in a broken Looking-Glass:

For all [Parker's] Courtship had no other operation than to make him stil more in love with himself: and if he frequented [the Gentlewomen's] company, it was only to speculate his own Baby in their Eyes. But being thus, without Competitor or Rival, the Darling of Both Sexes in the Family and his own Minion; he grew beyond all measure elated, and that crack of his Scull, as in broken Looking-Glasses, multiply'd him in self-conceit and imagination.¹⁸

The passage is richly suggestive of Marvell's lyric modes of self-imagining, here of course turned outwards and projected satirically against his enemy, but strangely echoing moments in the lyric poetry where Marvell turns inwards to self-reflection.

¹⁸ Marvell, *Prose Works*: 1: 76.

Andrew Marvell's subject is the porous, indeterminate, shape-shifting self, and 'The Character of Holland' displays the poet at work on the problem of national identity and of selfhood, and the two seem, for a moment in this poem, strangely, weirdly interchangeable. The assault on Dutch toleration is Marvell's own; these are his opinions, which is not to say that he did not also believe in the toleration he so ardently supported elsewhere; but the opposite opinion, the dismissive ridicule of toleration, also belonged to him. What does it mean both to own and to deride the very same opinion? In one way of course it might seem merely a matter of tactics, the clarion call of opportunity ringing in the 1650s and again in the 1660s and beyond to which Marvell responds first with an assault on the 'character' of Holland, celebrating the English Commonwealth, and then in the mid-1660s erasing those commonwealth associations and celebrating – prematurely it turned out – the Royal navy and its victory over the Dutch at Solebay. And not to be caught out by the reversal of fortune, Marvell turned again, in 'The Last Instructions', to trash that very navy and embrace Dutch valor and masculine authority. In one sense Marvell simply played the cards most useful to him at a particular moment: vilifying the Dutch in two trade wars, but then turning tail and using their martial valor and masculine vigor as a hammer against the corruptions, transgressions, and cowardice of the Restoration court. What did Marvell really think of the character of Holland, or of Anglo-Dutch relations? Did he embrace tenderness of conscience or was it to be simply an opportunity for ridicule? Which is it, we might like to know?

This becomes a more complex question when we answer: both at once, that the mechanism of regret and abuse is premised on sameness rather than on difference, a premise that comes startlingly clear in the verses and reversals of 'The Character of Holland', a nation that is the Protestant vanguard, bulwark against French hegemony, and the very image of sea-faring mercantilism to which England of course aspired. You can deride the Dutch republic as a mere off-scouring of English soil, but in so doing what you create is an effect where self and other turn out to be shadows of the same thing. So the story of opportunism in the shifting instantiations of 'The Character of Holland' turns into a story of self-imagining and self-understanding. Of course Marvell had the intellectual capacity to understand the dialectic, to see the

force of sameness and otherness; but it is also true that the poet and polemicist had a body that seems to have been the very paradigm of sameness and otherness, that he was a male but not a progenitor, that he was derided as a neutered thing, that he was caught up by an exquisite self-consciousness that could ventriloquize oppositions, and dialectically argue identity as difference.

What's the problem with the Dutch, anyway? The answer is Andrew Marvell: the character of Holland is also, it turns out, the character of Andrew Marvell.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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