

# Forum

## Marvell's "Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers," an "Eclogue of the Golden Age"?

To the Editor:

Patrick Cullen's interesting and ingenious article (Oct. 1969 *PMLA*) should be discussed by specialists of each of the three poets it deals with. I shall concentrate on Marvell, but with a few preliminary remarks on Spenser and Milton, since the method used in the article has points common to its three studies.

Is "April" in *The Shepherdes Calender* an "Eclogue of the Golden Age"? I wonder, even by Cullen's criteria. The Virgilian tradition affects the form of a prophecy. Elizabeth, by then forty-six years old, and hardly a "child" (p. 1563) any longer, though still her parents' "daughter" (l. 50), had been on the throne for twenty-one years when the poem was published; had she been able to bring the Golden Age back into England it should have been done by then, but Cullen admits that the world of *The Shepherdes Calender* is largely "characterized by fraud, deceit, injustice, and failure." In sober fact the highly poetic praise that is conferred on her concerns her person mostly and the state very little if at all; I see no "ordering of life" in her rather passive position as the receiver of worship. But later (p. 1565) Cullen somewhat cavalierly dismisses the historical "Elisa" altogether, in favor of the symbolic one. Being too *terre-à-terre* I shall not rise with him to that level. Certainly his interpretation of the daughter of Pan by Syrinx, i.e., "Song" (p. 1563), is attractive and deserves careful examination by Spenserian critics. I should believe in it more readily if the next stanzas (ll. 55–90) showed her as a source of song; but only after Pan and Syrinx have reappeared (ll. 91–94) do the Muses play with their "violines" and sing "for Eliza," who just listens. True she will grace, as fourth Grace, a dance. After which she will resume her hieratic attitude until she eventually is asked to "ryse up" (l. 145) and "thanke" the "Damsells" (among whom the poet will distribute "Damsines"—an unnoticed pun?) "for her song," i.e., for their song. I cannot imagine that Cullen should have failed to recognize the archaic plural pronoun.

With Milton he is on firmer ground, since "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" explicitly mentions "the age of gold" and, at one point (l. 135), announces its return. As in Virgil this event will be occasioned by the birth of a "child" (*stricto sensu*). Cullen notes, with praiseworthy candor, the differences between the pagan and the Christian poets; Milton, he says, "reverses," as a "misperception," in the latter part of his "eclogue" (Milton calls it "hymn," l. 17, or "ode,"

l. 24); Virgil's "cyclical conception," which he had accepted in the former part (p. 1567). Now Milton certainly corrects the premature hopes of the early Christians—in 1629 he is wise after the event—and warns us that we must wait for "the wakeful trump of doom" before we enter felicity; but is there any allusion to a "pagan cyclical time" even in the earlier, and feebler, part of the ode? I cannot see it, though Cullen uses the epithet "cyclical" four times in less than one page. That, however, is nothing in comparison to his use of the noun "meditator" as a substitute for Milton: twenty times by my reckoning; to which should be added "meditative," six times, and "meditation," five times. Clearly Cullen believes, like Napoleon, that there is only one efficacious figure of rhetoric, viz. repetition. But in a perverse anti-Napoleonic mind the effect may be the arousing of the spirit of contradiction: is Milton's poem a "meditation"? I admire as much as any fellow critic Professor Louis Martz's work in that field, and have lately advised my fellow countrymen to take example on the seventeenth century—contest less and meditate more; but I am afraid that "meditation" has now become a vogue word among critics. For Milton, at least in his early life down to "Lycidas," the verb "meditate" meant what "meditari" meant for Virgil (who used it to translate *μελετᾶν*): *practise* (i.e., lyrical verse-making). I leave it to the Miltonists to decide whether he was of a meditative cast of mind, or at what age he acquired the habit of meditation, possibly favored by blindness.

As regards Marvell I beg leave to express more than doubts, rather a personal opinion based on half a century's intimate acquaintance. Cullen considers that he has discovered a hitherto unnoticed aspect of "The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers" and I readily grant him the novelty of his interpretation. He begins with this admission: "Certainly the poem's surface appearance makes it an unlikely candidate for the golden-age tradition"; and then comes the revelation: "It consists of a play on the golden age of childhood innocence and chastity vis-à-vis the typically Renaissance golden age, the age before the reign of the hard and chaste rules of Honor" (p. 1568). This already sounds ambitious enough; but before the critic ends he has reached the further conclusion that "Honor, the unnatural and artificial restriction of the bud from flowering, is the excess of T. C.'s human art." Thus he connects the poem with "The Mower against Gardens"; he might rather have thought of "Maria," near the end of "Upon Appleton House," beautifying, straightening, sweetening, purifying "Gardens, Woods, Meads, Rivers" (ll. 676–96). But Marvell (must we

repeat it?) is a poet who seldom repeats himself. It is at best hazardous to infer the meaning of one poem from another. And it need not be done here since Marvell speaks plainly, at any rate to plain men.

In Stanza i the only excuse for discovering “the golden age” is the phrase “golden daies.”<sup>1</sup> On the strength of a common factor Cullen deems the two phrases if not synonymous at least parallel (he will speak of their “rather complex interrelation,” p. 1569). He then elegantly defines that period of T. C.’s life as “the age of her presexual chastity” (p. 1568). Later she is to become, no less elegantly, “a naturally or [?] sexually desirable object.” We should be a little nearer Marvell if we said “she becomes nubile” or “marriageable,” for marriage is as clearly implied in this poem as it is absent from “To his Coy Mistress.”

As early as Stanza ii, however, we have left the golden age behind, and (according to Cullen) we witness “the return to the iron age of Honor”; that neither “iron” nor “Honor” appears in the text might be considered immaterial if the critic could prove his case and connect Marvell with those Renaissance poets who advocate the return to “the age antedating honor and society’s false restriction of natural urges” (p. 1569). Cullen names only Tasso;<sup>2</sup> why not Donne also, Marvell’s master in several ways?<sup>3</sup> But the unprejudiced reader will see that there is no such advocacy in this poem: the love that T. C. will frighten is “The wanton Love” (note the definite article), indeed, Cupid with his notorious “Bow.” She appears as a “virtuous Enemy of Man” in general, but there will be one exception, he “who can appease” her enmity; honor—not named in the poem—means neither more nor less to her than standing on her guard against male seductive “trains,” as described in Stanza lxxx of “Upon Appleton House” and duly escaped by Mary Fairfax, whose “*Destiny*” also is marriage.

Stanza iii strikes a slightly different note: the poet, being or pretending to be concerned with his own fate, passes from T. C.’s proud virtue to her no less proud beauty; she will indeed be as scornful as any other object of Petrarchan adoration; but we do not find Cullen’s “warring of chastity against nature” (p. 1569), merely the convention of courtly love that presents the lover as the abject conquest of the woman he loves.

Yet not until Stanza iv does Cullen flagrantly go against the text of the poem. Here he attributes to T. C. a “messianic mission” (p. 1569); if this is not inflation, what is? By a transfer of epithets we might say that the critic suffers from a messianic delusion. The poet clearly states that he no longer foresees the future but gives advice for the present: “Mean time . . .” He returns to the child in the flower garden. I see no justification for Cullen’s metamorphosing of

the flowers into women: in love poems other women are explicitly or at least implicitly sacrificed to the one woman the poet is praising; here they are ignored.

The distortion of Stanza v may appear comparatively slight in Cullen’s explication; it merely results from his prior intruding of free love. For no one will deny that “T. C. herself is, now, like the bud; to pick the bud before it has a chance to blossom and fructify is to go against the purposes of nature. Nature requires that buds grow into flowers, or blossoms into fruits, and once grown into flowers, or fruits to be picked and enjoyed.” All right (syntax apart), but is each bud, i.e., girl, to be “enjoyed” by one or by many? Let us return to the title of the poem: Marvell’s verse does not deal with the female sex but with one of them; although sheltered by initials she is not anonymous; she is too young to read the verse; it will, primarily if not exclusively, be read by people who know her, first of all her parents. Even in 1971 it is difficult to imagine parents who would be pleased to read such “Advice to *their* daughter” as Cullen imagines, an exhortation to lead the fashion back to primeval promiscuity. In his conclusion he makes this admission: the poet expresses the “longing” for that overthrow of Honor “somewhat cavalierly perhaps.” Granting that the poem may (but need not) have been composed while Marvell associated with Cavaliers, some of them “deboshed,” it yet remains that one’s daughters, as well as mother, not to mention wife, are always excepted from the general invitation to women to prove kind to all lovers.

There is a virtue that modern critics seem to neglect, viz. humility. When Marvell shows us a child “in a Prospect of Flowers” let us see a child, whose actions are unpredictable and who can pass without warning from harmless discerning “simplicity” to destructive activities. When the poet speaks of “Buds” let us think of incipient flowers; and when he shocks us by giving a somber conclusion to a playful poem, why not accept Margoliouth’s historical explanation, reinforced by Mrs Duncan-Jones? Cullen does not even mention it but pronounces that without his own explanation “it is unlikely that the . . . final stanza will make much sense.” Before this Theophila Cornewall an elder sister of hers bearing the same Christian name had died while still an “Infant.” Hence the poem does not express the fear that sexuality should be frustrated—this is Cullen’s fear in the mid-twentieth century—but the fear that a seventeenth-century child should not reach womanhood.

Whether our age be that of gold or that of iron Cullen obviously is its “child,” more dangerous to poems than any untutored “child” to “Buds.” And the same can be said of a large family of critics. Therefore my critique is aimed not at him but at a criticism

not so very “New” by now but dying hard. Using pseudo-scientific language it tends to confusion since it sets out to find everything in anything—an unscientific procedure. Linking Marvell’s “Picture of Little T. C.” with Virgil’s “Pollio” reminds me of a music-hall joke heard in the ’twenties. Question: “Why is George Bernard Shaw like Norma Shearer?” Answer: “Because they both have beautiful white beards . . . except Norma Shearer.”

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cullen might have found some comfort, if not exactly support, in Mr. Kermode’s note on l. 5: “Gives them names: a task traditionally attributed to Eve in Eden.” If not the pagan blissful state we should have its Christian equivalent.

<sup>2</sup> Marvell does not name Tasso, nor does he apparently quote from his works; but very near the beginning of *The Rehearsal Transpos’d*, he (without naming Guarini) mentions “Amaryllis’s dilemma” (Grosart, III, 8; see also p. 85), showing sufficiently his scorn for that sort of protest against “troppo dura legge” that forbids “il peccar . . . si dolce.” On that theme see Nicholas J. Perella, “Amarilli’s Dilemma: *The Pastor Fido* and Some English Authors,” *CL*, 12 (1960), 348–59.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., “The Dampe,” ll. 11–12. On this topic it suffices to refer to Louis Bredvold’s article, “The Naturalism of Donne in Relation to Some Renaissance Traditions,” *JEGP*, 22 (Oct. 1923), 471–502. Louis Lecocq, *La Satire en Angleterre de 1588 à 1603* (Paris: Didier, Perversion 1969), pp. 57–58, after quoting S. K. Heninger, “The Renaissance Version of Pastoral,” *JHI*, 22 (1961), adds: “Il faut préciser que certains regrets de l’âge d’or ne sont que des jeux poétiques . . . Donne suit cette mode dans son ‘Elegie xvii,’ vers 38 sqq., où l’on ne trouve rien de sérieux ni d’amer.”

## The Politics of Eighteenth-Century Satire

To the Editor:

W. B. Carnochan’s recent expedition into the virtually unmapped territory of late eighteenth-century satire (March 1970 *PMLA*) will doubtless provide essential guidance to future students of the subject. But I think that Carnochan’s essay needs correction in some particulars and that some alternatives to his hypotheses should be considered.

Carnochan gives William Gifford a prominent place in his essay. Gifford, he thinks, stands at “the far point” (p. 260) of changes in Augustan satiric theory and practice. He twice quotes Gifford’s statement (in the preface to his translation of Juvenal, 1802) that satire must overawe folly as well as vice in order to demonstrate the sublimity of the Juvenal to whom Gifford looked as satiric mentor; and in Gifford’s *Epistle to Peter Pindar* (1800)—especially in its ab-

sence of irony and its melodramatic treatment of evil—Carnochan hears the voice of both a sublime and a sentimental Juvenal. This interpretation would be more convincing if there were not better ways of accounting for Gifford’s satiric qualities.

One of these is the likelihood that politics—the overheated political atmosphere of the 1790’s—was a primary cause of Gifford’s ferocity. Most readers today, if they chance on Gifford’s satires and know anything about their subjects, are astonished or incredulous at the disproportion between Gifford’s invective and its victims. Nor were Gifford’s the only satires of their day to be marred by this disproportion. It is understandable that Pindar supposed Gifford to be the author (actually it was Thomas James Mathias) of *The Pursuits of Literature*, a satire which first appeared in 1794, was added to copiously in successive editions, and reached its sixteenth edition in 1812.<sup>1</sup> This work, like Gifford’s satires, appealed to that segment of the English public whose fears had been thoroughly aroused by the French Revolution—who had begun, in fact, to imagine radicals lurking behind nearly every bush. Just as Mathias stalked men like “Monk” Lewis, so Gifford stalked the Della Cruscan, because he really believed them to be subversive menaces. Although Gifford’s *Baviad* and *Maeviad* are less obviously political than *The Pursuits of Literature*, a careful reading of them reveals that Gifford devotes more attention (if not always his most violent rhetoric) to a Della Cruscan like Robert Merry, who was also a radical, than he does to the merely literary offenders. It may be less tenable to claim that Gifford’s *Epistle to Peter Pindar* was politically motivated: there are no overtly political references in the poem, and since Pindar had recently attacked him, Gifford may simply have been retaliating. But regardless of motivation, this poem too doubtless appealed mainly to the politically conservative; because of his satires on the Pitt administration, Pindar had acquired the reputation of a radical for readers like Gifford’s, and they must therefore have relished the verbal drubbing which Gifford gave him. Furthermore, it is extremely doubtful that this drubbing would have been so harsh if Pindar had been politically conservative. In short, instead of attributing Gifford’s declamatory tone to a “sublime” or “sentimental” Juvenal, I would attribute it, like Mathias’, in part to fear. Stemming from the French Revolution, Gifford’s fear found an object in the Della Cruscan, and perhaps also in Pindar, who seemed to him representative of the revolutionary disorder and the subversion of values which threatened England.<sup>2</sup>

Carnochan observes that Gifford’s satiric theory (and, presumably, his practice) does not offer much that is “intellectually new” (p. 260). Had Carnochan