

FALLEN FRUIT, FALLEN MEN AND A FALLEN STATE: IMAGES IN MARVELL'S PASTORAL POETRY

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God Almighty first planted a garden. And indeed it is the purest of human pleasures. It is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man, without which buildings and palaces are but gross handyworks.

(Francis Bacon)

In this paper, I would like to approach the poetry and poetics of Marvell by examining the way he uses images of fruit as symbols, metaphors and emblems. After an examination of the subject, I would then like to move on to discussing the green background, in other words, the garden and landscapes in which Marvellian fruit is to be found. Finally, I hope to be able to demonstrate how such an approach can help us understand both this enigmatic figure and some of the reasons for the sour disagreement between Marvell scholars engaged on the study of a sweet subject.

I am sure that for most readers of seventeenth century poetry the most significant fruit of the century, if not in the whole literary canon, is the one "whose mortal taste/ Brought death into our world" (*Paradise Lost* 1.2-3). Milton's apple has had rather more drastic results than the one Snow White half-swallowed. We have not been brought back to bliss by the kiss of a fair prince - or a Republican - instead, as Milton so graphically

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demonstrates to us in the closing books of his epic poem, apple-induced kisses, or perhaps simply apple-induced disobedience, have turned human history into a neverending series of battles interrupted by brief periods of peace; paradise regained is still a long way off. Penelope Fitzgerald does not agree either with Christopher Hill or Michael Wilding or Graham Turner, all three of whom try to persuade us that Milton is liberal if not revolutionary in his politics and marital affairs, and neither will she consent to the idea that an apple is at the centre of our first parents' downfall: it is not an apple, but a fig. Logical enough: figs and fig leaves. Whether or not we believe Milton to be a crabbed old Puritan, it is clear that as far as fruit is concerned, he has a rather short menu, and looking through a concordance for myriad legions of exotic items would be a fruitless task. If Milton took so long to describe the events leading up to the first bite of the first fruit and the terrible consequences which followed thereafter, we might think it just as well that he did not turn his attention to the countless other varieties. What we should try and bear in mind, throughout our investigation into Marvell's use of fruit, is precisely the width of meaning and implication that Milton achieves by his use of *fruit* in the second line of poem. We might immediately think of fruit as the apple itself as well as the consequence of the mortal bite, but we should not forget other connotations which might universalise the poem's reach, at least this is what Milton supporters would have us believe; a few examples would be: fruits of the earth, the fruits of reason (Chaucer), the fruits of victory, fruits of the body, loins or womb and so on.

Even though Marvell's use of fruit might not be nearly so wide and extensive as his references to trees, flowers and other plants, they occupy a special place in his affections. Pierre Legouis tells us that "He enthuses as a gourmet, the company of apples, 'the luxurious clusters of vine', nectarines, peaches, and melons." (Legouis, 1968: 45) He might have added strawberries as well. However, this lifelong Marvellian admirer has some words of caution which advise against this particular paper. Legouis adds:

Of fruit he has not named ten kinds, but since the renumeration of them, almost complete, is found in one famous stanza of *The Garden*, and *The Horatian Ode* contains the fairly technical term 'Bergamot', hasty admirers have made of him, at little cost, an expert in pomology. (Legouis, 1968: 54)

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We cannot agree with this statement for two reasons. In the first place, fruity images can also be found in *Bermudas*, and secondly, when they appear, as, for example, the ‘gelid strawberries’ in *Upon Appleton House*, they are rather striking occurrences, as bizarre as those of his human grasshoppers or that of man as an inverted tree. This might sound a little impressionistic, but Shakespeare makes two references to strawberries which are surely equally memorable to both fruit followers and ordinary citizens alike. The Duke of Gloucester’s request for the strawberries which he had seen in the Bishop of Ely’s Holbourn garden becomes part of Richard’s decision to execute Hastings; we know that he will not crush the red pulp between his teeth until the traitor’s head has been cut off. The megalomaniac Gloucester enjoying his strawberries, satisfied with the bloody execution, becomes a powerful off-the-stage scene. Did he have cream, sugar and sweet wine ? George Peele, a contemporary of Shakespeare’s, in his *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1581) includes cream and eroticism in the following juicy lines:

When as the rye reach to the chin,
And chopcherry, chopcherry ripe within,
Strawberries swimming in the cream,
And schoolboys playing in the stream,
Then O, then O, then O, my true love said,
Till that time come again,
She could not live a maid.

Whether her desires are ignited more by fruit than (naked?) lads playing in the stream is debatable, but clearly the drawing together of red and white and strawberries and eroticism has been made. What really made Othello mad with anger and rage ? We now realise that it was not suspicions of what his young gallant subordinates were up to which riled him, but the fact that the handkerchief which Cassio supposedly wiped his beard with was the one **spotted with strawberries!** We will never know the precise details of what the gift meant to Othello and Desdemona, but it is surely suggestive of something very personal and intimate, the sort of secret we do not want to share with outsiders, thus its being made known to another comes to signify the greatest betrayal of all. Art students and historians know of a Flemish strawberry, that painted by Hieronymous Bosch:

The center of the triptych portrays *The Garden of Delights*, a crowded canvas of nudes, both male and female, of giant fruits, birds

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and fish, of strange surrealistic forms both animate and inanimate. All inhabit a *locus amoenus* landscape where sun and shade, meadow, grove and stream are pleasingly if fantastically portrayed. The many interpretations of this central panel rival in number and variety the interpretations of Marvell's *The Garden*. Two suggestive parallels with Marvell's are worthy of note. One is the use of fruit - gorgeous, huge, brilliantly coloured strawberries, grapes and cherries - in an obvious sexual sense, in repeated and intimate juxtaposition with the nude female forms in various attitudes all over the panel. The effect is lush but disquieting. (Spencer, 1973: 96-7)

Although we will refer to some other of Jeffrey Spencer's observations later, we can already see the clear associations of blood and passion with strawberries. We must try and consider their emblematic importance within, in this case, *Upon Appleton House*. With this sort of sexy strawberries around, it is now difficult to sustain that the poem is a hymn of praise to the Puritan qualities of Fairfax and daughter and their England. What has the Puritan garden state come to if it might alternatively be a garden of earthly delights? What have we been made to believe about Marvell ?

This particular use of an emblem or image might be one of the parts of the poem which sticks in our mind, but perhaps the clearest indication that Marvell is an odd fruit comes from his much commented ecstatic encounter with fruit in *The Garden*, the tactile quality of which demonstrates that Keats is of a different vintage but of a similar growth:

What wondrous life is this I lead!
Ripple apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarene, and curious peach,
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,
Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass. (33-40)

For Legouis, though it is not exclusively his opinion, this is the central 'gourmet' stanza describing the pleasure of sensual contact with soft, pliant, sweet-smelling substances. We might have difficulties in describing

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the exact nature of the sensations involved, but there are clearly erotic. We just have to think back to the *Song of Solomon*, a text which Marvellian scholars, by frequent omission, believe that the their Puritan MP and poet did not read very much. Just for the record, we should remember that after praising the beloved, we are reminded ‘our couch is green’. (1.16). We may best remember the references to milk, honey, pomegranates(apples yet again!) and spices, but there are others which are closer to the Marvellian lexicon. For example, in the bride’s reverie we are told “With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.(2.3). Sustain me with raisins, and refresh with me with apples, for I am sick with love.(2.5).” After many references to the brides’ breasts’ colour and softness, the writer of the song cannot finish his description of the queenly maiden without reverting to fruit:

How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!
You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of of your breath like apples,
and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly
gliding over lips and teeth. (2.6-9)

Marvell would have undoubtedly approved of the idea that if words begin to fail you, the best way to communicate intense feeling is through fruit. However, it is quite common, and understandable, as *The Garden* was first written in Latin, to try and draw parallels between Marvell and Ovid, and/or Marvell and medieval garden conventions, without paying sufficient attention to the Bible. This is possibly the result of the endeavour to make Marvell less provincial and less of a typified Puritan, which is probably a necessary and praiseworthy manoeuvre. Of course, we could maintain that the *Song of Solomon* tells us of the love of the faithful for the church, whereas we have seen that is about a poet who had a passion for fruit.

Is Marvell, therefore open to erotic interpretations in spite of his insistence that “Two paradises ’twere in one/ To live in paradise alone?

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(*The Garden* 64/5) Such readings must first consider the bizarre battle of the books over the fruity fifth stanza. William Empson started it all off:

Melon, again, is the Greek for apple. (Empson, 1935: 132)

More was to come:

Although it has been more than once noted that ‘melon of Marvell’s fifth stanza is derived from the Greek ‘malum’ meaning ‘apple’, it is doubtful that there has been any comment on the noun ‘peach’, which, elliptical for ‘*Persicum malum*’, Persian apple, is another reference to the apple of Eden. The apple, named four times in the stanza, since the nectarine is ‘a variety of the common peach’, is the evil fruit of the Garden of Eden which drops upon the poet’s head and causes him, ensnared in the flowers of pleasure, to fall”. (ed. Carey, 1969: 247-8)

In other words, out of melons, peaches, nectarines, apples and grapes, only grapes are not apples. If this is beginning to appear nonsensical, we might be relieved to hear that

... the apple is not ‘named’ four times in the stanza. The apple is named once, the peach once the nectarine once, and the melon once. It may be that Marvell was aware of etymological reflections among the words and intended his readers to be aware of them. I think it pretty unlikely. (ed. Carey, 1969: 238)

Although it might be received as a return to common sense, this comment does not take us any nearer to understanding the significance of the fruity items, nor does it consider the perplexing question of apple madness. What pithy subtext can be found at an apple’s core? Apples can hardly universalise fruit simply because apples are not an exotic fruit for a northern European, whereas peaches, grapes, melons and nectarines belong to that catalogue of southern pleasures that the nightingale’s song evoked for Keats. Furthermore, for people with dental problems, apples could be painfully associated with bleeding gums and pain, whereas peaches are soft, yielding and pleasurable. It is perfectly true that a peach is a Persian apple and that nectarine is a kind of peach; is also true, and equally useful to remember, that melon is an anagram of lemon.

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I would now like to outline some of the pleasurable associations of peaches and melons, with a little help from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. *The Boorde Dietary* (1542) tells us that “Peaches do mollify the belly, and be colde.” Sylvester Du Bartas(1591) mentions “the velvet Peach” (1591), **velvet** being an adjective that often alternates with **downy**, as in Thomson’s *The Seasons - Autumn* (1776) “The downy peach, the shining plum, The ruddy, fragrant nectarine”. Autumnal ripeness often becomes a figure for the sexually attractive female, as in this description from Miss Braddon’s *Ishmael* (1884): “A gray velvet bodice that fitted the plump, supple figure, as the rind fits the peach.” We could not create the same effect with a mundane apple. Its powers of suggestion clarify Prufrock’s reference to the same fruit, which, superficially concerned with dexterity with cutlery, actually deals with several kinds of appetite. Although the nectarine is a variety of peach, etymologically they are not related, the origin of the word being obscure, it is, through its nectareous connotations, a fruit for the gods. As we saw a moment ago, Thomson had a high opinion of this fruit. Etheredge must have thought it had strong powers of evocation, as we can see from *Man of Mode* (V.i).” A strange desire I had to eat some fresh Nectaren’s”. There is no room for doubt, it is not an ordinary fruit. The melon, or the Greek apple, if we need reminding of the fact, has been used generically for various kinds of gourds, and so does not appear to have such a clear set of erotic associations as do the abovementioned peaches, or apples, though we are surely right in thinking that if it does carry with it connotations of fullness and ripeness then the man in *The Garden* who accidentally falls on top of the melons which have caused him to stumble will cause the fruit to explode in a moment of Onanistic splendour. The writers or compilers of *The Broode Dyetary* were not thinking along the same lines: they somberly declare that “Mylons doth engender euyll humours”. *The London Gazette* of 1691 (2742/2) contains a curious phrase that tells of “A piece of pure Gold in the form of Melon.” And finally, what would Marvell have said to Tennyson about the hidden vices of the Victorians on reading the conclusion to *The Princess*:

No lily-handed Baronet he,
A great broad-shoulder’d Englishman,
A lord of fat prize-oxen and of sheep,
A raiser of huge melons and of pine,
A patron of some thirty charities,
A pamphleteer on guano and on grain. (84-89)

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We would like to be able to believe that we have convinced some people that by reducing fruit to apple, we are missing out on a whole series of wonderful sensual experiences. There are several objections to this. Defenders of pippins can accuse us of simplifying our definition of their fruit by not taking into account its own multiplicity; there is surely something sensuous in the custard apple and exotic, if not threatening, in the spikey pineapple. Secondly, although it is arguable that there are numerous varieties of fruit in *The Garden*, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the crucial stanza's emphasis falls on **falling**, in other words sin and damnation, as first fruit and then man, plummet to the ground.

No one doubts that *Upon Appleton House* has strong political links with Fairfax's refusal to join the fight against the Scots. Readings of all sorts suggest that both the story about the rescue of Isabel Thwaites and the tour of the estate indicate to Fairfax either that he was wrong to withdraw from public life or that he was acting correctly to do so. Whatever the verdict, the political context is generally recognised as being there. With *The Garden*, opinion is divided. Frank Kermode's use of double negatives in his comment " .. it is comforting to reflect that the date of *The Garden* is quite unknown, so that it cannot be positively stated to be the direct record of some personal experience at Nun Appleton(ed. Carey 1969: 251) is representative of doubt about the affair whereas the reason why this lack of knowledge should be *comforting* (sic) gives some indication of what he considered critical practice to be. The varieties of fruit we have been considering are also found in another poem, *The Bermudas*:

He gave us this eternal spring,
Which here enamels everything,
And sends the fowl to us in care,
On daily visits through the air.
He hangs in shades the orange bright,
And does in the pom'granates close,
Jewels more rich than Ormus shows,
He makes the figs our mouth to meet,
And throws the melons at our feet,
But apple plants of such a price,
No tree could ever bear them twice. (31-24)

Elizabeth Donno states that Marvell had read or had had access to Waller's *The Battle of the Summer Islands* (1645) and Captain John Smith's *The*

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General History of Virginia, New England and Summer Isles (1624), so we can assume that Marvell perceives *The Bermudas* as something and somewhere exotic and distant. At the same time, we should not forget that on several occasions Marvell's equates Nunappleton estate with both perfection and England:

O thou, that dear and happy isle
The garden of the world ere while,
Thou paradise of four seas,
Which heaven planted us to please,
But, to exclude the world, did guard
With watery if not flaming sword;
What luckless apple did we taste,
To make us mortal, and thee waste? (321-328)

Now, apparently, the promised land is not the Bermudas with its profit-making pineapples, nor that peculiar garden where birds Platonically become souls but England at some moment during the Republic when some luckless apple was tasted in unknown circumstances by a mysterious "we". Sceptics will some see their fears confirmed: there seems to be no way of making coherent sense of Marvell's fruit, nor his poetry.

To reach a satisfactory conclusion, it is necessary to contextualise our fruit: that is to try and achieve a coherent idea as to the nature of the garden in which it is to be plucked. Consequently, we have to define our terms of reference. Let us return to Jeffrey Spencer's remarks about *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. His emphasis on the juxtaposition of nude female forms and suggestive fruits does seem to be a long way from our common conception of England's green and pleasant land and the habits, climate and customs of poets and their readers in the middle of the seventeenth century. It is conceivable to argue that Marvell might have harboured a secret passion for Mary Fairfax which he had to suppress, hence 'gelid strawberries', but we are still a long way from being able to view matters comprehensively; to say simply that it is fruitless to look for consistency or that everything can be put down to unmentionable desires is unsatisfactory.

In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth reprimands himself for the way he became drunk with nature while young and congratulates himself for the sombre maturity which has enabled him to see its real value. Throughout

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his and Coleridge's poetry runs the belief that nature is the place for bodily and mental health, whereas if we are pent up in the city, we are likely to suffer. The moment has come to emphasise that nature and gardens are two completely different things. Both cities and gardens are constructs, outside whose walls lies benovolent or malignant nature. Let us now consider some of the major characteristics of Renaissance gardens in order to clear up this and other points. A garden is not simply a place to escape to, nor is it planned for pleasure alone, it is designed for the restoration of the body and soul, as well as moral improvement. It is the highest form of horticulture, black tulips and wonderful exotic fruit show man's genius rather than his abuse of nature (Damon take good note). Shaping and reshaping landscape obeys the same logic: when the Franciscan friar Bernadino Caimi transforms a mountain top "into a model of Palestine with several 'stations' providing a 'via Crucis' for people who were unable to travel to the Holy Land" (Coffin 1972: 33) this is not a case of overreaching or vanity but an act of service on behalf of God. Gardens can induce pleasure, but also "feelings of fear and confusion" (Coffin 1972: 44). They can contain caves, grottoes and mazes, which became one of Borges' favourite emblems, stressing, as he does, that many labyrinths have no ways out. Gardens can contain earthly delights, whether they be strawberries or naked men or women, or both, or all three items, but gardens can also be terrible places, for example Circe's enchanted garden. We can now appreciate that Marvell's concept of the garden has a lot in common with these Renaissance ideas. The flooding of the meadow and the mock-fortresses of Nunappleton estate, the exotic fruits (at least for English gardens), the peaches, melons and nectarines of *The Garden* are surely compatible with this model. Once we have rejected the idea that gardens must be related to momentary pleasures and the punishment meted out to mankind in Genesis, Marvell's use of fruit emblems makes more sense.

If it is useful to plant Marvell's fruit trees in a Renaissance garden, it is also useful to reconsider the notion of genre. Marvell's garden poetry is often referred to as pastoral or neopastoral. In an article published in 1986, Alistair Fowler combines an attack on the coupling of Marvell to the pastoral tradition with an attack on Raymond Williams and his approach.

Pastoral knows nothing of buildings, or gardens, or estates. All the topics of the so-called estate poems are georgic, the mode for representing cultivated nature. The seasonal cycle: abundance of produce, the contentment with a sufficient estate idealized in terms of

the Golden Age: renunciation of grandeur, moral virtue. (Fowler 1986: 4-5)

Alistair Fowler believes that by reading these poems as Georgic, we give them “coherence in generic terms” and, we are meant to assume, a much wider coherence. How can we use this approach to the small group of poems we have been considering? We again avoid the pitfall of considering Marvell’s fruit as exclusively theological or doctrinal in origin; we do not have to go on a wild apple hunt. We can understand the themes of contentment which lie at the heart of *Upon Appleton House* and *The Garden*. It might appear odd that such a large estate or such a rich fruitful garden can be made to represent sufficiency for one man, either for Fairfax or for the narrator who loves laurel. Alistair Fowler argues that we should not forget the emphasis on good husbandry or the fact that in later estate poems, those written in other decades or centuries, the emphasis shifts onto the grandeur of house and ground as a reflection of the grandeur of their owner. It is particularly noteworthy that Marvell, at the beginning of *Upon Appleton House* stresses the modesty of the building and questions grandeur: the “unproportioned dwellings”. Perhaps the most useful result of the Georgic approach is that it now allows us to pull together many threads and thus conclude. I have tried to argue that Marvell’s use of fruit images should not be restricted to creating an apple monopoly, as this in turns leads to an obsession with original sin. A return to Renaissance garden thinking is more rewarding. The latter approach would seem to be at odds with an historical approach, whether new or traditional, as we would place Marvell in another age, an age that precedes his Puritanism. However, Marvell’s rejection of ostentation in favour of contentment satisfies both readings. He can be seen as rejecting establishment views and/or harking back to a Golden Age, which might refer to early days of the Commonwealth or something ahistorical and sensual which belongs to the genre he has written in. My major conclusion is that Marvell is much more of a Renaissance man than the contextualisation within Puritanism would initially allow. Once this step has been taken, we are justified in rejecting the parameters of this paper, and simply replace them by fruit, men and genre. I will finish by adding that the Georgic analysis Alistair Fowler has used must at some time be fruitfully employed in an analysis of *Paradise Lost*. Contentment, natural abundance ... it all begins to make more sense.

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