
 RICHARD LOVELACE

The Snail

Wise emblem of our politic world,
 Sage snail, within thine own self curled,
 Instruct me softly to make haste,
 Whilst these my feet go slowly fast.¹
 5 Compendious snail! thou seem'st to me
 Large Euclid's strict epitome,²
 And in each diagram dost fling
 Thee from the point unto the ring—
 A figure now triangular,
 10 An oval now, and now a square,
 And then a serpentine dost crawl,
 Now a straight line, now crooked, now all.
 Preventing³ rival of the day,
 Th' art up, and openest thy ray
 15 And ere the morn cradles the moon,
 Th' art broke into a beauteous noon.
 Then when the sun sups in the deep,
 Thy silver horns o'er Cynthia's⁴ peep,
 And thou from thine own liquid bed,
 20 New Phoebus,⁵ heav'st thy pleasant head.
 Who shall a name for thee create,
 Deep riddle of mysterious state?
 Bold nature that gives common birth
 To all products of sea and earth,
 25 Of thee, as earthquakes, is afraid,
 Nor will thy dire delivery aid.
 Thou thine own daughter, then, and sire,
 That son and mother art entire,⁶
 That big still with thy self dost go,
 30 And liv'st an agéd embryo,
 That like the cubs of India,
 Thou from thy self a while dost play,
 But frighted with a dog or gun,
 In thine own belly thou dost run,⁷
 35 And as thy house was thine own womb,

1. "Politic" carries a slight implication of low cleverness: the snail is an emblem of those who "take care of Number One," as Lovelace's biography shows he was conspicuously unable to do. Lines 3 and 4 play with a Latinism: the way to get ahead is to *festina lente*, to make haste slowly, as Lovelace intends to do on his (poetic) feet.

2. Euclid the Greek mathematician wrote a complete book on geometry, of which the snail, with his convoluted structure, is a tiny abridgement.

3. Forestalling.

4. The moon's.

5. Phoebus is the sun god. As the sun rises every morning from the ocean, so the snail rises from his liquid bed inside his shell.

6. Many snails are in fact hermaphroditic; like gastropods in general, their inner organs are in a state of disarray compared with what we vertebrates consider "normal."

7. Popular natural histories described a creature, living in India and named Su; its young were carried in a pouch from which they emerged to play, and to which they retreated when threatened.

So thine own womb concludes thy tomb.

But now I must (analyzed king)⁸

Thy economic virtues sing;

Thou great staid husband,⁹ still within

40 Thou, thee, that's thine, dost discipline;

And when thou art to progress bent,

Thou movest thyself and tenement;

As warlike Scythians traveled,¹ you

Remove your men and city too,

45 Then after a sad dearth and rain,

Thou scatterest thy silver train;

And when the trees grow naked and old,

Thou clothest them with cloth of gold

Which from thy bowels thou dost spin,

50 And draw from the rich mines within.

Now hast thou changed thee saint, and made

Thyself a fane² that's cupola'ed,

And in thy wreathéd cloister thou

Walkest thine own gray friar³ too;

55 Strict and locked up, th'art hood all o'er,

And ne'er eliminat'st⁴ thy door.

On salads thou dost feed severe,

And 'stead of beads⁵ thou drop'st a tear.

And when to rest each calls the bell,

60 Thou sleep'st within thy marble cell,

Where in dark contemplation placed,

The sweets of nature thou dost taste,

Who⁶ now with time thy days resolve,

And in a jelly thee dissolve,

65 Like a shot star,⁷ which doth repair

Upward and rarefy the air.

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8. The snail is king of his own nation (shell), and Lovelace, having analyzed his sex life, is about to discuss his "economy" (i.e., his management of household affairs).

9. Frugal or provident person.

1. According to Herodotus, the nomadic Scythians pitched their tents on their wagons, and had no other dwellings. "Progress" (line 41) implies a formal royal journey, such as Queen Elizabeth used to enjoy, from country house to country house.

2. Shrine.

3. Franciscan monk.

4. From Latin *limen*, threshold: i.e., you never go

out of doors (though the Franciscans themselves had sometimes been rebuked as wandering or vagabond friars).

5. The rosary is a mnemonic device popular with monks, who use its 150 beads as a way of keeping track of their prayers. The meditative snail drops a bit of slime instead of a bead.

6. Nature.

7. Shooting stars were popularly supposed to dissolve to jelly when they landed on earth. But the pure spirit of the star was then carried aloft, rising to the upper atmosphere, which it purified.