ANDREW MARVELL

Mourning

You, that decipher out the fate
Of human offsprings from the skies,
What mean these infants which, of late,
Spring from the stars of Chlora’s eyes?

Her eyes confused, and doubled o’er
With tears suspended ere they flow,
Seem bending upwards to restore
To Heaven, whence it came, their woe.

When, molding of the watery spheres,¹
Slow drops untie themselves away,
As if she with those precious tears
Would strew the ground where Strephon lay.

Yet some affirm, pretending art,
Her eyes have so her bosom drowned,
Only to soften, near her heart,
A place to fix another wound.

And while vain pomp does her restrain
Within her solitary bower,
She courts herself in amorous rain,
Herself both Danaë and the shower.²

Nay others, bolder, hence esteem
Joy now so much her master grown,
That whatsoever does but seem
Like grief is from her windows thrown.

Nor that she pays, while she survives,
To her dead love this tribute due,
But casts abroad these donatives³
At the installing of a new.

How wide they dream! the Indian slaves,
That sink for pearl through seas profound,
Would find her tears yet deeper waves
And not of one the bottom sound.

I yet my silent judgment keep,
Disputing not what they believe;

¹ Taking the shape of watery spheres.
² Zeus wooed Danaë in a shower of gold.
³ Largesse, gifts of public charity.
But sure as oft as women weep
It is to be supposed they grieve.

On Paradise Lost

When I beheld the poet, blind yet bold,
In slender book his vast design unfold,
Messiah crowned, God’s reconciled decree,
Rebelling angels, the forbidden tree,
Heaven, Hell, Earth, Chaos, all—the argument
Held me a while, misdoubting his intent,
That he would ruin (for I saw him strong)
The sacred truths to fable and old song
(So Samson groped the temple’s posts in spite)²
The world o’erwhelming to revenge his sight.

Yet as I read, soon growing less severe,
I liked his project, the success did fear;
Through that wide field how he his way should find
O’er which lame faith leads understanding blind;
Lest he perplexed the things he would explain,
And what was easy he should render vain.
Or if a work so infinite he spanned,
Jealous I was that some less skillful hand
(Such as disquiet always what is well,
And by ill imitating would excel)
Might hence presume the whole creation’s day
To change in scenes, and show it in a play.³
Pardon me, mighty poet, nor despise
My causeless, yet not impious, surmise.

But I am now convinced, and none will dare
Within thy labors to pretend a share.
Thou hast not missed one thought that could be fit,
And all that was improper dost omit,
So that no room for writers is here left
But to detect their ignorance or theft.
That majesty which through thy work doth reign
Draws the devout, deterring the profane.
And things divine thou treat’st of in such state
As them preserves, and thee, inviolate.

At once delight and horror on us seize,
Thou sing’st with so much gravity and ease;
And above human flight dost soar aloft

1. This poem was prefixed to the second (1674) edition of Paradise Lost; Marvell wrote as an old friend and former colleague of Milton’s, but with a note of respect that cannot be overlooked.
2. Blind Samson, brought into the temple of the Philistines to make them sport, pulled down the roof on himself and his enemies. Marvell had doubtless read Milton’s tragedy, Samson Agonistes, published in 1671, three years before the present poem.
3. Here, as elsewhere (see note 6, below), Marvell shows himself jealously aware of Dryden, who had asked for and received (though grudgingly) Milton’s permission to cast Paradise Lost in the form of an opera.
With plume so strong, so equal, and so soft.
The bird named from that paradise you sing
So never flags, but always keeps on wing.  
  Where could'st thou words of such a compass find?
  Whence furnish such a vast expense of mind?
Just heaven thee like Tiresias to requite
  Rewards with prophecy thy loss of sight.

Well might'st thou scorn thy readers to allure
With tinkling rhyme, of thy own sense secure;
While the Town-Bays\(^6\) writes all the while and spells,
And like a pack-horse tires without his bells.
Their fancies like our bushy-points appear,
The poets tag them, we for fashion wear.
I too, transported by the mode, offend,
And while I meant to praise thee, must commend.

Thy verse, created like thy theme sublime
  In number, weight, and measure, needs not rhyme.

4. The bird of paradise was thought to have no feet, and thus to remain perpetually in flight.
5. Tiresias is one of the blind prophet-poets whom Milton himself invokes in Book III of *Paradise Lost* (line 36) as one of his prototypes.
6. Dryden had been parodied in a farce called *The Rehearsal* (1671) under the name “Mr. Bays.” (The poet laureate was supposed to wear a crown of bay-leaves.) Marvell is glancing at Dryden’s fondness for rhymed couplets.
7. The comparison of rhyme to points and tags (little silver decorations on the laces used to fasten hose to doublet) was a commonplace; Milton is said to have told Dryden, rather stiffly, “You may tag my verses.”
8. “Commend” implies explanation, almost apology; praise would be straightforward eulogy. Marvell can only mean that Milton stands outside the fashions of his own day, and above them.