

THE POET AND THE FETTERED CHRIST IN MARVELL'S *EYES AND TEARS*

BY AMY SATTLER

In accounting for Marvell's transformation from a lyricist of private experience to a political satirist, many critics have located within both the lyrics and the satires a tension between retirement and engagement with the world. Both of these postures—that of retirement and that of engagement—are the product of a search for liberty.<sup>1</sup> In imagining pastoral paradises, Marvell seeks liberty from the repressive external world, and in his prose tracts, he seeks liberty for non-conformist political and religious perspectives. Yet even as Marvell celebrates liberty—the liberties of retirement and of polemic—he maintains critical distance from the project of liberty. Marvell reveals his suspicion of the dream of the liberated self in two early lyrics that focus on the weeping subject. With these weepers, Marvell explores two postures of selfhood: the enclosed, or retired, self and the exposed, or engaged, self. Even as he imagines retired selves questing for liberty, he destabilizes the ideal of enclosed selfhood that such a quest entails.

At the center of *Eyes and Tears* lies the story of Magdalen weeping at the feet of Christ. Despite the stanza's central location, some readers regard it as peripheral. In his introduction to *Eyes and Tears*, for example, Nigel Smith argues that the poem "begins and remains secular in subject-matter" and speculates that the Magdalen stanza "began life as a separate entity."<sup>2</sup> Others readers, however, have located religious meaning in *Eyes and Tears*. Barbara Lewalski numbers it among Marvell's religious poems, which "treat centrally and seriously the speaker's stance towards or relationship with God."<sup>3</sup> Following Lewalski, Gary Kuchar argues that religious concerns, particularly the relation of the human to the divine, infuse the poem. *Eyes and Tears*, he claims, "enacts a way of relating to Deity that is characterized by a rigorous reflexivity."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, such reflexivity characterizes one of Marvell's most explicitly religious poems, *On a Drop of Dew*. The Magdalen stanza, I argue, should not be read as a non-secular oddity, an afterthought lurking in the poem's center, but rather as central to the conceptual work of the poem. This is not to claim, however, that the poem's conceptual work is primarily devotional. Instead, Marvell deploys the figure of Christ to counter the poem's celebration of liberty through enclosed subjectivity.

Marvell is occupied with vision throughout his poetic career. Early poems—*On a Drop of Dew*, *Mourning*, and *Eyes and Tears*—reveal his skepticism about conveying and receiving truth through vision. *Eyes and Tears* opens by claiming that vision is an inadequate means of perceiving the world:

How wisely Nature did decree  
With the same eyes to weep and see!  
That, having viewed the object vain,  
They might be ready to complain.

(ll. 1-4)

The ambiguity of the third line—either the object is vain or viewing the object is vain—points to the futility of searching for meaning in the external world. Objects

are vain, but sight is also insufficient. “The self-deluding sight,” Marvell continues, “in a false angle takes each height” (ll. 5-6). The perspective of the viewer renders vision false, but rather than urging the viewer to correct the false angle, the speaker imagines a retreat into tears. The poem later asserts that those who “preserve their sight more true / Bathe still their eyes in their own dew” (l. 27). The truth available through weeping is interior truth, subjectivity liberated from objects in the external world. Like the dewdrop “scarce touching where it lies” (l. 10) and the “world excluding” (l. 29) soul in *On a Drop of Dew*, weeping subjects preserve themselves from corrupting contact with the external world. The primary mode of this preservation is visual: by bathing their eyes with tears, they evade not only contact with objects, but also the self-delusion that comes of being a seeing subject.

In *Eyes and Tears* enclosure is the result not only of tears covering the eyes, but also of tears flooding the world. Unlike the dewdrop soul, which transcends the world by “dissolving [...] / Into the glories of th’Almighty Sun” (ll. 39-40), the weeping subject does not so much dissolve herself as reduce all that exists to tears. “Essence” is revealed as “show’rs”; the “sparkling glance” (l. 37) loses its fire; “incense” (l. 41) loses its “perfume” (l. 42). In the two closing stanzas of the poem, Marvell intensifies the dissipating work of tears: not only are they “dissolving” (l. 49), but also, they “drown” (l. 52) like floods and “o’erflow” (l. 53) like streams. Copious tears liberate the weeper from vision by dissolving the external world.

As many critics have noted, *Eyes and Tears* seems to echo elements of Crashaw’s *The Weeper*. While Magdalen, the focus of Crashaw’s poem, appears in only one stanza of Marvell’s poem, other stanzas echo Crashaw’s weeping imagery. Crashaw’s poem concludes with Magdalen’s tears, personified as her sons, abandoning flowers and gems to seek Christ’s feet. Marvell also takes up gems and flowers, imagining tears melting away jewels and finding nothing but tears in “the red, the white, the green” (l. 18) of the garden. But Crashaw’s tears are nourishing rather than dissolving. As Magdalen weeps “upwards” (l. 19), “heav’n’s bosom drinks the gentle stream” and a Cherub breakfasts on it (l. 30).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Crashaw describes Magdalen’s tears becoming the wine for a heavenly feast (ll. 70-72). Where Crashaw imagines tears that provide nourishment, Marvell imagines tears that liberate the weeper both from any object of vision and from “self-deluding sight” (l. 5) as they subsume her world.

Weeping liberates the speaker of *Eyes and Tears* from the seduction of jewels, flowers, and all else that is fair, but Marvell’s seeing subjects are not so free. In *Upon Appleton House*, another poem in which Marvell explores anamorphic vision, the speaker, after attempting to read “Nature’s mystic book” and being hit with a masque, pleads to be fettered, chained, and even nailed through by the objects of his sight (ll. 613-16). Marvell makes a similar move in *Eyes and Tears*:

So Magdalen in tears more wise  
Dissolved those captivating eyes,  
Whose liquid chains could flowing meet  
To fetter her Redeemer’s feet.  
(ll. 29-32)

Tears, Marvell claims, dissolve the power of Magdalen’s eyes to captivate her viewers, but then he turns the stanza to assert her ongoing captivating power. This counters the image of self-enclosure that concludes the previous stanza—tears which “bathe still their eyes in their own dew” (l. 28)—with the claim that tears imprison those who observe them. Here, the Redeemer is the seeing, and interpreting, subject. Like the speaker in *Upon Appleton House*, he is captivated, even fettered, by Magdalen’s tears. Magdalen’s tearful, sightless eyes are analogous to the

drop of dew, which “scarce touching where it lies” (l. 10) slights the external world, and the dissolution of her eyes echoes the dissolution of the dew as it returns to the sun at the end of *On a Drop of Dew*. But while Magdalen’s tears free her from sight, the Redeemer seems not to be sheltered from the vulnerabilities of vision. Just as the speaker in *Upon Appleton House* is fettered and even crucified as the masque of nature entangles him, Magdalen’s Redeemer is captivated by the “liquid chains” of her tears.

So what kind of captivation is this? Clearly, Marvell draws on the traditional representations of the penitent Magdalen who has relinquished her sexual charms. Yet he immediately undercuts this claim that she has renounced her “captivating eyes” by showing her tears accomplishing a similar act of captivation. And Marvell reiterates this move in the following stanza:

Not full sails hasting loaden home,  
Nor the chaste lady’s pregnant womb,  
Nor Cynthia teeming shows so fair,  
As two eyes swoll’n with weeping are.  
(ll. 33-36)

Startlingly, swollen eyes show “more fair” than even “the chaste lady’s pregnant womb.” In other words, the weeper’s swollen eyes are more appealing than Mary and the incarnate, or incarnating, Christ. Swollen eyes are also more “fair” than Cynthia, who is the full moon and also Diana. Here, the speaker distinguishes the fairness of Cynthia, the chaste goddess of the hunt who incites desire in many of her viewers, from that of Magdalen, yet he also likens them. When he describes Magdalen’s swollen eyes as “fair,” he suggests that they are appealing, and even more appealing than Cynthia’s form. Rather than contrasting the visual allure of Cynthia’s form with the moral uprightness of Magdalen’s penitence, however, Marvell claims that the weeper’s eyes are even more appealing than Cynthia, a difference of degree rather than of kind. Christ, fettered by Magdalen’s tears, then, is perhaps not so distinct from the lovers seduced by a “sparkling glance that shoots desire” (l. 37) and the speaker who perceives “swollen eyes” (l. 34) as “fair” (l. 35). To respond to Magdalen, to see her tears of penitence, is to have failed to achieve the self-enclosure that she, who “weep the more, and see the less” (l. 27), has attained.

While Marvell does not elaborate on Christ’s imprisonment, the implication that some sort of affective response to Magdalen’s display of penitence binds him is borne out by the source text. The Gospel of Luke, the origin of the story of Magdalen, affective response is entangled with sight. Simon the Pharisee observes Christ’s encounter with the weeping woman, and, Luke narrates, “spake within himself, saying, ‘This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner’” (7:39). Scandalized that the Christ would tolerate the touch of a sinner, Simon seems to espouse the vision of self-enclosure idealized in *On a Drop of Dew*. But Christ repudiates Simon’s response to the woman. As he narrates Christ’s response to the Pharisees for his disdain for the weeping woman, Luke explains, “And he turned to the woman and said unto Simon, ‘Seest thou this woman?’” (7:44). Looking at the woman and insisting that Simon look at her as well, Christ links vision to the affective response of forgiveness.

I would like to turn now to *Mourning*, Marvell’s other poem about weeping, to develop my explanation of Magdalen’s power to fetter Christ with tears. In *Mourning*, Marvell represents vision as entangling and enslaving the subject in interpretive acts. The speaker of the poem observes Chlora’s tears and, like *The Gallery*, the poem moves through a series of representations of Chlora as he recounts interpretations of these tears. First, she is a sincere mourner, weeping “As if she,

with those precious tears, / Would strow the ground where Strephon lay” (ll. 11-12). Next, the self-enclosed Chlora finds a kind of masturbatory delight in weeping: “She courts herself in am’rous rain; / Herself both Danae and the show’r” (ll. 19-20). Last, she has found a new lover and “whatsoever does but seem / Like grief, is from her from her windows thrown” (ll. 23-24). This Chlora, like the Clora of *The Gallery*, is a compilation of pastoral and Ovidian images that invites the viewer’s interpretation.

But even as the speaker offers this series of representations of Chlora, he begins to distance himself from the act of interpretation. The opening line of the poem identifies the reader rather than the speaker as the primary viewer of the images of Chlora. He addresses the reader as “You, that decipher out the fate / Of human offsprings from the skies” (ll. 1-2). This line elevates the task of interpretation: the viewer aims to “decipher” the “fate” of Chlora’s tears, which come from the “skies.” Reading Chlora is something like reading the classical and contemporary source texts. Yet, after presenting the images of Chlora for interpretation, Marvell turns to deflate the act of interpretation:

How wide they dream! The Indian slaves  
That dive for pearl through seas profound,  
Would find her tears yet deeper waves,  
And not of one the bottom sound.  
(ll. 29-32)

Shifting from the direct address of the first stanza, the speaker refers to Chlora’s viewers as “they.” They, the readers whom the speaker is no longer addressing, dream rather than decipher. Lest we imagine that dreaming is superior to deciphering, the speaker moves to compare such dreamers to “Indian slaves.” Here, again, Marvell identifies perception with enslavement. Like Magdalen’s tears which fetter Christ, Chlora’s tears enslave her viewers.

Marvell illuminates the contours of this slavery. While the first stanza describes the tears as “human offsprings from the skies” (l. 2), the eighth stanza diminishes them, portraying them as pearls in the depths. The viewer must “dive,” or descend, to reach them. Such descent is hazardous: slaves were given the task of diving for pearls because drowning was a danger. Marvell evokes the danger of annihilation in the waves. While the opening stanzas suggest that Chlora’s tears link her to the heavens and to the order expressed by the constellations, by the penultimate stanza, her tears become a bottomless, undifferentiated abyss. The “waves,” through which there is no access to the “bottom,” counter the description in the second stanza of the tears, which seem to be “bending upward.” Similarly, the threat of annihilation implicit in the act of diving into the “seas profound” dismantles the earlier reproductive imagery of tears as “infants” (l. 3). Like those who see rather than weep in *Eyes and Tears* and so are subject to “self-deluding sight,” Chlora’s viewers are slaves to “dreams,” in particular the dream of interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

I have digressed into this discussion of *Mourning* because Marvell makes use of similar elements for similar purposes in *Eyes and Tears*. Just as the “Indian slaves” are enclosed in the “seas profound” of Chlora’s tears, Christ is fettered by the “liquid chains” of Magdalen’s tears. And just as Chlora’s tears produce a bottomless abyss, the speaker of *Eyes and Tears* imagines his tears as “floods” that “o’erturn and drown.” In other words, Christ, the interpreter of Magdalen’s tears, is in a position analogous to that of the interpreters of Chlora’s tears. Despite his superhuman interpretive powers—as described in Luke’s account of Magdalen weeping at Christ’s feet—he, too, is captive to tears.

Both *Eyes and Tears* and *Mourning* conclude with the speakers renouncing the task of gazing upon the weeper and interpreting her tears. In the final stanza, the speaker

of *Mourning* distinguishes himself from those enslaved by the dream of interpretation:

I yet my silent judgement keep,  
Disputing not what they believe:  
But sure as oft as women weep,  
It is to be supposed they grieve.  
(ll. 33-36)

With the final couplet, the speaker liberates himself from the interpretive project that continues to engage the dreamers by offering a superficial reading of the tears: a weeping woman is to be “supposed” to be grieving. Here, the speaker is detached not only from deciphering, dreaming, and disputation, but also from Chlora herself. He frees himself from the annihilating flood of interpretive possibilities, suggesting that the particular woman is insignificant as he generalizes about weeping women. Yet, even as he distances himself from Chlora, the final stanza also exposes his identification with her self-enclosure and inscrutability. Just as she conceals her eyes, or windows, with her tears, he conceals his judgment with silence.

At the close of *Eyes and Tears*, the speaker makes a similar move. After celebrating the fairness of “eyes swoll’n with weeping,” he turns his gaze away from the fair eyes of the weeper and begins to emulate her. The speaker instructs his eyes, “Ope then mine eyes your double sluice” (l. 45). Rather than being captivated by Magdalen, the speaker aspires to imitate her with “These weeping eyes, those seeing tears” (l. 56). This turn away from vision and towards the enclosure of the self within tears ends the poem. Self-enclosure, in this poem and in so many of Marvell’s other lyrics, seems an ideal state. Governed by this ideal, the speaker privileges Magdalen above even Mary, the mother of Christ, when he describes swollen eyes as more fair than the “chaste lady’s pregnant womb.” Biographical accounts suggest that for Marvell self-enclosure was a personal as well as poetic ideal. Aubrey depicts him as a “man of very few words” who liked to drink alone. Nigel Smith, in his biography, concludes, “Marvell stands for liberty—the liberty of the subject, liberty in the state, liberty of the self, liberty from political and personal tyrannies: the domination of the public self and the interior private consciousness” (343). In Marvell’s imaginative landscape tears are liberatory: they are a means to such private interiority because they dissolve the eyes, transform all that they gaze upon to a flood of tears, and thwart the interpretive efforts of viewers. Tears, then, demand interpretation even as they free the weeper from the interpretive imperative. Such freedom has its attractions. Yet even as Marvell celebrates the enclosed selfhood produced by weeping, he represents seeing and interpreting as necessary prerequisites to poetry. The speaker of *Eyes and Tears* is drawn by the fairness of swollen eyes; the speaker of *Mourning* observes the weeping Chlora; the speaker of *Appleton House* is engaged in reading “Nature’s mystic book.” The seeing subject may be fettered, enslaved, or even crucified, but vision spurs the interpretive endeavors that constitute poetic creativity. When he incorporates the fettered Redeemer into *Eyes and Tears*, then, Marvell counters his celebration of self-enclosure. With the image of Christ as the spectator and interpreter of Magdalen’s tears, Marvell elevates the seeing subject even as he dismisses “self-deluding sight.”

Washington University, St Louis

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The essay collection, *Marvell and Liberty*, ed. Warren Cherniak and Martin Dzelzainis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999) and Nigel Smith’s recent biography, *The*

*Chameleon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), argue that the poet's commitment to liberty is central to Marvell's literary achievements.

<sup>2</sup> *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara K. Lewalski, "Marvell as Religious Poet," in *Approaches to Marvell: The York Tercentenary Lectures*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1978), 251.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Kuchar. "Andrew Marvell's Anamorphic Tears," *Studies in Philology* 103.3 (2006): 362.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Crashaw, "The Weeper," *Seventeenth-Century British Poetry, 1603-1660*, ed. John P. Rumrich and Gregory Chaplin (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> L. E. Semler argues that Marvell further evacuates meaning from the tears in this stanza. Both the "seas profound" and the "pearl" represent Chlora's tears; when the viewers dive for tears like Indian slaves dive for pearls, they are diving into the seas that are Chlora's tears to search for the pearls that are Chlora's tears. Semler claims that the absence of a signified to ground the signifiers of the stanza is an expression of Marvell's skepticism. L. E. Semler, "Marvell's Mannerist Skepticism: A Reading of 'Mourning,'" *English* 44.180 (1995): 214-228.