# Pastoral tradition from Andrew Marvell's Renaissance perspective: The "Mower" poems

**Kübra Baysal**[*]

**Abstract:** Estimated to be written between 1651 and 1652 (Pole 1966), Andrew Marvell's four "Mower" poems are the products of the same period following a similar pattern which places each one of them in a consecutive position. Following a similar fashion, the "Mower" poems are brought together as a "suite" (Cousins 2011) among Marvell's other pastoral works published in the 1681 Folio. In the sequential pattern of the "Mower" poems, the voice of the same speaking persona, Mower, is heard from different angles, literary, scientific and political influences and a distinct perspective of the pastoral tradition. Thus, it is evident that Marvell is a man of his age experiencing the religious, social as well as political turmoil of the seventeenth century England, albeit through his Renaissance background and mind. With this, the focus of the paper is Marvell's "Mower" poems: "Damon the Mower", "The Mower to the Glo-Worms", "The Mower against the Gardens" and the fourth poem, "The Mower's Song" – pastoral works by Andrew Marvell in his unique perspective reflecting the influence of social and political state of England at the time and the poet's talent of extracting different traditions and incorporating them to his work.

**Keywords:** Andrew Marvell, pastoral tradition, seventeenth-century poetry

Praising Andrew Marvell's unique talent of borrowing from previous traditions and adapting them, T. S. Eliot in his essay pinpoints Marvell's manifest difference from John Donne, the quintessential poet of the seventeenth century, as follows: Marvell's verse "is a quality of a civilization, of a traditional habit of life […] Donne would have been an individual at any time and place; [however] Marvell's best verse is the product of European, that is to say, Latin, culture" (Eliot 1950, 251-252). In other words, Marvell stands aloof as a seventeenth-century poet nourished by European traditions.

[*] Kübra Baysal ( ✉)
School of Foreign Languages, Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Ankara, Turkey
e-mail: kbaysal@ybu.edu.tr

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In his "Mower" poems, Marvell initially alludes to the pastoral tradition as well as classical literature setting the basic pattern of the poems upon which the larger piece of the argument is placed. Adopting from a wide range of sources from "high culture of the Greek and Roman classics to the bawdy street singers, all levels in the context of biblical imagery" (Badley 1993, 1), Marvell exhibits a satiric and humorous tone reflecting different ideas and concepts. Then again, he refers to the significant political and religious issues of the mid-seventeenth century "along with contemporary sciences of optics, alchemy, and horticulture" employed within his understanding of "art, nature and their relation […] in conjunction with two major themes of the Renaissance - love and death" (Ibid.). Furthermore, in the "Mower" poems, Marvell commits the pastoral figure of a lovelorn man confused by his passion and inability to receive any response from his beloved, Juliana. Choosing Juliana as his "imaginary mistress," he composes the set of "Mower" poems similar to Robert Herrick's "Julia" poems in which Julia is posed "as his [Herrick's] fantastic mistress to whom he [Herrick] addresses in his poetry" (Chung 2012, 157).

In the same vein, employing the pastoral pattern upon which a more serious argument is built, the "Mower" poems differ from the pastoral tradition of the late-Renaissance period. The poems present a microcosmic picture of the Mower's world reflecting the larger piece, macrocosmic England and whole humanity "affirming almost nothing while elegantly and provocatively bringing almost all into question" while introducing "conflict" to the pastoral scheme (Cousins 2011, 523). Each poem presents the pastoral mode through a different argumentation. "Damon the Mower" is written in the ancient tradition of Theocritus depicting the rustic figure who is lovesick due to unrequited love which is also seen in Ovid and Virgil (Badley 1993, 46). However, relying more on Ovid's model which comes to "link all classical mythology with the theme of change or transformation" (Ibid.) as observed in the figure of Damon, Marvell combines the whole classical influence and makes a perfect sum of the pastoral tradition. Likewise, another poem, "The Mower against the Gardens," which pictures the criticism of a mower with the focus on his garden, derives from "a long tradition from Theocritus and the censure of the supposed first city-gardener, Epicurus" through the religious and political atmosphere of "the radical Reformation" in the early Renaissance and the "enclosure of land" in Middle Ages (Ibid, 90).

Furthermore, establishing the basis of his "Mower" poems within the pastoral tradition, Marvell discusses such pressing issues as the place of human beings in nature and Neo-platonic love with its earthly connotations. Placed within the pastoral landscape, Damon in the three Mower poems depicts his love for Juliana "in terms of familiar meadows, meadow occupations [and] meadow creatures" (Pole 1966, 31). Likewise, philosophising on the fall of the humankind, the Mower is in "a state of war within his mind, and with the natural world" (Wilcher 1967, 62). As a lover in a pastoral setting, he feels hurt because of Juliana and receives no reward for his pain. His suffering seems to be endless as he asks Juliana in "Damon the Mower": "How long wilt Thou, fair Shepheardess,/ Esteem me, and my Presents less?" (33-34). He is desperate in the way that "[j]ust as the mower brutally damages the grass, so Juliana disparately hurts the mower" (Chung 2012, 156) in "The Mower's Song" and he is isolated from nature and has lost his way because of Juliana's love in "The Mower to the Glo-Worms". So, through the suffering lover of the poem, Marvell reflects the separation of human beings from nature due to bitter human experience and unreturned love.

"Damon the Mower" begins in a sad mood with Damon's plaintive approach: "Heark how the Mower Damon Sung,/ With love of Juliana stung!/ While ev'ry thing did seem to paint/ The Scene more fit for his complaint" (1-4). Her love has taken away all his hopes like a scythe cutting the grass (7-8). So, the Mower in the sequence poems who "tak[es] the place of the traditional shepherd" serves in a way that the "pastoral innocence of the shepherd gives way to a more qualified innocence in the mower" which brings out a more complex figure "in the pastoral landscape" (Lord 1979, 135). He is complicated in his mind; however he tells of his naïve nature, past innocence and merriment as follows: "How happy might I still have mow'd,/ Had not Love here his Thistles sow'd!/ But now I all the day complain,/ Joyning my Labour to my Pain" (65-69). He cannot take any joy from mowing and being a part of fields and meadows anymore since he is lovesick.

Complaining about Juliana's love, Damon moves on to the extreme heat affecting all amphibians as explained in the second stanza with the emphasis on "grass-hopper[s]" and "hamstringed frogs" seeking for shade (11-14). However, the snake (like the serpent from the Garden of Eden) "that kept within" (15) is quite alive and well as it "glitters in its

second skin," (16) which calls for the sexual connotations of Damon's love. In this respect, the state of the snake being well in its second skin may be "seen as a symbol of renewal, but it can also be seen as a rebirth or the process of starting birth, coitus" (Badley 1993, 94). Moreover, the general commentary on the hot weather recalls for Damon's lust and his physical suffering. Damon can also be observed as the epitome of humanity in a shifting state from innocence to experience, and also the embodiment of the fall of the humankind, through Juliana's love and his extreme passion for her. With his exile from the pastoral serenity and idyllic life to love's sphere of suffering (Lord 1979, 136), Damon falls from both Arcadia and Eden referring to the pastoral and biblical traditions that the poem successfully blends. From another perspective, "perceiving Nature through terms similar to those that Francis Bacon advocates [treating Nature as a woman from a male perspective], Damon discovers the critters of nature with a different perspective, yet without finding "the path to back Paradise but re-enact[ing] the Fall" (Funari 2010, 1). With this in mind, Juliana, with her name originating from Latin "Jove", has a touch of godliness and thus contributes to Damon's fall and "dislocates him from his cosmos by the impact of frustrated sexual experience" (Badley 1993, 89). Damon, the lover, tries desperately to extinguish his fire and yearning for her as he is now the embodiment "Of the hot day, or hot desires" (26). So, he looks for a "cool Cave" (27) or a "gelid fountain" (28) as a temporary cure for his lust. In these lines, the "sexual imagery is quite vivid" (Hamed 2016, 45). Nevertheless, the lover is not only seeking a sexual encounter with Juliana but he also desires to have her heart and mutual affection in the Neo-platonic sense, as seen in the following lines:

> To Thee the harmless Snake I bring,
> Disarmed of its teeth and sting.
> To Thee Chameleons changing-hue,
> And Oak leaves tipt with hony-dew.
> Yet Thou ungrateful hast not sought
> Nor what they are, nor who them brought. (35-40)

"Harmless snake" and "hony-dew" stand for the innocent side of Damon's love. However, Juliana does not accept anything from him, sexual or innocent, which frustrates him and leaves him in such intense desperation and carelessness that he accidentally cuts his ankle instead

of grass with the scythe (77-80). Yet, not caring about his condition, he once again philosophises about his lovelorn state: "Alas! said He, these hurts are slight/ To those that dye by Loves despight" (81-82).

Similarly, Damon seems like an ordinary mower reflecting the rustic and pastoral landscape. However, he still holds a certain degree of pride as he talks about his occupation and how nature provides for him:

> I am the Mower Damon, known
> Through all the Meadows I have mown.
> On me the Morn her dew distills
> Before her darling Daffadils.
> And, if at Noon my toil me heat,
> The Sun himself licks off my Sweat.
> While, going home, the Ev'ning sweet
> In cowslip-water bathes my feet. (41-48)

In other words, Damon boasts about himself for being the "mower" of the meadows and the master of nature as an experienced person instead of showing humility as an innocent pastoral figure. Likewise, he is associated with death towards the end of the poem since "his occupation as a mower, his frequently sour remarks and [the final line of the poem]" relate him "to the sinister figure of death who likewise wields a scythe" (Baldwin 1977, 25). Changing from the first person to the third person point of view in the last two stanzas, the speaking persona discourses on the issue of "death": "Tis death alone that this must do:/ For Death thou art a Mower too" (87-88). Thus, Damon's identity changes with the figure of death with a scythe in the end (Chung 2012, 155) focusing on the metaphysical concerns of human beings. Depicting once an innocent but now experienced figure of the mower, Damon, the poem reflects his sexual and Neo-platonic yearnings for love giving way to a final philosophical approach through the mentioning of death.

Likewise, "The Mower to the Glo-Worms" begins in a nocturnal mood with the speaker addressing glow-worms that create light and serve nature at night. The mower in the voice of Damon calls them "Lamps" (1), "Country Comets" (5) and "Lights" (13), praising their unique quality: "Ye living Lamps, by whose dear light/ The Nightingale does sit so late,/ And studying all the Summer-night,/ Her matchless Songs does meditate" (1-4). Providing light for the

enjoyment of nightingales at night and for the lovers to find their way, glow-worms produce pure light as opposed to the "foolish fires" that "stray" throughout the night (12). Compared to "Damon the Mower" in terms of light imagery, "The Mower to the Glo-Worms" presents a contrast through "the former in the light of midday and the latter in darkness" reflecting the "Renaissance concern with perception versus conception" (Badley 1993, 96). Concerning this, the lover cannot find his way despite the light of the glow-worms that shows the way because his mind is in conflict and he cannot conceive things in nature properly: "Your courteous Lights in vain you wast,/ Since Juliana here is come,/ For She my Mind hath so displac'd/ That I shall never find my home" (13-16).

"The Mower to the Glo-Worms" is similarly studied in comparison to "The Mower's Song"; as, in the former, the mower accepts he is lost in nature because of Juliana's love, whereas, in the latter, the mower bitterly remembers that his mind's "true survey of nature - or map to the original Garden - is lost because of obsession with Juliana" (Badley 1993, 97). Then again, light imagery brings along the imagery of darkness and the contrast of external world of nature with the inner world of the "mind" through "shifting and shimmering" light images (Chung 2012, 156). Despite the external twilight, the light of the glow-worms still shows the way - only to the ones with a clear and peaceful mind, which explains the mower's desolate state as his mind lingers in darkness because of Juliana. Finally, the nocturnal imagery of the poem recalls the image of time; and with this, death, through "the arc of the scythe as the image of time; [because] Chronos/Saturn carries the scythe" (Badley 1993, 165).

About the pastoral landscape and the theme of love within this context, the poem presents the mower in a non-pastoral manner. Although the poem recounts the beauty, peaceful atmosphere of nature and "the importance of lowly creatures", namely the glow-worms, the lines "converge on a personal crisis" as a result of which the mower denies his pastoral identity (Stroebel 2000, 64). He is so "displac'd" in his mind that he can no longer find his way in nature. From another approach, the mower is blind with Juliana's love, or light, so he will never find "content or comfort" in nature for he is now "a lost wanderer" (Hamed 2016, 46). Lastly, the "foolish fires" (12) may refer to a false kind of love causing only suffering and desperation in the lover, which may be the mower's case "crudely exemplify[ing] the

lower end of the seventeenth-century scale of love as an itch to Platonic ideal" (Badley 1993, 120).

In the final "Mower" poem, "The Mower against the Gardens", the main argument is about the human exploitation of nature and the criticism is directed towards artificial gardens. The speaking persona adopts a "georgic tone [complaining about] the imposition of artifice" (Roy 2007, 7). As seen in "The Garden" and also in "Upon Appleton House", the speaking persona of this poem discusses the matter of "artificiality" and human influence on nature (Colie 1970, 30). The mower, who comes from meadows and green fields, condemns the art of horticulture as the reflection of human corruption and fall from innocence:

> LUXURIOUS man, to bring his vice in use,
> Did after him the world seduce,
> And from the fields the flowers and plants allure,
> Where Nature was most plain and pure.
> He first inclosed within the gardens square
> A dead and standing pool of air,
> And a more luscious earth for them did knead,
> Which stupefied them while it fed. (1-8)

Yearning for a pastoral world, the mower objects to the artifice of human beings and what they build under the name of luxury. Following the Renaissance tradition, Marvell discusses the theme of nature against art/culture; and in this context, "horticulture is the art that transforms nature" (Badley 1993, 44-45), which he highly criticises. In the same vein, through pastoral tradition, Marvell embraces two different attitudes at the same time in "The Mower against the Gardens": "it exhibits a satiric strain and a pathetic strain at once, like its long eighteenth-century inheritors, or like its pretexts in Theocritus and Virgil" (Boyd 2016, 3). Furthermore, thinking of the pastoral past in nostalgia as opposed to the luxurious present, the mower prefers to live in the virtuous world of the pastoral landscape:

> And in the cherry he does Nature vex,
> To procreate without a sex.
> 'Tis all enforced, the fountain and the grot,
> While the sweet fields do lie forgot,
> Where willing Nature does to all dispense
> A wild and fragrant innocence;

> And fauns and fairies do the meadows till
> More by their presence than their skill.
> Their statues polished by some ancient hand,
> May to adorn the gardens stand;
> But, howsoe'er the figures do excel,
> The Gods themselves with us do dwell. (29-40)

Nature is presented as a gift to human beings by "Gods", so it is innocent and has the power to procreate by itself, which proves its superiority to the human-made gardens coloured and multiplied by human intervention. After the abuse of nature by the gardener as part of the horticulture, "all the natural order is spoiled entirely, and the worst of it is that all the flowers and trees are shown grotesquely and are painted in an exotic style--multiple colour in a flower, the mixture between the trees" (Chung 2012, 154).

The concept of garden changes from "The Garden" to "The Mower against the Gardens" in that it becomes not only the symbol of nature and innocence but also "of human nature before the Fall - nature in its purest, most innocent form, and it is the corrupted, fallen Mower who works 'against' it" (Sengupta 2012). It is the "luxurious" (1) and "proud" (20) man who influences, exploits and searches for everything beautiful and innocent on Earth, stretching from England to "the marvel of Peru" (18). Humans teach the flowers "the art of make-up that this has led to envy among flowers" (Badley 1993, 56) that the "white" tulip symbolising purity starts to find ways to look more colourful: "And flowers themselves were taught to paint./ The tulip white did for complexion seek,/ And learned to interline its cheek" (12-14). So, the impact of human beings can be observed everywhere, to the poet's distaste.

Then again, the religious and political tone in the poem is evident. First of all, the poem reflects the Puritan anger. From the "verb tenses" of the poem, it is clear that the past and present incidents are referred: "the radical Protestant Reformation and the social revolution that were coincident with the political revolution of the Civil War and the execution of Charles I in 1649" (Badley 1993, 47). More importantly, the poem starts with the word "luxurious" in a despising manner. In the seventeenth century, "'luxurious' is an epithet of condemnation" in Puritan ideology (Ibid, 48). Then, "pointed language and the significant resolution of the final couplet of the poem [as well as] the poetic complement of the significant darkness of the Senecan style"

(Pole 1966, 22) expose the serious undertone of the poem. Finally, in lieu of a summary, according to William John Badley, "The Mower against the Gardens" and other "Mower" poems can be explained as the fall of the humankind from innocence to experience, as follows:

> So, the centre of "The Mower against Gardens" was the word "proud," and the centre of "Damon the Mower" is a boast of being the axis of nature's concern. There were "falls" in "Damon the Mower," but here in "The Mower to the Glo-Worms" the results of the fall are seen to be the loss of direction from nature to find one's home […] The poetic movement of the Mower's progress reminds one of a biblical description of the progress of sin. (1993, 169)

In conclusion, with his "Mower" poems, Marvell interprets the pastoral tradition with his contemporary perspective shaped by his Renaissance background and the social, religious and political conditions of the seventeenth century. Depicting the change within England from rural happiness and innocence to urban displacement and experience, Marvell makes a critique of his age through the central speaking figure, Damon the Mower, who stands for the humans with their life-time transition from innocence to experience.

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