

RETIREMENT VERSUS INVOLVEMENT: THE DILEMMA IN
MARVELL'S MOWER POEMS, "THE GARDEN, AND "UPON APPLETON HOUSE"

by

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Retirement Versus Involvement: The Dilemma
In Marvell's Mower Poems, "The Garden" and "Upon Appleton House"

The volume of criticism which surrounds Andrew Marvell's poetry of rural retirement is uneven and conflicting. The four Mower lyrics are seen by different critics in a wide range of traditions and contexts. They are judged by Donald Friedman as a re-enactment of man's Fall from innocence,¹ by Harold Toliver as a narrative progression in which the mower's desire for a totally innocent life-style leads only to confusion and death,² and by Joseph H. Summers as a depiction of man's alienation from created nature.³ Patrick Cullen evaluates the Mower lyrics as amorous pastorals which portray the frustrations of love,⁴ while Rosalie Colie explains that they illustrate both the beauty and inadequacy of an idealistic pastoral program.⁵ Scholarly investigations of "The Garden" also provide a wide variety of viewpoints. Several critics treat the lyric as a document in the history of ideas, and turn for guidance through "The Garden" to philosophical or theological concepts found in Bonaventura, Canticles, Hermes Trismegistus, Plotinus, and libertine works.⁶ Friedman and Cullen, who focus on the lyric's treatment of retirement and action, are convinced that "The Garden" represents a serious commitment to the retired, contemplative life.⁷ Others, such as Christopher Hill, Summers, and J. B. Leishman,

contend that the celebration of an ideal retired state in the lyric is qualified by a witty, light-hearted approach which suggests to them that Marvell views retirement as a refreshing but brief interlude necessarily interrupted by the claims of the active world.⁸ Although not as numerous, critical viewpoints of "Upon Appleton House" are just as divergent as those which focus on "The Garden." While Leishman views this lengthy lyric as a catalogue of delights celebrating the occasion of Lord Fairfax's retirement to his country estate,⁹ Friedman argues for a greater complexity that weighs without resolution the merits of the contemplative life and the pursuit of private good against the claims of public involvement.¹⁰ Although Colie asserts that the poem deals thematically with the question of moral choice concerning retirement and the active life, and claims that withdrawal is considered a preparation for emergence into the world,¹¹ in her explication of the poem she seems almost to substantiate Friedman's position. Finally, in complete opposition to Friedman, George deF. Lord and M.J.K. O'Loughlin maintain that Marvell resolves the issue of retirement versus involvement in "Upon Appleton House" by ultimately favoring public service.¹²

The number of divergent critical viewpoints toward these poems seems to point to an elusive stance on Marvell's part concerning the conflicting claims of retirement and involvement. However, the position taken by Marvell in these lyrics is by no means as ambivalent as critical interpretations