

What can the past teach us about living through a pandemic?

Re-reading Andrew Marvell's poetry from the perspective of Covid-19 reveals surprising similarities between Marvell's experience of pandemic and our own.



Portrait of Andrew Marvell by Vincent Galloway (1894-1977) © Hull Museums Collections KINCM: 2005.37

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned our familiar world upside down, but it has also helped bring into focus a key aspect of Andrew Marvell's life and literature which has been difficult to relate to until now.

Lockdowns, self-isolations, and school closures were as much a part of Marvell's England as our own, and this realisation is helping us connect with Marvell and the world to which his poetry responds. Are we finally seeing the world through Marvell's eyes?

Marvell (1621-78), who will be celebrating his 400th birthday on 31 March 2021, was born at Winestead-in-Holderness and moved to the Hull Charterhouse in 1624. Hull in Marvell's day was a very different place, as Hollar's map of Hull (c.1640) makes clear.

Little survives in Hull of the streetscapes Marvell knew, and the wordscapes of Marvell's metaphysical poems can also seem remote from today. The recent decision to focus resources for the new GCSE National Curriculum for English on poetry written after the age of Marvell risks condemning Marvell to further obscurity. How to connect Marvell's gardens, mowers, and coy mistresses with the concerns of today's readers? Four hundred years is a long time...

Marvell and the Second Plague

The 1600s sit within the period now known to historians as the Second Plague Pandemic. One of the first uses of the word 'pandemic' in English comes in a book by physician Gideon Harvey (1666), published in the year of the Great Plague.

The Great Plague killed an estimated 70,000 people in London alone (Smith 2010: 183), but this was by no means the only plague outbreak in Marvell's lifetime. In the late 1630s, a plague epidemic swept England, killing an estimated 45% of Hull's population (Smith 2010: 38). Marvell's mother –

who died in Hull in April 1638 – may herself have succumbed to this most deadly of diseases (von Maltzahn 2019: 8).



Painting of Hull from the Humber by Henry Redmore from the University of Hull Art Collection.

Estuary ports like London and Hull were particularly prone to bubonic plague, a strain of the disease imported on ships via black rats and their cargo of fleas. Bubonic plague would decimate local rat populations and then spill over to humans, transmitted by fleas (bubonic plague) or air-borne droplets (pneumonic plague).

The disease spread rapidly in crowded urban settings and was almost always fatal (Snowden 2019: 45-50). Small wonder that many would flee the towns at the first sign of plague. Marvell records exactly this mentality in his earliest surviving poem, *Ad Regem Carolum*, written in Latin while Marvell was a student in Cambridge during the 1636-38 plague.

This was a time, Marvell writes, ‘when the scholar cast aside his gown and abandoned the town in terror’ (Smith, ed. 2007: 8). When the Great Plague struck London in 1665-66, Marvell – now an MP for Hull – again ‘abandoned the town’, retreating with other MPs to Oxford.

Seventeenth-century self-isolation

Those who remained in plague-ridden towns were subject to strict lockdowns and enforced periods of self-isolation or quarantine – a practice introduced to England from Italy in the late sixteenth century (Newman 2012: 809).

Whole households were quarantined whenever someone was discovered with the tell-tale plague blisters and buboes. Doors were padlocked and watchmen appointed to ensure no one came or went from the house for a period of up to forty days.

Quarantine increased the likelihood of infection spreading within the shut-up household but also placed an economic burden on those unable to work within, although subsidies were available for the poorest households (Newman 2012). We are by no means the first generation to be counting the socio-economic costs of pandemic.

An entry in Hull’s civic records, at the Hull History Centre, notes the release on 9 November 1637 of Marvell’s parents from a period of self-isolation ‘for suspicion of infection’ lasting ‘fourteen days or above’ (Bench Book V: 104).

Their quarantine was triggered by their servant, Jane Pease, who died of plague and was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Hull on 29 October 1637 (von Maltzahn 2005: 23). An account of Hull’s

lockdown in the mid-1630s paints a grim picture of an entire town in quarantine:

'... the gates were kept continually shut, except when provisions were brought in: all assemblies and meetings were forbidden; the schools were discontinued, and the churches entirely unfrequented. The whole town soon exhibited a scene of horror, silence, and distraction: the streets were unfrequented, and the country people fearing to attend the markets, made provisions excessively dear.' (von Maltzahn 2005: 22)

As we prepare for Marvell's 400th anniversary during the third Covid-19 lockdown, it is worth reflecting on the shared experience of pandemic that now connects us to Marvell. Pandemic shaped Marvell's poetry, and not only through his references to plague and disease. We might, too, see a kindred spirit in the Marvell who escapes the confines of urban life during the Second Plague Pandemic into the green-blue landscapes of his creative imagination. In poems like 'Upon Appleton House' and 'The Garden', we find a Marvell for our own times – a poet who can teach us to find comfort in the created world, and in lines of poetry to discover 'a green thought in a green shade' for ourselves.

A copy of the page from an old register, which shows the entry for Andrew Marvell's baptism on the 5th of April 1621.



