

Time, Tide, and Tempestuous Flooding: Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' in an Age of Storms

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Why might Marvell complain 'by the tide | Of Humber' in 'To his Coy Mistress'? This article reads these lines in light of little-known records of flood risk management, housed at East Riding of Yorkshire Archives, Beverley, to uncover a new approach to Marvell's poem as shaped by the seventeenth-century 'Age of Storms'. In winter 1646–1647, a series of storms left large swathes of land and multiple settlements east of Hull under water. The floodwaters remained on the ground long into 1647, leading to fines, recriminations, and arrests, as authorities sought to assign responsibility for the flooding. Floods in Marvell's England were often read as cautionary tales and compared to the cataclysms of Noah's flood and the coming Apocalypse. These similitudes between past, present, and future floods inform Marvell's representations of flooding in 'Upon Appleton House' (1651) and 'The Character of Holland' (1653), and the article reads Marvell's reference to 'the flood' in 'To his Coy Mistress' in a similar light, as referring simultaneously to the biblical deluge and the Humber floods of 1646–1647. The article therefore sheds new light on 'To his Coy Mistress', as a cultural product of a region that has long been at risk of flooding from North Sea storms.

'To his Coy Mistress' is a poem of time, and of tide. The poem constantly shifts temporal gear, from telling time at the sublunary level—the phases of the 'tide | Of Humber', the rising and setting of the ever-moving sun; to computing time historically—'an hundred', 'two hundred', and 'thirty thousand' years; to bookending time by Noah's flood and 'the conversion of the Jews', events that start and stop the clock on biblical time.¹ Marvell trades in the overlapping temporalities of the seventeenth century, a century which saw mechanical clocks and pocket watches enter the domestic sphere, but which also saw the rise of other, future-oriented ways of telling time following publication of Joseph Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), with its 'key' to computing time and predicting the 'last age' of the future millennium.² The poem also immerses readers

¹ 'To his Coy Mistress', lines 6–7, 13, 15, 16, 10, in *Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. N. Smith, rev. edn (London, 2013), 75–84.

² For more on these overlapping temporalities, see N. Smith, 'Time Boundaries and Time Shifts in Early Modern Literary Studies', in K. Poole and O. Williams (eds), *Early Modern Histories of Time: The Periodizations of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2020), 36–51 (44–8), and A. Grafton, 'Dating History: The Renaissance and the Reformation of Chronology', *Daedalus*, 132 (2003), 74–85, who discusses the challenges the early modern encounter with competing accounts of

in the watery metaphors of time's etymological cousin, tide, moving between the ebb and flow of estuarial rivers to the climacterics of rising tides and rivers in flood. Floods in Marvell's England were frequently read as cautionary tales—episodes of divine chastisement that put Marvell's contemporaries in mind of the catastrophes of the biblical flood and the cataclysms of the coming Apocalypse. This article explores a series of North Sea storms and other weather events that brought widespread flooding to the Holderness region east of the town of Kingston-upon-Hull in 1646–1647. Reading 'To his Coy Mistress' in light of these events, it advances a new understanding of Marvell's poem by tracing the marks these storms leave on the poem's approach to time, to tide, and to the 'Deserts of vast eternity' beyond (line 24).

Holderness has long been shaped by the river sediments that centuries of seasonal flooding deposited on land closest to the rivers Humber and Hull. June Sheppard writes that these sediments gradually raised the land along the river banks above the high-tide mark, while the low-lying land further inland remained waterlogged long after artificial drainage channels began to be cut in the late twelfth century. On the evidence of the *Domesday Survey* of 1086, land along the Holderness coast had already by the late eleventh century begun to be converted into the meadow, pasture, and 'chaumpain good corne ground' that John Leland commends in his *Itinerary* (1535–1543).³ Much of this land was inundated by the Holderness storms of 1646–1647. According to surviving accounts, large swathes of agricultural land east of the town of Hull lay under water for many months between October 1646 and October 1647.⁴ New research is beginning to emerge on this remarkable episode in the history of East Coast flood risk management, but it is an episode that has not been previously connected with Marvell's poem.⁵ This article begins by reading Marvell's reference to 'the flood' in 'To his Coy Mistress' alongside other representations and reports of flooding in early modern poems and pamphlets, including in Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' (1651) and 'The Character of Holland' (1653). These accounts apply to the rising tides of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century flooding the same shifting temporal lenses that Marvell applies to time itself in 'To his Coy Mistress', using a range of similes and metaphors to assimilate, if not quite collapse, episodes of flooding in the early modern present with the deluge of the deep biblical past. The article shows how an understanding of this early modern tendency to read present-day flooding through a biblical lens can help shape a new appreciation of the nature of Marvell's 'flood' in 'To his Coy Mistress'. The lines 'I would | Love you ten years before the flood' (7–8) have conventionally been read as a reference to the biblical deluge, but the article makes the case for reading Marvell's 'flood' metaphorically, as standing for the deluge and at the same time for the extensive flooding borne by the 'tide of Humber' in Holderness in 1646–1647.⁶

Environmental historians have begun to recognize the 'forced solidarities' that have historically conjoined coastal communities across eastern England and other North Sea littoral regions in shared histories of flood risk management.⁷ However, there has been little research to date on

the past posed to traditional biblical models of history and chronology. For the technologies of time-keeping, see S. Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660–1785* (Chicago, IL, 1997). B. W. Ball, 'Mede [Mead]', Joseph (1586–1638), in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter ODNB], vol. 37 (Oxford, 2004), 683–5. 'To his Coy', line 18.

³ J. A. Sheppard, *The Draining of the Hull Valley*, East Yorkshire Local History Series, 8 (1958), 1. L. Toulmin Smith (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the years 1535–1543*, vol. 1 (London, 1907), 51.

⁴ Beverley, East Riding of Yorkshire Archives [hereafter ERYA], CSR 14/23 (20 April 1647).

⁵ B. McDonagh, H. Worthen, S. Mottram, and S. Buxton-Hill, 'Living with Water and Flood in Medieval and Early Modern Hull', *Environment and History*, 30 (2024), 585–614; B. McDonagh, H. Worthen, and S. Mottram, 'Governing Flood Risk in Mid Seventeenth-Century England', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 89 (2025), 13–26.

⁶ R. Sharrock, 'The Date of Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress"', *Times Literary Supplement* (31 October 1958), 625, and E. E. Duncan-Jones' response, in *Times Literary Supplement* (5 December 1958), 705. See also 'To his Coy', line 8 n, in *Poems*, ed. Smith, 81.

⁷ For comparative North Sea histories of risk, see Milja van Tielhof, 'Forced Solidarity: Maintenance of Coastal Defences along the North Sea Coast in the Early Modern Period', *Environment and History*, 21 (2015), 319–50; G. Bankoff, 'The "English Lowlands" and the North Sea Basin System: A History of Shared Risk', *Environment and History*, 19 (2013), 3–37. For early modern histories of flood risk management along the English East Coast, see J. Morgan, 'Funding and Organising Flood Defence in Eastern England, c.1570–1700', in *Water Management in Europe (12th–18th Centuries)* (Firenze, 2018), 413–31; McDonagh et al., 'Living

how the *literature* of an ‘English Lowlands’ that extends from Hull southwards to London and the Sussex coast has also been shaped by the flood risks to which East Coast communities have historically been exposed. This article’s focus on North Sea flooding is therefore intended to shed new light on ‘To his Coy Mistress’ as a cultural product of a region which was, and remains, at risk from the compound threats of storm surges, spring tides, and riverine flooding. ‘To his Coy Mistress’ has conventionally been read, after T. S. Eliot, as a ‘product of European, that is to say Latin, culture’, but our argument is that Marvell’s love poem is also shaped by the storminess of the Little Ice Age, and the environmental challenges of living with flood risk ‘by the tide | Of Humber’ in Hull.⁸

I. POETRY AND FLOODING IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Today, anthropogenic climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of storms and causing ‘more frequent and intense compound coastal flooding events as sea levels continue to rise.’⁹ Yet climate change was also a factor in increased storminess in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a period climatologists regard as the climax of the Little Ice Age (1300–1850).¹⁰ As increased storminess leading to coastal and fluvial flooding is a known consequence of global heating today, so the colder, windier, wetter climate of the Little Ice Age brought with it an ‘Age of Storms.’¹¹ Unlike anthropogenic climate change today, the climactic cooling that caused the upturn in seventeenth-century storms was a result, not of human actions, but natural phenomena.¹² However, early modern broadsides and newsbooks still saw human actions at the root of the ‘mervailous in-undation of waters’ they report.¹³ These accounts apply what Kate Rigby terms a ‘punishment paradigm’ to flooding, one that sees evidence of ‘the Rod of Divine Justice’ in ‘the merciless waves’ of North Sea storms.¹⁴

That reports of flooding in Marvell’s day discern ‘the Rod of Divine Justice’ behind their accounts of lands inundated and lives and livelihoods lost led naturally to writers drawing more explicit analogies between the biblical deluge and early modern floods. In October 1570, communities in eastern England reported significant flooding along rivers and coastlines, as related in Richard Tarlton’s broadside ballad, *A Very Lamentable and Woful Discours* (1570).¹⁵ The poem reports key details of the flood’s destructive force—that it struck Bedford ‘at twelve a clock at night’ (line 33), that the rising waters also caused ‘great losse’ (122) of lives in Lincolnshire, and that the ‘riuers flowe’ (103) brought widespread destruction to houses, cattle, and sheep. As significant is Tarlton’s perception of this flood as analogous to the biblical deluge in its severity, scale, and in terms of the divine anger Tarlton discerns behind the ‘waters fierce and fel, | And fluds both huge and hie’ (5–6). ‘The Arke of father Noy’, Tarlton writes,

with Water’. Recent work on early modern Dutch and Flemish histories of dike management is characterized by a focus on the inequalities and failures of flood risk management, exemplified by T. Soens, ‘Flood Security in the Medieval and Early Modern North Sea Area: A Question of Entitlement?’, *Environment and History*, 19 (2013), 209–32.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, ‘Andrew Marvell’, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode (London, 1975), 161–71 (161).

⁹ S. I. Seneviratne and X. Zhang, ‘Weather and Climate Extreme Events in a Changing Climate’, in V. Masson-Delmotte, et al. (eds), *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge, 2021), 1513–766 (1599–600) <doi:10.1017/9781009157896.013> accessed 1 August 2024.

¹⁰ R. S. Bradley and P. D. Jones (eds), *Climate Since A.D. 1500* (London, 1992), 658–60. Also, D. Wheeler and J. Mayes (eds), *Regional Climates of the British Isles* (London, 1997), 291–8, who note the period from 1550 as marking ‘the most profound depths of the Little Ice Age’ (292).

¹¹ The phrase appears in T. Soens, ‘Flood Security’, 210.

¹² For the Little Ice Age’s possible causes, see Wheeler and Mayes (eds), *Regional Climates*, 293–8.

¹³ *Strange and Terrible News, from Holland, and Yarmouth* [hereafter, *News*] (London, 1651), 2.

¹⁴ K. Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville, VA, 2015), 17; *News*, 1, 6.

¹⁵ R. Tarlton, *A Very Lamentable and Woful Discours of the Fierce Fluds, whiche Lately Flowed in Bedfordshire and Lincolnshire* (London, 1570).

was had in minde as than:
When God did clene destroy,
Bothe woman childe and man.

But that he promis made,
When he did heer remaine:
The world should neuer vade,
By waters force againe.

Els would we then haue thought,
The dredful day of dome:
Had been bothe made and wrought
To drown vs all and some.

(77–88)

Lydia Barnett writes of the phenomenon of ‘temporal doubling’, whereby early moderns relate the biblical past to the present or future, and see the deluge ‘as a harbinger of the Apocalypse’, Tarlton’s ‘day of dome’.¹⁶ These associations between past, present, and future flooding are amply exemplified in Tarlton’s ballad. Yet, while Tarlton draws close comparison between the biblical deluge and the Bedford flood, in his use of the conditional tense, Tarlton is as careful to differentiate past, present, and future floods as he is to create similitudes between them. Looking at the floods in Bedford, the people ‘had in minde’ the biblical past, Tarlton writes, and ‘*would ... then haue thought*’ the ‘dredful day of dome’ had arrived (emphasis added), were it not for God’s parting promise, in Genesis 8:21, never to inundate the world ‘By waters force againe’. God’s covenant therefore helps transmute the ‘punishment paradigm’ of ‘divinely ordained disaster’ into ‘a blessing in disguise’, Rigby writes, one that encourages us to heed a moral warning from the deluge that happily will never be repeated again.¹⁷ God may send ‘merciless waves’ to England’s shores in Tarlton’s day as punishment for sin, but his mercies also ensure that communities be allowed to recover and learn from past mistakes. The idea of the biblical deluge as a one-off disaster has important implications for our understanding of the nature of the similitudes between past, present, and future floods that writers like Tarlton create when they set a recent flood event against the backdrop of the floods of Genesis 6–8 and Revelation 14 that book-end biblical time. For Tarlton, past, present, and future floods are closely comparable, almost contiguous, but never quite collapsible with one another, connected by simile or metaphor but distinctive of themselves.

Marvell’s commonwealth poetry also uses the world-engulfing flood of Genesis 6–8 as a metaphorical lens on the seventeenth-century flood events it describes—the breached dikes of Holland’s ‘new-catched miles’ in ‘The Character of Holland’ (1653) and the deliberate flooding of meadows on the banks of the river Wharfe, in ‘Upon Appleton House’ (1651).¹⁸ The ‘floating’ or ‘drowning’ of meadows was an agricultural innovation of the early modern period designed to improve grass and hay yields by passing water across a meadow, typically through a system of raised channels or ‘bedworks’, fed from a sluice gate communicating with a river or watercourse.¹⁹ Marvell uses the language of ‘drowning’ to describe the movement of water from river to meadow in ‘Upon Appleton House’—‘The river’, he writes, ‘in itself is drowned’—and

¹⁶ L. Barnett, *After the Flood: Imagining the Global Environment in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, MA, 2019), 15.

¹⁷ Rigby, *Dancing*, 17.

¹⁸ ‘Character of Holland’, line 18, in *Poems*, ed. Smith, 246–56.

¹⁹ H. Cook and T. Williamson (eds), *Water Meadows: History, Ecology and Conservation* (Bollington, 2007), 2–3. Although the technology of using bedworks to conduct water across meadows was not perfected until Henry Vaughan’s *Most Approved and Long Experienced Water Workes* (London, 1610), evidence points to rivers having been diverted for irrigation at Yorkshire Cistercian houses since at least the late fifteenth century. See H. Cook, K. Stearne, and T. Williamson, ‘The Origins of Water Meadows in

his reference to the process by which ‘Denton sets ope its cataracts’, or sluices, may refer, John Barnard suggests, to the deliberate inflow of water into the river Wharfe from the fishpond on the Fairfax estate at Denton, some 30 miles upstream of Nun Appleton.²⁰ Marvell’s descriptions of a drowned world turned upside down, where ‘boats can over bridges sail; | And fishes do the stables scale’ (477–8), borrow from Ovid’s topsy-turvy descriptions of Deucalion’s flood in *Metamorphoses* Book I and help recast the artificial (and controlled) irrigation of Nun Appleton’s meadows into the paradoxes of a world-engulfing deluge.²¹ The absurdities of these conceits—applying imagery of fish scaling stables to irrigated meadows—also seep into the next stanza, where the poet retreats from the flood to take ‘sanctuary in the wood’ (482). This wood quickly transforms in Marvell’s imagination to become a ‘yet green, yet growing ark’—a site ‘Where the first carpenter’, Noah, ‘might best | Fit timber for his keel have pressed’ (484–6). Marvell here sees the ‘sea’ (468) of Nun Appleton’s drowned meadows through the lens of Noah’s flood and ark. Yet, by applying diluvian paradoxes to water of just a few centimetres’ depth, the poem also creates an ironic distance between biblical deluge and Nun Appleton’s drowned meadows, one that prevents any actual collapsing of chronologies and keeps pre- and post-diluvian time distinct.

Similar ‘fish out of water’ conceits abound in ‘The Character of Holland’, which also draws on piscatorial imagery and Ovidian paradox in describing Holland’s ‘daily deluge’ (line 27) from the North Sea—a deluge of such severity, Marvell writes, that it causes ‘the fish’ to sit at table, ‘not as a meat but as a guest’ (29–30). Holland’s vulnerability to flooding arises, Marvell implies, from its efforts to drain and reclaim ‘new-catched miles’ from the North Sea (18). The more land that was reclaimed from the sea in the early modern period, the higher the sea-dikes needed to defend the ‘forced ground’ from the ‘barking waves’ beyond (20). In Holland, Greg Bankoff writes, sea-dikes reached average heights of ‘two to four metres in the sixteenth century, three to five in the seventeenth century, and four to six in the eighteenth century.’²² Marvell’s description of the Dutch, ‘Building their wat’ry Babel far more high | To reach the sea, than those to scale the sky’ (21–2) casts a characteristically satirical eye on the growing heights of Dutch coastal defences in the seventeenth century, but in its reference to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), the line also casts moral judgement on Dutch efforts to over-engineer an amphibious country, ‘half wet, and half dry’ (line 53). In ‘Character of Holland’, Marvell’s focus on the ‘daily deluge’ that overtops the sea-dikes of Holland’s ‘wat’ry Babel’, and ‘o’er their steeples played’ (line 24) seemingly recasts these early modern flood events as divine punishment against the hubris of Dutch land reclamation schemes. No wonder Marvell writes in this poem of the ‘ark’ splitting on Holland’s poldered ground (68).

Like the drowned meadows of ‘Upon Appleton House’, Marvell’s description of Holland’s ‘daily deluge’ also has its basis in reality. Past criticism of ‘Character of Holland’ has pointed to Owen Felltham’s *Brief Character of the Low Countries* (written c.1629–1630, published 1652) as the principal source for the poem’s anti-Dutch satire. Richard Todd reads Marvell’s poem as holding a mirror up to the new English commonwealth of the early 1650s by showing, through its satire on the mixed government—half monarchy, half democracy—of the Dutch, the more complete achievements of the English in having cast off the regal yoke entirely, to become the ‘better Rome’ to Holland’s Carthage.²³ Todd shows how Marvell uses a succession of balanced

England’, *Agricultural History Review*, 51 (2003), 155–62 (161). Nun Appleton—the estate Marvell celebrates in his poem, ‘Upon Appleton House’—was itself the site of a former Cistercian priory, and it is tempting to speculate that the nuns who are a source of anti-Catholic satire in the poem may also have been a source of local knowledge for how to engineer flooding in Nun Appleton’s meadows.

²⁰ ‘Upon Appleton House’, lines 471, 466, in *Poems*, ed. Smith, 210–41. J. Barnard, ‘Marvell and Denton’s “Cataracts”’, *RES*, n.s. 31 (1980), 310–15 (313).

²¹ For Marvell’s Ovidian borrowings, see ‘Upon Appleton House’, lines 477–80 n, in *Poems*, ed. Smith, 230.

²² Bankoff, ‘English Lowlands’, 12.

²³ ‘Character’, lines 142, 141. Richard Todd, ‘Equilibrium and National Stereotyping in Marvell’s “Character of Holland”’, in C. J. Summers and T. Peabworth (eds), *On the Celebrated and Neglected Poems of Andrew Marvell* (Columbia, MO, 1992), 169–91.

East Coast. This letter reports flood damage ‘not far from this town’ at ‘Soal’ [Salle, near Norfolk], and notes that the flood waters ‘hath drowned a great part of the Country, and many Cattle’ (News, 6). Bringing the Dutch and English reports of flooding together, *Strange and Terrible News* therefore speaks directly to the Anglo-Dutch similitudes or ‘half-identities’ that Zwicker uncovers. These ‘half-identities’ extend beyond the shared experience of flooding to encompass a shared recognition, echoed as much in the Yarmouth letter as in the letters from Amsterdam, that the floods were a form of divine chastisement for ‘our stubbornness and disobedience in walking contrary to his Laws and Ordinances, and refusing to be humbled for our sins’ (News, 6). As G.T. notes from Amsterdam, ‘events are not so confined to any one special subject or Country, [...] and none can plead a freedom to be exempted, while our infirmities lay us all open to the Rod of Divine Justice’ (1). Marvell may appear to direct ‘the Rod of Divine Justice’ onto the ‘half-wet’ Dutch in his poem, but the solidarities of *Strange and Terrible News* show it was indeed difficult to exempt the English from their share in the suffering caused by North Sea floods in Marvell’s day.

Nor was it only flooding from the North Sea that threatened to drown land in Holland and eastern England around the time Marvell was writing ‘Character of Holland’ in the early 1650s. Not all floods are caused by storms and other ‘acts of God’: some are started deliberately, as acts of protest or war, and this was as much the case in Holland, where deliberate flooding had been widely used as a weapon of war during the Dutch Revolt (1568–1648), as in the wetlands of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire.³⁰ Here, Hatfield Chase and the Isle of Axelholme, a low-lying region at the confluence of seven rivers south of the Humber Estuary, had been progressively drained under the Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden between 1627–1631 and the reclaimed land settled by tenant farmers and some of the Dutch investors in Vermuyden’s scheme. Commoners in the Lincolnshire manor of Epworth were particularly affected by the drainage works, with Piet van Cruyningen noting that 7400 out of 13,400 acres of commons were lost to enclosure under Vermuyden.³¹ These ‘new-catched miles’, and the Dutch investors who settled there, were later the target of protests to reclaim the commons which broke out in June 1642 and continued intermittently until 1656. William Dugdale writes that as well as demolishing houses and destroying ploughs, the protestors targeted the banks, ditches, and sluices Vermuyden had installed, thinking to reclaim the commons by returning these ‘new-catched miles’ to their formerly flooded state.³² These protests, ongoing when Marvell was resident at Nun Appleton between 1650–52, have previously been identified as a possible context for the flooding in ‘Upon Appleton House’.³³ Yet, read alongside Marvell’s satire on Dutch land reclamation, they also cast an ironic light on ‘Character of Holland’, reminding us that it was not only Holland’s ‘new-catched miles’ that were ‘half-wet’ in this period.

That Marvell was aware of the ironies of his anti-Dutch satire and its potential to fall back on the English at every turn is clear from the fact that ‘Character of Holland’ likens the Dutch States General—the supreme legislature of the seven United Provinces in the seventeenth century—to ‘a Commission of the Sewers’ (line 52), an arm of English local government with statutory powers in Marvell’s day to manage rivers and water courses and defend coastlines from what the 1531 Statute of Sewers calls ‘the outrageous flouyng surges and course of the See’.³⁴ Marvell

³⁰ A. M. J. de Kraker, ‘Flooding in River Mouths: Human Caused or Natural Events? Five Centuries of Flooding Events in the SW Netherlands, 1500–2000’, *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences*, 19 (2015), 2673–84; E. Kreike, *Scorched Earth: Environmental Warfare as a Crime against Humanity and Nature* (Princeton, NJ, 2022), 24–58.

³¹ P. van Cruyningen, ‘Dutch Investors and the Drainage of Hatfield Chase, 1626–56’, *Agricultural History Review*, 64 (2016), 17–37 (23–5). See also, K. Lindley, *Fenland Riots and the English Revolution* (London, 1982).

³² William Dugdale, *The History of Imbanking and Drayning of Divers Fenms and Marshes* (London, 1662), 146–9.

³³ D. Hirst and S. Zwicker, ‘High Summer at Nun Appleton, 1651: Andrew Marvell and Lord Fairfax’s Occasions’, *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 247–69 (252–3).

³⁴ 23 Hen. VIII, c. 5, in A. Luders, et al. (eds), *The Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 3 (London, 1817), 368–72 (368).

mocks the esteem with which water management was of necessity regarded in the Low Countries: 'To make a bank was a great plot of state', he writes in 'Character', 'Invent a shovel and be magistrate' (47–8). But Marvell knew that in England, too, it was the 'magistrates' or civic elite who wielded the metaphorical shovel. Those appointed to Commissions of Sewers, S.G.E. Lythe writes, needed to be of a certain social standing, and for the Commission of Sewers in Marvell's hometown of 'Hull & County', this translated to a pool of possible commissioners drawn from the town's gentry and civic elite—including its mayor, aldermen, and MPs.³⁵ As one of two MPs for Hull to serve in the Restoration Parliament, 'Andrew Marvell Esqr' was duly nominated to two Commissions of Sewers in his lifetime, his name featuring beneath that of fellow MP, John Ramsden, in the 1668 list—and, in a previously unnoted connection, also beneath Anthony Gilby's name in the list of 26 names compiled for a new commission on 22 May 1676 (Figure 1).³⁶ Despite this large pool of commissioners, Lythe writes that 'the real work was done by a handful of enthusiasts'. Only six commissioners were required to attend 'sessions of Sewers', which heard and passed judgement on disrepair or neglect in manner of a court. A team of jurors were appointed to survey sites and report defects, and the commissioners had power to levy taxes on the owners or occupiers of land adjoining the watercourse, bank, or bridge in need of dredging or repair.³⁷

As an MP with at least nominal water management responsibilities as a named commissioner for 'Hull & County', Marvell's position later in life certainly casts an ironic light on his earlier comments about shovel-wielding magistrates in 'Character of Holland'.³⁸ Yet the surviving Sewers records for Hull and East Yorkshire are equally valuable for what they reveal about a series of storms that reportedly left large swathes of the Holderness Level under water between October 1646 and October 1647. In 1646–1647, according to surviving records held at the East Riding of Yorkshire Archives, Beverley, high tides and strong winds combined to bring 'downe a great part of the Bancks' defending the Holderness Level from what one account calls the 'rage of the river of Humber', causing 'greate calamities of waters [...] in the Levell'.³⁹ These little-known records are throwing new light on the history of flood risk management in eastern England, but we show here how the 'calamities' they describe can also frame a new understanding of 'To his Coy Mistress', as a poem written 'by the tide | Of Humber', and in a time of flood.⁴⁰

II. FLOODING IN HOLDERNESS IN 1646–1647: THE COMMISSION OF SEWERS' ACCOUNTS

The 'Commission of Sewers for the East Parts of the East Riding' extended its jurisdiction over 'the lowlands of Holderness and the River Hull Valley', including 'the channel of the River Hull' itself.⁴¹ The Holderness Level stretches northwards from the Humber banks at Drypool, a hamlet situated at the mouth of the river Hull, towards Driffield, some 22 miles inland, near the river Hull's source in the Yorkshire Wolds (Figure 2). It was a separate Commission to the one operating in 'Hull & County', whose authority centred on the town and port of Kingston-upon-Hull. In the seventeenth century, Drypool was situated outside the town of Hull's jurisdiction, although Hull's military defences had already encroached onto the Drypool side of the river in Marvell's day. Drypool is described by its seventeenth-century inhabitants as 'but a screed of

³⁵ S. G. E. Lythe, 'The Court of Sewers for the East Parts of the East Riding', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 34 (1939), 11–24 (19).

³⁶ Hull, Hull History Centre [hereafter, HHC], C JS/1/15/1 (1668); C JS/1/15/5 (22 May 1676).

³⁷ Lythe, 'Court', 12.

³⁸ As has been noted previously by N. von Maltzahn, 'Death by Drowning: Marvell's *Lycidas*', *Milton Studies*, 48 (2008), 38–52 (40).

³⁹ ERYA CSR 14/23.

⁴⁰ For discussion of the Sewers records and the light they throw on flood risk management, see McDonagh, Worthen, and Mottram, 'Governing Flood Risk'.

⁴¹ Lythe, 'Court', 12.

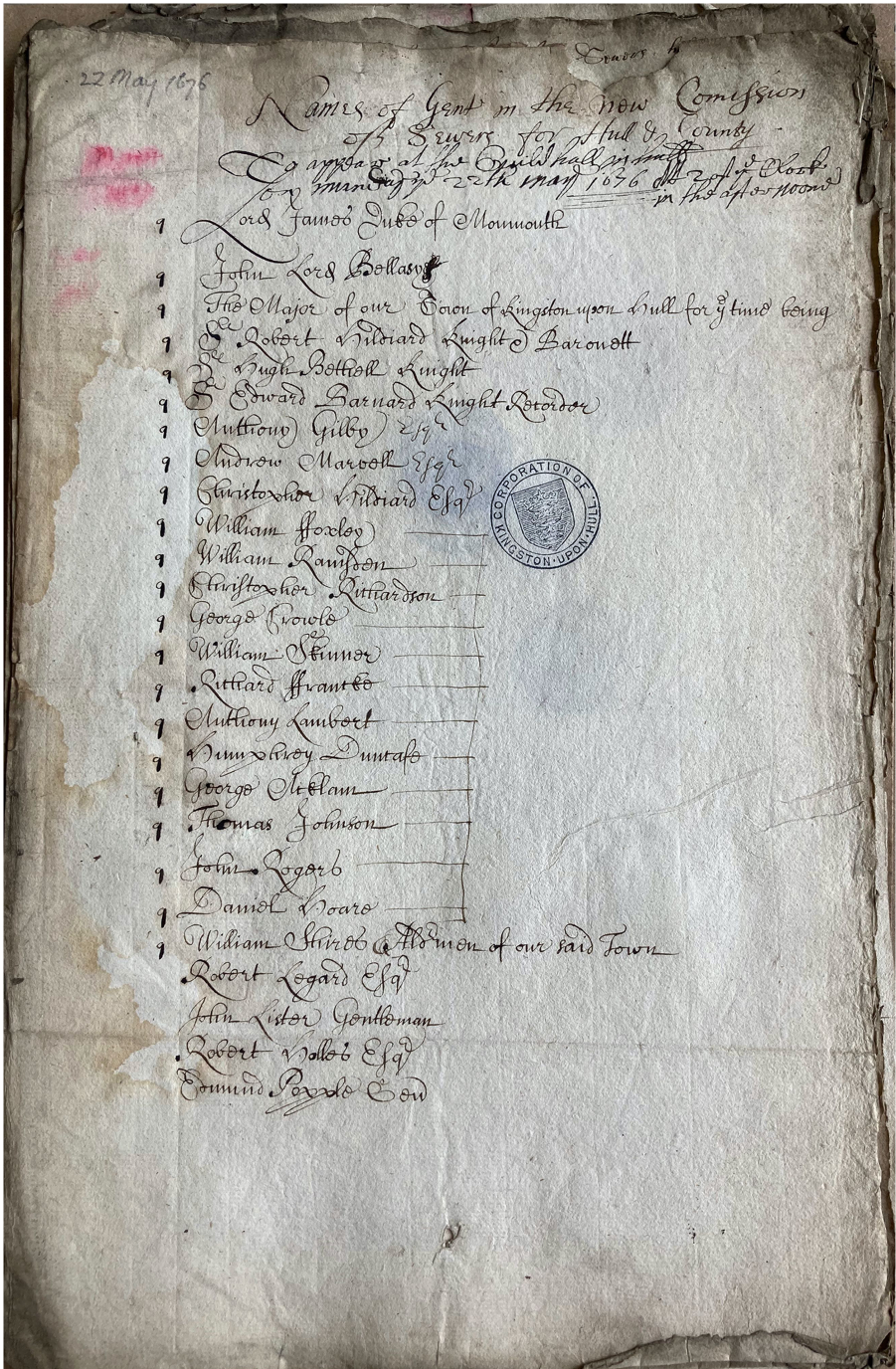


FIG. 1. List of Commissioners for 'Hull & County', 22 May 1676. Hull, Hull History Centre, C JS/1/15/5. 'Andrew Marvell Esqr' appears eighth on the list, below Anthony Gilby. Reproduced by permission of Hull City Archives, Hull History Centre, Hull.

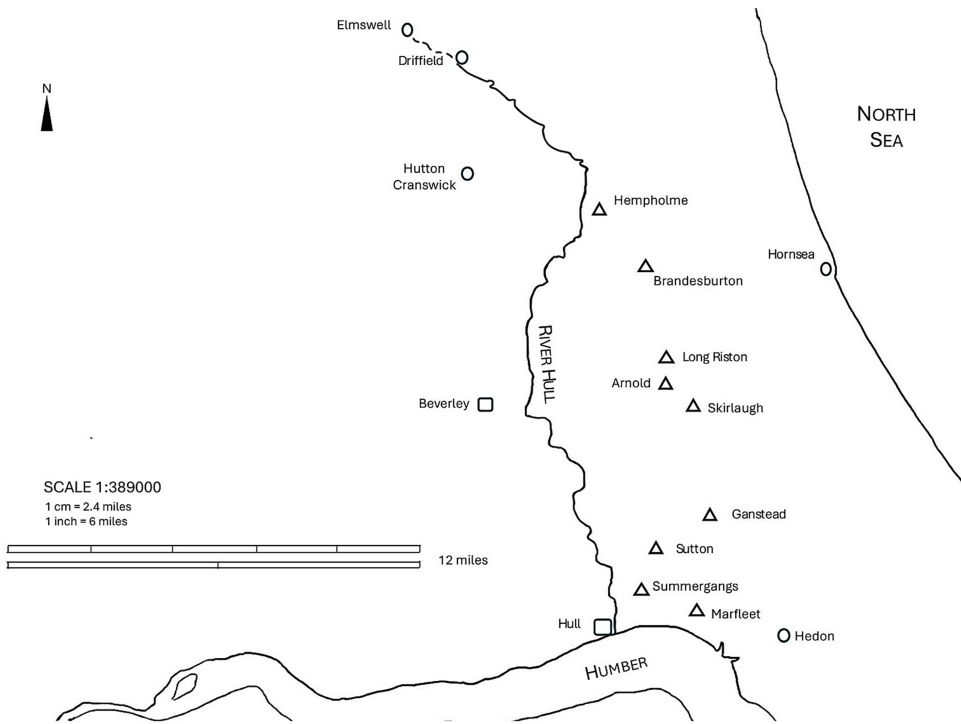


FIG. 2. Map of Hull and Holderness, showing the course of the river Hull and selected townships (marked with a triangle) mentioned by the East Riding Commissioners of Sewers on 20 April 1647 as either under water or at risk of flooding as a direct result of the breached banks at Drypool (Beverley, East Riding Archives, CSR 14/23). Copyright, the authors.

ground, adioynning vpon the furious & unresistable arme of the sea called Humber.⁴² 14 householders are listed in the Hearth Tax returns for Drypool in 1672, yet these residents claimed they had traditionally borne a disproportionately large responsibility for maintaining the sea banks that kept the 'furious' Humber at bay.⁴³ In their 'humble petition' to the Commissioners of Sewers of 22 October 1646, the 'poor & distressed Inhabitants of Dripool' note they 'haue hitherto contributed their vtmost Indeavores' to the annual repair of a 'sea banke ... soe often assaulted', but 'now call daily for more assistance' in a task, they claim, that benefits the entire Level—for it 'would be the vtter vndoing of the whole Country adioynning' were the sea bank to be 'quite wasted & carried away'.⁴⁴

The plea here that local communities should not pay disproportionately for maintaining coastal defences of common benefit across a wider region is a repeated refrain in Hull and Holderness in the 1640s. A similar emphasis on the unjust burden of flood alleviation costs also characterizes the town of Hull's plea for tax relief just 15 months earlier in July 1645. Hull's plea cites the 'greate & insupportable chardge in making & mayneteyning the Jeattyes, banckes, clowes, lockerworkes & other water works', and notes that 'the Country beares noe charge' for these costs, 'albeit they receive thereby equal benefit which folloes, for otherwise the water of

⁴² ERYA CSR 12/1 (22 October 1646).

⁴³ For the Hearth Tax returns, see K. Allison (ed.), *A History of the County of York, East Riding*, vol. 1: *The City of Kingston upon Hull* (London, 1969), 460–64 (460).

⁴⁴ ERYA CSR 12/1.

Humber would overflowe & drowne the whole Countrey'.⁴⁵ Yet in the case of Drypool, the petitioners do not just base their plea for support with repairing the sea walls on the perceived injustice of these, their customary responsibilities to bear the financial burden for maintaining a public benefit. At the heart of their petition is the claim that the banks and walls have been so irreparably damaged in recent years as to make the cost of repairs, at this time, 'a burthen most intolerable'. There are two reasons their petition cites for this irreparable damage: the first, vandalism by soldiers garrisoned in Hull's blockhouses at Drypool during the course of 'these unhappy warres' between king and parliament; the second, an act of God, which on 'the 23 & 24 dayes of March last' [i.e., March 1646], caused 'such hedious & mighty winds both by day & night, that they forced vpp the waves; and broke & carryed cleare away the most of [the] wood worke of the bankes: and wholly ruined the same'. Despite the 'ruines & insolencies ... committed by the vnruely soldiers', the 'said pet[it]itioner[s]' had nevertheless 'endeavoured still to keep out the Water from breaking in upon the Countrey'. The March 1646 storm, they claim, was 'a thing w[hich] came by the power of God: w[hich] noe power of man can withstand'. The petitioners argue that they cannot, therefore, be held responsible, or financially liable, for extreme weather events outside of human control.⁴⁶

The commissioners noted the 'ruinous' condition of the Drypool banks, and warned that the 'damage susteyned by the Inlett of salt waters therein' was now 'spreading it self into the adjacent Levell', 'rendering the wayes impassable' and 'overflowinge great quantities of grounds'. But they argued that no act of God was responsible for this disaster; rather, the banks had been rendered 'ruinous' as an entirely avoidable consequence of the inactions of the Drypool residents.⁴⁷ Sitting in Beverley on 30 October 1646, the commissioners ordered jury members to survey the Drypool banks and make the necessary repairs. But other acts of God—described variously as 'the rage of the river of Humber' and 'an hideous Tempest'—intervened before repairs could be completed.⁴⁸ At the next sessions of sewers on 20 April 1647, the commissioners lament 'the violence of windes & stormes this last winter', which 'hath borne downe a great part of the Bancks' at Drypool, causing 'large passages & ingresse' of saltwater. The account notes that 'a great part of the Countrey consisting of many Townshippes' are at present 'over flowed & surrounded'. The extent of the flooding was so unprecedented that the commissioners took the decision in April 1647 to levy a tax of 3 shillings per acre of land across the Level, listing the settlements liable for this tax and the number of acres of land in each settlement (Figure 2).⁴⁹ The commissioners still maintained, however, that the Drypool residents were 'bound to make upp those breakes', and that, 'by the evadeing', and 'utterly neglecting', of their responsibilities, they should accept liability for the floods. Meeting again on 18 May 1647, the commissioners therefore noted that the tax levied on the Level was 'for this tyme onely and noe more, And that all such moneyes as shall bee paid by any Inhabitants of any of the said Townshippes towards the repaires of the said Banckes shall bee repaid out of the Lordshipp of Drypoole'.⁵⁰ In October 1647, the commissioners duly reported that the 'new seadike' at Drypool 'is at p[re]sent happilie brought to some perfection with the expenses of 600li'. With the 'Levell ... freed at present, and for the future secured' from flooding, the Commission turned to recuperating the substantial costs incurred by levying a crippling tax on the Drypool inhabitants of between £3 and £5 per acre.⁵¹

Surviving Sewers accounts surrounding the disrepair of the Drypool banks are a valuable witness to the extreme weather and 'extraordinary waters' of the mid-seventeenth century. But

⁴⁵ 'Bench Book, 1609–50', HHC C BRB/3, 669–70 (669).

⁴⁶ ERYA CSR 12/1.

⁴⁷ ERYA CSR 14/21 (30 October 1646).

⁴⁸ ERYA CSR 14/23; CSR 14/34 (22 January 1649).

⁴⁹ ERYA CSR 14/23.

⁵⁰ ERYA CSR 14/26 (18 May 1647).

⁵¹ ERYA CSR 14/32 (26 October 1647).

insofar as they accuse Drypool residents of evasion and neglect, these accounts also witness a common early modern tendency to blame human communities for flood events popularly regarded by Marvell's contemporaries as divine chastisement for human sins. This tendency we have seen already within the similitudes of early modern flood poems and pamphlets, wherein comparisons between Noah's flood and North Sea floods implicitly liken the immorality of early moderns affected by flooding to the debauchery of the pre-diluvian age. The biblical landscapes of poems like 'Character of Holland' serve in this sense as a shorthand for finger pointing and recrimination, with Marvell's references to the Tower of Babel part of the moral economy of a poem that blames the 'daily deluges' breaching Holland's Babel-like dikes on the Babel-like hubris of Dutch land reclamation schemes. Such comparisons are metaphorical rather than literal: they compare rather than collapse biblical with early modern time and so recognize clear distinctions between the pre-diluvian world of divine retribution and the post-diluvian world of redemption and reform. Yet the recognition that floods in the post-diluvian world were admonitory rather than cataclysmic—'acts of God' which chastised rather than destroyed—nevertheless brought a distinctly admonitory tone to early modern accounts of flooding in poetry, newsbooks, and Commission of Sewers accounts. This same admonitory tone is heard in the Commission's response to the Drypool petitioners' plea that the 1646 floods were 'a thing w[hich] came by the power of God: w[hich] noe power of man can withstand'. The Commission reminded the petitioners that humans always bore responsibility for the acts of God with which they were visited, and that the 1646 floods were directly the fault of the Drypool residents' failure to keep their banks in good repair.

III. 'TO HIS COY MISTRESS' AND 'THE RAGE OF THE RIVER OF HUMBER'

'To his Coy Mistress' is a poem self-consciously written 'by the tide | Of Humber' and conventionally dated to the same years that saw the river Humber breach Drypool's banks. To what extent are the 'calamities of waters' in Holderness an informing context for Marvell's speaker's reference to loving his mistress 'ten years before the flood'? And how far should we also hear the admonitory language of early modern accounts of flooding in Marvell's use of the word 'flood' in this poem? Floods, like sighs, tears, and wind-tossed boats, are commonplaces of conventional Petrarchan love poetry, and the conceit of the complaining lover causing a flood of tears was already being parodied around the turn of the seventeenth century, when we hear the speaker of John Donne's 'The Canonization' ask 'who's injured by my love?', and 'Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?'.⁵² Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' also trades in parody: Marvell's reference to 'flood' follows hard on his speaker's complaint 'by the tide | Of Humber', and forms part of what Jules Brody calls this poem's wider 'parodic deconstruction' of lyric forms like the Petrarchan love poem, and the lover's complaint.

But we might also recognize the roots of Marvell's speaker's reference to loving his mistress 'ten years before the flood' in mid-seventeenth-century eschatological thought. Marvell's temporal markers in 'To his Coy Mistress'—the 'flood' and 'conversion of the Jews'—have long been read alongside the computations contained in eschatological writing to reveal clues as to when Marvell's poem may have been composed. Writing in October 1958, Roger Sharrock first suggested that Marvell's 'conversion of the Jews' may refer, not to an event 'hidden in futurity', but to a movement gaining traction among Independents in Cromwell's England, who were eager to orchestrate 'the conversion of some members of the Jewish race' to accelerate the prophesied

⁵² John Donne, 'The Canonization', lines 10, 12, in *The Major Works*, ed. J. Carey (Oxford, 2008), 95–6. For discussion, see M. A. Winkelman, 'Sighs and Tears: Biological Signals and John Donne's "Whining Poetry"', *Philosophy and Literature*, 33 (2009), 329–44 (340). See also H. Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), 223, who links 'The Canonization' to the 'tear-floods' and 'sigh-tempests' of 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'.

millennium by accomplishing ‘the last things forecast in Revelation.’⁵³ Sharrock argues on this evidence for 1653 as a plausible date for the composition of ‘To his Coy Mistress’. But in December 1958, Elsie Duncan-Jones responded to Sharrock by pointing to the equal value of dating the poem to 1646, on the basis that Noah’s flood was commonly dated in mid-seventeenth-century biblical commentaries to the year 1656 since the creation of the world (*anno mundi*).⁵⁴ Duncan-Jones writes that ‘Marvell is unlikely to have written “ten years before the Flood” without intending this to be understood as 1646 *anno mundi*’, and she takes this as a clue to when the poem was originally composed, arguing that ‘there was a point in his choice of year: and it can, I think, only be, that if they had world enough and time he would begin to love his lady in 1646 *anno mundi* instead of in 1646 *anno Domini*.’⁵⁵ Duncan-Jones’ argument for a composition date in c.1646 has since been corroborated on stylistic grounds, via Nigel Smith’s discovery of ‘some very direct reworkings of images’ towards the end of Marvell’s poem from John Hall’s ‘To his Tutor, Master Pawson. An Ode’ (1646).⁵⁶

Where was Marvell in the late 1640s? Marvell had been in mainland Europe since at least February 1642, but we know he had returned to England by November 1647, since his signature appears on a deed of sale transferring Marvell’s remaining property at Meldreth, Cambridgeshire, to John Stacey of the nearby parish of Orwell, signed in person by Marvell on 12 November and again, on completion of the sale, on 23 December 1647.⁵⁷ Hilton Kelliher notes the significance of Marvell’s denomination in the deed as ‘of Kingstone super Hull Gentleman’ and writes on this evidence that it was ‘almost inevitable’ Marvell returned first to Hull from mainland Europe, and that ‘he may have taken ship there directly from the Low Countries.’⁵⁸ Matthew Augustine agrees that Marvell returned first to Hull, ‘not later than November [1647] and probably some months before.’⁵⁹ The balance of probability is therefore that Marvell spent summer 1647 in Hull, visiting his sisters and brothers-in-law in the town, and his stepmother and Alured uncles and cousins in nearby Beverley.

Several of the Alureds relocated to Beverley in the 1640s following the destruction of the family home next door to the Hull Charterhouse amid the second royalist siege of Hull in September 1643.⁶⁰ Marvell’s stepmother, Lucy Marvell (née Alured), was at Beverley by 1643, as was her nephew, Matthew Alured (born c.1615), who by 1642 had married and settled at the nearby village of Walkington.⁶¹ Also living nearby in the 1640s was Lucy and Colonel Alured’s brother, Lancelot Alured (born 1587). Lancelot was an active member of the East Riding Commission of Sewers, and his signature appears on several of the Sewers orders, dated between April–August 1647, relating to the ongoing controversy over who should bear financial responsibility for repairs to the Drypool banks.⁶² In April 1647, Lancelot was at the meeting at Beverley that took the unprecedented step of assessing landowners in settlements across the Holderness Level to raise money for repairs at Drypool.⁶³ In June 1647, he was among the commissioners to appoint collectors ‘for the gathering of the severall somes of Money charged upon the severall ... townes ... for the repaires of drypoole bankcs.’⁶⁴ Then in July–August 1647, he

⁵³ Sharrock, ‘Date’, 625.

⁵⁴ Duncan-Jones, response to Sharrock, 705; Samuel Hartlib, *Clavis Apocalyptica: Or, the Revelation Revealed* (London, 1651),

D2v.

⁵⁵ Duncan-Jones, response to Sharrock, 705.

⁵⁶ *Poems*, ed. Smith, 76.

⁵⁷ H. Kelliher, ‘Some Notes on Andrew Marvell’, *British Library Journal*, 4 (1978), 122–44 (125). See 128–9 for a full transcript of the deed.

⁵⁸ Kelliher, ‘Some Notes’, 126.

⁵⁹ M. C. Augustine, *Andrew Marvell: A Literary Life* (London, 2021), 66.

⁶⁰ For the destruction of the Charterhouse in the 1643 siege, see S. Mottram, *Ruin and Reformation in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Marvell* (Oxford, 2019), 165–8.

⁶¹ P. Burdon, ‘The Second Mrs Marvell’, *N&Q*, 29 (1982), 33–44 (44).

⁶² Matthew Alured was also a member of the East Riding Commission of Sewers at the time of the 1646–1647 floods. Matthew attended three, and Lancelot four, of the eight Sewers meetings held between 1646–1648.

⁶³ ERYA CSR 14/23.

⁶⁴ ERYA CSR 14/28 (2 June 1647).

and his nephew, Matthew Alured, were signatories to Sewers orders that fined (on 1 July) and then imprisoned (on 20 July) the appointed collectors for refusing to carry out their duties, from whence they were later released on bail (5 August) and subsequently fined and discharged (10 August).⁶⁵ Clearly there was considerable resistance across Holderness to this unpopular and unprecedented tax, but the records also show the levers the commissioners were prepared to pull to raise the necessary monies to build a 'new seadike' at Drypool and stem the flooding causing 'large passages & ingresse' of saltwater at every spring tide.⁶⁶ There was high drama in Holderness in summer 1647—floods, finger pointing, fines, and arrests—and in this drama, the several members of the Alured family who acted as Sewers commissioners were centre stage.

This, therefore, was the situation Marvell would have encountered had he visited Hull in summer 1647. If, as Kelliher thinks likely, he also ventured out to Beverley to visit his Alured relations, then he would have heard, perhaps directly from Lancelot or Matthew, of the controversies surrounding the tax, the arrests, and the 'greate calamities of waters [...] in the Levell'. Marvell may even have witnessed the floodwaters at first hand, given that it was not until October 1647 that the Level was deemed 'safe at present and for the future secured' from flooding. Equally important was the insight Marvell would have gained from the Alureds into questions surrounding who was liable for maintaining the Drypool banks, and who was therefore responsible for the inundations that the tide of Humber had unleashed.

'To his Coy Mistress' is well known for its reference to 'the tide | Of Humber', and Christopher Hill and Nicholas von Maltzahn are among critics who argue that the Humber stands as a biographical marker in the poem, a reminder of Marvell's boyhood in Hull, and of the tragic death of his father, who drowned crossing the Humber in January 1641. As the source of his father's death, 'Marvell had reason to complain of Humber's tide', Hill writes.⁶⁷ Von Maltzahn notes that 'Any visitor to Marvell's Hull and its East Riding environs will understand the fascination with water and submergence that surfaces in his poetry'—a fascination recently explored in connection with 'To his Coy Mistress' in Angela Leighton's poem 'By the tide of Humber', marking the quatercentenary of Marvell's birth.⁶⁸ Leighton, like von Maltzahn, sees Marvell's father's death in the Humber as the principal source for his son's fascination with these 'waters that quarrel and kill' (l. 29). The undercurrents of his father's death are keenly felt in Marvell's poetry, but the tide that 'sand-warpt' Marvell Senior's boat in 1641 was also responsible for breaching banks and inundating land across the Holderness Level in 1646–1647.⁶⁹ Marvell's likely encounter in summer 1647 with the 'rage of the river of Humber', and with the questions these storms left in their wake over who was to blame for the Holderness floods, would certainly have given the poet further cause to complain of Humber's tide in 'To his Coy Mistress'. This association between the tide of Humber and tidal flooding finds its mark in the poem itself through the occurrence of 'Humber' and 'flood' at the beginning and end of the couplet in lines 7–8: 'I by the tide | Of Humber would complain. I would | Love you ten years before the flood' (6–8). The couplet reminds us that tidal time—the ebb and flow of the Humber tide—is, like time itself in the poem, always liable to stray beyond its bounds, to breach its banks, and to reflect, in the 'calamities' of a river in flood, the climacterics of apocalyptic time.

These reflections on time and tide weigh heavily in a poem in which time ticks audibly, and in which the temporal markers of the flood and the conversion of the Jews act as thresholds between calendrical and apocalyptic time. In Samuel Hartlib's *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1651)—'in

⁶⁵ ERYA CSR 14/29 (1 and 20 July, 5 and 10 August 1647).

⁶⁶ ERYA CSR 14/32.

⁶⁷ C. Hill, 'Till the Conversion of the Jews', in R. H. Popkin (ed.), *Millenarianism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought, 1650–1800* (Leiden, 1988), 12–36 (12); von Maltzahn, 'Death by Drowning', 38–9.

⁶⁸ von Maltzahn, 'Death by Drowning', 39. Leighton's poem first appeared in *Times Literary Supplement* (26 March 2021) and was republished in *Companions of his Thoughts More Green: Poems for Andrew Marvell*, ed. D. Wheatley (Talgarreg, 2022), 67–8.

⁶⁹ N. von Maltzahn, *An Andrew Marvell Chronology* (Basingstoke, 2005), 28.

effect ... an abridgment', the author of its preface, John Dury, writes, of Joseph Mede's own 'Key of the Revelation'—Hartlib highlights the importance of the period before the biblical deluge as an opportunity for penance and reflection for those 'who would not anie more hearken to the reproof of his Spirit', and Hartlib compares the time immediately before the deluge to the period of watching and waiting in the years directly preceding the date of AD 1655, which he designates as the end of days.⁷⁰ In this threshold period, the period of Marvell's poem's composition, 'It is verie likelie that for certain, som great things are at the door, and that wee may look for terrible and fearful revolutions', Hartlib writes.⁷¹ Marvell encourages precisely this kind of moral introspection in readers of 'To his Coy Mistress': he deliberately positions the beginning and end of his poem's 'long love's day' (line 4) on thresholds—'before the flood', 'till the conversion of the Jews'—in order to put readers in mind of the period of watching and waiting immediately prior to the advent of the end of the world which Mede inspires other writers in the late 1640s and early 1650s to date to around 1655. Seen through this temporal frame of watching and waiting, Marvell's poem plausibly foregrounds the floodwaters in Holderness as prompts for penance and reflection—and Marvell also signals the moral dimensions of these 'hideous Tempests' through the poem's similitudes between the tide of Humber and the biblical flood.

In this context, the floods in Holderness are not just damaging to lives and livelihoods but signs of the ‘terrible and fearful revolutions’ that Samuel Hartlib sees as harbingers of the Apocalypse he anticipates in or around 1655. Marvell’s interests in eschatological thought therefore add renewed urgency to his poem’s allusions to the early modern commonplace of floods as cautionary tales, prompting readers to repent and reform before ‘Time’s winged chariot’ catches up with us all. What is notable, however, is how far this moral message goes unheeded by Marvell’s speaker in the poem. Marvell’s lover gives his coy mistress license to refuse his advances only until ‘the conversion of the Jews’, and he intends to use the period of impending Apocalypse thereafter not for repentance and reform but for exuberance and excess—to ‘tear our pleasures with rough strife, | Thorough the iron gates of life’ (lines 43–4). Smith notes the ‘gates of life’ as ‘an inversion of the gates of death’ alluded to in Psalms 9:13.⁷² Yet the ‘iron gates’ also borrow directly from Acts 12:10, where Peter passes in company with an angel from prison through ‘the yron gate that leadeth vnto the citie’.⁷³ In the 1640s and early 1650s, the ‘iron gates’ of Acts 12:10 are used metaphorically in Anglican devotional writing to refer to the imprisonment of the soul in the body’s gates, or gates (the words are used interchangeably in some mid-seventeenth-century sources, just as they are in different versions of ‘To his Coy Mistress’).⁷⁴ ‘Yet is thy soul at liberty’, writes the sequestered rector of St Benet Paul’s Wharf, Thomas Adams, in 1652: ‘no barricadoed walls, no iron-gates or gates, no darke dungeons can imprison that. The Jail is a strong prison to thy body, and thy body is but (in a metaphorical phrase) a prison to thy soul’.⁷⁵ In ‘To his Coy Mistress’, Marvell’s speaker also looks to stray beyond ‘the iron gates of life’, but he intends to break free of the body’s bounds through the ‘rough strife’ of carnal desire rather than through the Christian norms of piety and prayer.

⁷⁰ Hartlib, *Clavis*, A6r, B2r. Hartlib's prediction that the world would end in 1655—a leitmotif throughout Hartlib's work—is first announced on the titlepage to the 1651 edition. Joseph Mede 'expected it between 1625 and 1716, with 1654 and 1670 as possibilities', while Fifth Monarchists attached apocalyptic significance to the years 1655–1657. See C. Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London, 1997), 33; B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism* (Totowa, NJ, 1972), 104–5.

⁷¹ Hartlib, *Clavis*, D3v. Hartlib here uses 'revolutions' in the plural to mean 'an alteration, a change; esp. a dramatic or wide-reaching change in conditions, the state of affairs, etc.' (*OED* II.7.b), rather than in either of the narrower senses of political or planetary revolution.

⁷² 'To his Coy', line 44 n, in *Poems*, ed. Smith, 84.

⁷³ *The Holy Bible* (London, 1611), N1r.

⁷⁴ 'Gates' appears in *Miscellaneous Poems* (London, 1681) and in almost all subsequent scholarly editions of Marvell's poems excepting *The Complete English Poems*, ed. E. Story Donno (London, 1972), 50–51. Donno adopts the variation 'grates' found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet d. 49, a copy of the 1681 *Miscellaneous Poems* with manuscript emendations and additions compiled by Marvell's nephew, Will Poppel. See 'To his Coy', line 44 n, in *Poems*, ed. Smith, 84.

⁷⁵ T. Adams, *God's Anger; and, Man's Comfort: Two Sermons* (London, 1652), L2r. For Adams' ecclesiastical career, see J. Sears McGee, 'Adams, Thomas (1583–1652)', ODNB, vol. 1, 260–61.

Christopher Hill believes that Marvell is being ‘almost certainly ironical’ in his reference to ‘the conversion of the Jews’ and its implication that the world will end in the mid-1650s. The fact Marvell plays with ‘fashionable millenarian ideas’ in ‘To his Coy Mistress’, Hill writes, need not imply that he himself believed such predictions were true.⁷⁶ We might also apply this logic to Marvell’s lines on the flood and tide of Humber, questioning whether Marvell really believes the moral import of his similitudes between the biblical flood and Holderness flooding. Marvell’s speaker turns from the poem’s moral teachings to embrace Epicurean desire, but Marvell’s own voice is more muted, and at this distance it is difficult to disentangle the poet’s attitude to flooding from the ‘echoing song’ (27) of his many intertexts and interlocutors. What is clear is that in Marvell’s other English poems about flooding (‘Upon Appleton House’ and ‘The Character of Holland’), there is always an actual flood event, whether the irrigation of Nun Appleton’s fields, or the North Sea floods of March 1651, at the root of Marvell’s similitudes likening these floods to the biblical deluge. This article has argued that the same is true of ‘To his Coy Mistress’, and that the reference to Marvell’s speaker loving his mistress ‘ten years before the flood’ is prompted by Marvell’s encounter with the flooding in Holderness that he likely saw or heard about on his visit to Hull in summer 1647. The poem therefore reflects the more frequent storms and surge tides that were a feature of the mid-seventeenth century—storms which leave their mark as much on ‘To his Coy Mistress’ as on Marvell’s other flood poems from this period.

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⁷⁶ Hill, ‘Conversion’, 33.