

# Marvell's Melons

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In one of his celebrated poems 'The Garden', Andrew Marvell writes:

What wondrous life is this I lead!  
Ripe apples drop about my head;  
The luscious clusters of the vine  
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;  
The nectarine, and curious peach,  
Into my hands themselves do reach;  
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,  
Insnared with flow'rs, I fall on grass.

(lines 33-40)<sup>1</sup>

Here apples, grapes, nectarines, and peaches are all moving, following the classical rhetoric of *suponte sua*. These 'am'rous' (line 18) fruits seem to make approaches to the dendrophilous speaker. What is curious, however, is that the melons are inactive. The speaker himself stumbles on them and seems to indicate that none other than he is to blame for the sin, if any, of indulgence in a pleasure garden.

One explanation for Marvell's distinguishing of melons from other fruits may be sought in the Bible. Nigel Smith's footnote has drawn our attention to Job 18:10: 'The snare is laid for him in the ground, and a trap for him in the way.'<sup>2</sup> To this I would add verse 8 speaking also of 'the wicked': 'he is cast into a net by his own feet, and walketh upon a snare'. And, reminding us of another biblical verse — 'All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field' (Isaiah 40:6) — Marvell's lines evoke the idea of man's mortality and fallen condition in the garden of Eden. In this context, that the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, revised edition (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2007), p. 157. All quotations from Marvell's poems are taken from this edition. Quotations are accompanied by references to line-numbers.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

word melon derives from that for an apple will be relevant. The 'melons', then, provide the composite image of a snare and the forbidden fruit, which Adam and Eve ate of their own free will.

The associations of melons, however, should not stop here if the real practices of gardening and botany in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries are taken into consideration. By 'melons', Marvell seems to mean muskmelons, modern melons which were as rare and 'curious' a kind in those days as the 'peach' in the poem. They could be an item the rich and the powerful would like to show off in their gardens as much as something precious in their Cabinet of Curiosities. They appear as an exotic fruit in Marvell's 'Bermudas' together with 'the orange', 'the pom'granates' and 'the figs' (lines 22, 17, 19, 21). Just as he describes Oliver Cromwell planting the bergamot in his garden ('An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland', lines 29–32), alludes to a sensitive plant in Fairfax's garden ('Upon Appleton House, To My Lord Fairfax', lines 355, 357–358), and lets one of his speakers point a finger at 'the *Marvel of Peru*' ('The Mower against Gardens', line 18), Marvell's gardens always contain some sorts of rare plants.

In this sense, Nicholas von Maltzahn may be right in emphasizing the scarcity of melons in England. But I think it a hasty judgement for him to assert that 'even once established in England, they could only be grown in the south'. Maltzahn says this in order to argue that Marvell's 'The Garden' was written in a Restoration setting in which the poet had 'plenty of access to more southern gardens, where melons might thrive', such as Lord Wharton's.<sup>3</sup> *Pace* Professor Maltzahn, however, the melon could grow even in the north because, whether in the south or in the north of England, 'The fruit', as J. C. Loudon, in the *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (1822), explains, 'to be grown to perfection, requires the aid of artificial heat and glass throughout every stage of its culture'. 'Its minimum temperature may be estimated at 65° [18°C], in which it will germinate and grow; but it requires a heat of from 75° to 80° [24–27°C] to ripen its fruit'.<sup>4</sup> In the south of England the climate may seem not to have been entirely unsuitable for growing melons, but Melon-Masters did rely on

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas von Maltzahn, 'Marvell's Restoration Garden', <http://myweb.stedwards.edu/georgek/scrc/marvell/newsletter/newssum09.html#Nicholas>, 30, March, 2011. 'Andrew Marvell and the Lord Wharton', in *The Seventeenth Century*, 18, 2 (2003), p. 260.

<sup>4</sup> John Claudius Loudon, *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (London, 1824), p. 763.

artificial methods of cultivation: hotbeds prepared by dung, covers such as sail-cloth, bass-mats and straw, and glasses to cover melons with such as, first, drinking-glasses, then, ready-made melon-glasses and bell-glasses (which were later to be called cloches in the nineteenth century), and panes of glass which functioned as cold frames.<sup>5</sup> Given these devices, even the northern climate was not necessarily too cold to grow melons. John Reid, in *The Scots Gard'ner ... Published for the Climate of Scotland* (1683), told 'all the Ingenious Planters in Scotland' to 'On the south side of the Wall plant Apricocks, Peaches, Nectarines, [and] Vines', and to 'raise [melons] on the early Hot-bed.'<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, many contemporary gardening books caution that the greatest care should be taken not to burn or overheat the plants by examining with fingers the heat of the bed, raising the edge of the glasses to air the plants, or/and pouring cold water on the bed.

Moreover, as we have interpreted them, if Marvell's melons were meant to be rare and curious, it would be more logical to assume that they were cultivated in the north where fewer gardens had them, and that Marvell's special 'Garden' enjoys and boasts of their rarity. When already in 1629 John Parkinson said, 'now there are many that are so well experienced therein, and haue their ground so well prepared, as that they will not misse any yeare, ... to haue many ripe ones in a reasonable time', and that 'now diuers others that haue skill and conuenience of ground for them, do plant them and make them more common',<sup>7</sup> it is more likely that he had many flourishing gardens in the

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Adolphus Speed, *Adam out of Eden, or An abstract of divers excellent Experiments touching the advancement of Husbandry* (London, 1658), pp. 96–97; Sir Hugh Plat, *The Garden of Eden or, An accurate Description of all Flowers and Fruits now growing in England, with particular Rules how to advance their Nature and Growth, as well in Seeds and Herbs, as the secret ordering of Trees and Plants* (1608; London, 2 edn., 1652), p. 57; Leonard Meager, *The English Gardener: or, A Sure guide to young Planters and Gardeners In Three Parts* (London, 1670), pp. 192, 197; John Evelyn, *Directions for the Gardiner and Other Horticultural Advice*, ed. Maggie Campbell-Culver (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 227; John Reid, *The Scots Gard'ner ... Published for the Climate of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1683), pp. 95–96.

<sup>6</sup> John Reid, *The Scots Gard'ner*, sig. A2, pp. 91, 95.

<sup>7</sup> John Parkinson, *Paradisi in sole Paradisus terrestris, or A garden of all sorts of pleasant flowers which our English ayre will permit to be nursed vp with a kitchen garden of all manner of herbes, rootes, & fruites, for meate or sause vsed with vs, and an orchard of all sorte of fruitbearing trees and shrubbes fit for our land together with the right orderinge planting & preseruing of them and their uses & virtues collected by Iohn Parkinson apothecary of London* (London, 1629), p. 525.

south of England in mind. We can say at least that the written documents about the seventeenth-century cultivation of melons will not convincingly bolster Maltzhan's arguments. Indeed, the northern climate was unfavourable for melons, but this does not mean that they could not be grown there. On the other hand, even the southern climate could not dispense with artificial heat for their culture, and, if Fynes Morrison, touring England in 1607, was not too much idealizing the virtue of his native country when he said that it 'yeelds ...Muske melons in good quantity',<sup>8</sup> the 'southern gardens, where melons might thrive', as Maltzhan argues, did not have to be in the Restoration period.

Ultimately, though it sounds like an obvious truism, Marvell's melons could not exist outside a garden of his mind. They could grow neither in the north nor in the south of England. In reality, even at the last stage when the plant bears fruit, as Nicolas de Bonnefons, for example, recommends, 'You must place a *Tyle* under every *Melon*, the better to fashion them, and advance their *maturity* by the reflection of the *Sun* from it'.<sup>9</sup> Supposing the speaker of 'The Garden' was wandering in a real seventeenth-century melon field, it would not have been melons but tiles, or melon-glasses that he stumbled on. And if, as Thomas Andrew Knight observed, 'the extended branches of the Melon plant, particularly under glass, are slender and feeble',<sup>10</sup> it is more probable that the speaker would have chopped off the runners of the melons with his foot than they would have caught his foot.

When we further investigate into the cultivation of melons in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the difficulty lies in the fact that there was much taxonomical confusion surrounding them. The musk-melon is a kind of cucumber, and pumpkins or pompions were called melons in those days. The generic name squash indicates plants called pumpkins, gourds, cucumbers and musk-melons, often sharing similar tastes and properties, and

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<sup>8</sup> Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary* (London, 1617), Book III, Chapter 3, pp. 146–147.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolas de Bonnefons, trans. John Evelyn, *The French Gardiner: Instructing How to Cultivate all sorts of Fruit-Trees, and Herbs for the Garden* (London, 1658), p. 146. See also Plat, *The Garden of Eden*, p. 64: 'Lay your young mellons upon ridge-tiles, to keep them from the ground, and for reflection.'

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Andrew Knight, 'A concise View of the Theory respecting Vegetation, lately advanced in the Philosophical Transactions, illustrated in the Culture of the Melon.' (Read January 2, 1811), in the *Transactions of the Horticultural Society of London*, 7 vols. (London: 1812–1830), Volume 1 (1820), pp. 221–222.

their names were frequently interchangeable. John Gerard, in *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597, enlarged by Thomas Johnson, 1636), has sections entitled 'Muske-Melon, or Million', followed by 'Melons, or Pompions'.<sup>11</sup> They must have been grown with greater frequency than modern melons both in the north and in the south of England, especially in kitchen gardens. In *Description of England* (1587), William Harrison records that 'the poore commons' grow 'melons, pompions, gourds, cucumbers, ...and all kinds of salad herbs'.<sup>12</sup> *A Catalogue of the Plants in the Physical Garden at Edinburgh* (1683) contains 'common Melons'.<sup>13</sup> William Lawson, the owner of an orchard and garden in Yorkshire, mentions 'Pumpions, and Melons' in *The Country House-Wives Garden* (1618).<sup>14</sup> In a letter to the owner of Levens Hall in South Cumbria, which is in the same latitude as North Yorkshire, the agent reports that the gardener Guillaume Beaumont 'has made a hot bed and has sowne the Mellon seeds you sent by post & Cowcumbers and has gotten Frames made and glasses'. 'They are come up finely, he does not doubt but they will doe as well here as any where.'<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Gervase Markham, in *Maison Rustique or, the Countrie Farme* (1616), advises the reader to plant 'Pease, Beans, and other sorts of Pulse, as also Melons, Citrons, Cucumbers, Artichokes, and such like' in order to 'make pottage withal'.<sup>16</sup> In the latter half of the seventeenth century, the nurseryman Edward Fuller's handbill advertised, along with cucumbers and pumpkins, 'English Melon, French Melon, Spanish Melon' under the section of 'Sallad-Seeds'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Gerard, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes. Gathered by John Gerarde of London Master in Chirvrgerie Very much Enlarged and Amended by Thomas Johnson Citizen and Apothecarye of London* (London, 1633), pp. 916, 918.

<sup>12</sup> William Harrison, *Description of England*, in Raphael Holinshed, William Harrison, and others, *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles* (London, 1587), p. 208.

<sup>13</sup> *Hortus medicus Edinburgensis, or, A catalogue of the plants in the physical Garden at Edinburgh containing their most proper Latin and English names by James Sutherland, Intendant of the said Garden Botanist, and Overseer of the Physical garden at Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1683), p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> William Lawson, *The Country House-Wives Garden, Containing Rules for herbs, and Seeds, of common use, with their times and seasons when to set and sow them* (1618; London, 1653), p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Crowder, *The Garden at Levens* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2005), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Gervase Markham, *Maison Rustique or, the Countrie Farme* (London, 1616), sig. B.

<sup>17</sup> *A Catalogue of Seeds, Plants, &c. Sold by Edward Fuller, at the Three Crowns and Naked Boy at Strand-Bridge near May-pole, London*. Cf. John Harvey, *Early Nurserymen* (London: Phillimore, 1974), p. 5: 'In 1688 John Woolridge (or Worlidge) added to the third edition of his *Systema Horti-Culturæ, or The Art of Gardening*, first published in 1677, the complete standard catalogue of seeds and plants as sold by Edward Fuller in the Strand'.

In *The Gardeners Labyrinth, or A New Art of Gardning* (1577), interestingly enough, Thomas Hill, giving advice about 'the ordering of the Kitchin Garden', refers to musk-melons, which does not seem to mean modern melons, but not exactly the same variety as modern pumpkins when he enumerates thus: 'Cucumbers, Pumpions, Musk-millions, Cabbadges, and Gilly-flowers'.<sup>18</sup> It may be possible to assume — or at least the word allows the possibility — that Marvell's 'melons' in 'The Garden' could signify those planted in kitchen gardens, and should not necessarily be taken as being as rare and 'curious' as the 'peach', but as being as common as 'apples'. If so, the point would not be to show off either their rarity or the garden owner's conspicuous consumption, but rather to suggest their physical characteristic of having runners creeping along the ground so that the speaker would more easily stumble.

Or the point may consist in their properties. We all know that literary tradition has often associated the imagery of fruits in general with sexuality, but scholars and annotators so far have not noted that Marvell's reference to melons in 'The Garden' might be deeply bound up with the properties of cucurbitaceae. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century herbals and gardening manuals point out that women have a baneful influence upon the growth of cucurbits. For example, William Turner's *A New Herball* (1551) says, "Let weomen nether touche the younge gourdes nor loke upon them, for the only touchinge and sighte of weomen kille the younge gourdes."<sup>19</sup> And under the sections for both 'Cucumbers' and 'Gourdes' in *The Gardeners Labyrinth*, first published in 1577, but republished also in 1651, Thomas Hill repeats a similar caution:

... But there must be a special care, as *Columella* (after the Greek *Florentinus*) admonisheth, that no woman, at that instant, having the reds or monethly course, approacheth nighe to the fruits, especially handle them, for through the handling at the same time they feeble and wither. ... If she in the place be like affected she shall after kill the young fruits, with her onely look fixed on them, or cause them to grow after unsaverie,

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hill, *The Gardeners Labyrinth, or A New Art of Gardning* (1577; London, 1651), p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Jennifer Bennett, *Lilies of the Hearth: The Historical Relationship between Women and Plants* (Camden East, Ontario: Camden House, 1991), p. 26.

or else corrupted.<sup>20</sup>

Nicolas de Bonnefons's *Le Jardinier François* brings up exactly the same point, which John Evelyn translates in *The French Gardiner: Instructing How to Cultivate all sorts of Fruit-Trees, and Herbs for the Garden* (1658) thus:

To this Enclosure [of your *Meloniere*, or Melon Plot] you must make a door, which you shall keep under lock and key, that none molest your *Plantation*; and particularly to keep out *Women-kinde* at certain times, for reasons you may imagine.<sup>21</sup>

The original French wording, 'particulierement pour en interdire l'entrée aux Fille: & Femmes, en certains temps que le respe[c]t m'empesche de declarer' more clearly signifies that women were thought to be harmful to melons during their menstrual period.<sup>22</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves, here, that Marvell's 'The Garden' is a misogynistic garden, where the speaker laments, 'Such was that happy garden-state, / While man there walked without a mate' (lines 57-58).<sup>23</sup> Melons, if they were really grown there, would have given the speaker an opportunity to exclude women from the garden and 'wander solitary there' (line 62).

One of the typical properties, especially the medicinal ones, of cucurbitaceae is, as our common phrase 'as cool as a cucumber' suggests, to bring down a fever. Thomas Hill cites an instance of 'an Infant being sick of the Ague, ... laied on the bed made of the Cucumbers ... shall immediately be delivered of the same, for which he sleepeth, all the feverous heat passeth in the Cucumbers.'<sup>24</sup> It seems to have been believed that this kind of cooling effect was gained not only physically but also mentally. In *The Garden of Health* (1597), William Langham not only prescribes the water of melons for 'all inward unnaturall heates' but also lists as a symptom to be cured by cucurbits

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Hill, *The Gardeners Labyrinth*, the Second Part, p. 131. See also the Second Part, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> Nicolas de Bonnefons, trans. John Evelyn, *The French Gardiner*, p. 137.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolas de Bonnefons, *Le Jardinier François* (Amsterdam, 1661), p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> See Takashi Yoshinaka, 'Marvell's Misogynistic Garden Revisited', *Studies in English Literature* (The English Literary Society of Japan), 78, 1 (2001), pp. 1-16.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Hill, *The Gardeners Labyrinth*, the Second Part, p. 131.

specifically 'Lust to void', and says 'Gourds drive away Venus, and ingender thinne blood'.<sup>25</sup> Gerard's *The Herball* asserts that 'a Melon: which is vsually eaten of the Italians and Spaniards rather to repress the rage of lust, than for any other Physicall vertue'.<sup>26</sup> Somewhat ridiculing the Latin temperament in the same way, Robert Lovell's *Pambotanologia* (1659) says that 'The Spaniards and Italians eate them to refresh the rage of lust'.<sup>27</sup> Under the section of 'The Physicke commodities of the Pompons and Mellons' in *The Gardener's Labyrinth*, Thomas Hill explains this medicinal virtue not as specific to a national characteristic, but as more widely physiological:

The greater number of Physitians writes, that those eaten, doth mitigate the venereall act, and do abate the genitall seed.<sup>28</sup>

It is highly probable that this kind of knowledge was available through Gerard's immensely popular herbal to the readers of Marvell's 'The Garden', or that his 'habit of incorporating influences in his poems from recently published printed volumes' urged him to allude to Hill's explanation of melons in the 1651 edition of *The Gardener's Labyrinth*.<sup>29</sup> In 'The Garden', this healing property of melons fits in very nicely with the speaker's claim that 'When we have run our passions' heat, / Love hither makes his best retreat' (lines 25-26). Marvell's intended meaning might be — or at least the reader who knew this particular property of melons could detect — the irony embedded in the description of the speaker 'stumbling on melons'. He has just ridiculed 'Fond lovers, cruel as their flame' (line 19), but he himself, unaware of his own different kind of infatuation, falls in love with 'this lovely green' (line 18). By showing that this dendrophile has lost his footing and got carried away by the passion's heat, which melons were supposed to cool down, and perhaps by partly laughing at himself, Marvell cannot but suggest the ridiculous aspect of the garden-mania

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<sup>25</sup> William Langham, *The Garden of Health containing the sundry rare and hidden virtues and properties of all kinds of simples and plants* (1597; London, 1633), pp. 389, 294.

<sup>26</sup> Gerard, *The Herball*, p. 918.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Lovell, *Pambotanologia* (Oxford, 1659), p. 297. To 'refresh' here means 'To cool (desire)' in *OED*, l.b., but some readers might relish the irony of the nature of relapsing amorous fever: to 'refresh' can mean, for example, 'To renew, revive' (*OED*, 3.b.).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Hill, *The Gardeners Labyrinth*, the Second Part, p. 147.

<sup>29</sup> The quoted words are Nigel Smith's. *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, p. 152.



which another of his poems, 'The Mower against Gardens', thematises.

It seems that in 'The Garden', Marvell, 'Annihilating all that's made' (line 47), tries to delete as far as possible any artificial devices 'the skilful gard'ner' (line 65) must have contrived. The melon plot must have required an enclosure, but he, unlike the Mower, never mentions the fact that 'He first enclosed within the gardens square / A dead and standing pool of air' (lines 5-6). The cultivation of melons must have needed hotbeds, but he does not refer to what the Mower calls 'a ...luscious [= sickly, cloying, *OED* a. 2] earth' (line 7), i.e., smelly manure. Even 'this dial new' (line 66) of flowers and herbs could mean the garden as a whole, not an artificial sundial. And along this line of thought, if the gardener is taken as a metaphor of God the Creator, the human skilfulness, too, would disappear. As I have argued elsewhere, this nature vs. art theme of Marvell has a political dimension.<sup>30</sup> Especially in terms of time, melons connote their forcedness. As Thomas Hill remarks, 'The Mellons ... hardly come up in any Country at due time of the yeare, without labour, cost and diligence of the Gardener in hastening them forward .... The Gardener ought to hasten the fruites forwarde by dung, and heate of the beds'.<sup>31</sup> If there is any political association in the image of Marvell's melons, the way in which they were grown might suggest that they represent a fruit of the forwardness of Cromwell's army and his zealous policy of hastening eschatological time. In the middle of the seventeenth century, there was the danger that England as a garden state would become a typical contemporaneous garden where "Tis all enforced' ('The Mower against Gardens', line 31). In this context, if the speaker in 'The Garden', reflects Marvell's idea on the Revolution that 'men may spare their pains where Nature is at work, and the world will not go the faster for our driving', it is no wonder that he stumbles on 'melons'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Takashi Yoshinaka, *Marvell's Ambivalence: Religion and the Politics of Imagination in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), passim, but esp. pp. 176-193.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hill, *The Gardeners Labyrinth*, the Second Part, p. 143.

<sup>32</sup> *The Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, 2 vols. ed. Martin Dzelzainis and Annabel Patterson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), i. 192.