

MARVELL'S VALID LOGIC

by Richard Crider

The critical history of Marvell's most famous poem shows that determining the exact syllogistic equivalent and assessing the logical validity of a poetic argument can be difficult. After T. S. Eliot observed in 1921 that the three parts of "To His Coy Mistress" "have something like a syllogistic relation to each other,"¹ the poem's logical structure began to receive close scrutiny. Critics soon realized that it is a syllogism proper² (If P then not Q; not P; therefore Q), and that it commits a fallacy, denying the antecedent, and so must be invalid.³ A rare dissident from the latter view was J. C. Maxwell, who wrote in 1970 that "where the context allows (as it certainly does in . . . Marvell), 'if' is naturally taken to mean 'if and only if,'"⁴ a reading that produces a valid argument. But critics have rejected Maxwell's point, and the verdict of invalidity stands uncontested.

Recent critics praise Marvell's poetic truth and rhetorical complexity, but they agree that his logic is flawed. Clarence H. Miller, for example, marshals seventeenth-century logicians to expose Marvell's sophistry but argues that "though the reasoning is false" our experience of the poem's conclusion is "poignantly and powerfully true."⁵ Similarly Michael Gregory during a sensitive and substantial linguistic and rhetorical analysis invokes the authority of a philosophical colleague in order to assert that "the argument . . . as 'logic' or 'syllogism' is obviously invalid."⁶ And John Hackett defends the poem by acknowledging the fallacy then arguing that it was intentional: ". . . Marvell knew exactly what he was doing. He constructed the fallacy as deliberately as he constructed the syllogism, to make a better poem." The speaker "commits the fallacy," Hackett concludes, "not to deceive the mistress but to challenge and tease her."⁷ For all these critics the poem succeeds brilliantly, but it succeeds in spite or even because of its logical fallacy.

Fortunately, many valuable insights in these and earlier essays will not be nullified if we discover that nothing is wrong, after all, with Marvell's syllogism. A troublesome little red herring will be removed, however, from the path of future readers, who may be able to see the poem more clearly as a persuasive compound of wit, passion, and logic unalloyed with any deductive fallacy.

University students in the seventeenth century employed formal logic regularly in ways that may throw unexpected light upon the logic inherent in the poem's dramatic situation. I refer to "disputations," precursors of modern college debate. According to Father William T. Costello, at Trinity College, Cambridge, where Marvell matriculated in 1633 and graduated B.A. in 1639, "disputations were held thrice weekly in chapel . . . either in Philosophy or Theology. Sophisters (those who had not reached bachelorhood) disputed on rhetoric, dialectics, and the problems of Aristotle."⁸ These thrice-weekly disputations were "friendly little affairs," but the University disputations were elaborate public debates, conducted on some occasions in the presence of royalty. Students were required to participate in the University disputations four times during their undergraduate careers, debating questions that ranged from the perennial—whether, for example, threat of punishment deters crime—to the avant garde—whether dogs can make syllogisms. Disputants always debated in syllogisms but were expected to avoid becoming mechanical or dull. "When you dispute," wrote a Master in a set of rules for his students, "be sure you gett the Arguments perfectly by heart, & take heede of that dull, cold, idle, way of reading Syllogismes out of a paper, for so one can never dispute with life and courage." Costello describes the opening of the disputation as follows:

When the opponent had soberly and calmly proposed his first syllogism, the respondent was supposed to repeat it exactly, a feat of memory and training which becomes automatic Repeating the syllogism fixes the argument in the minds of the audience, makes sure the answerer has the point, and, incidentally, gives him a moment to think of a reply, which may be along one of several possible lines. The respondent may deny outright a premise, which the opponent will then have to prove Another—and by far the commonest—reply was to distinguish the meaning of any one of the terms (subject or predicate of a premise) . . . in such a manner as to show that the conclusion of the syllogism invalidly follows from the premises or is harmless to the answerer's position.

Costello then illustrates the practice of distinguishing:

. . . should the opponent propose the syllogism:

The good man is rewarded on earth.

But reward on earth makes eternal reward unnecessary.

Therefore eternal reward is unnecessary for the good man,

The answerer, having repeated the syllogism, might elect to distinguish the term "reward." He would say: "Adequately and inadequately. The good man is rewarded inadequately on earth, I concede. Adequately, I deny." He will then "counter-distinguish" the term "reward" as it occurs in the minor premise, and conclude: "Under the above distinction I deny the consequent and the consequence"

If we assume that Marvell knew the above practices thoroughly, from having witnessed their use and having used them himself many times in Cambridge disputations, it is interesting to speculate that he almost inevitably would have drawn upon these engrained habits, unconsciously perhaps, informally to be sure, when creating "To His Coy Mistress."

Like most dramatic monologues, the poem involves the reader in an encounter already in progress—

Had we but World enough, and Time,
This coyness Lady were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long Loves Day—⁹

and this opening implies a great deal. It must, for one thing, be the third utterance in a contention between two lovers. First came the speaker's amorous question, then the lady's demure and reasonable reply (lines 1-3). Thus the reader immediately receives a clear sense of what the lady must have said, or what Marvell's lines imply that she had said. Extrapolating from Marvell's word choices, we can imagine rather precisely what the lady's argument was:

The world is all before us, and we have time; let us delay our pleasures.

The speaker's emphatic first word in Marvell's poem signals his disagreement with such an argument and his intention of disputing it: "*Had* we but" Moreover, Marvell the trained logician and experienced disputant would have sensed intuitively that he had pitted his speaker against valid logic. The lady's argument, as imagined above, is an enthymeme expandable to the following valid syllogism:

If we have time, we can delay.
We do have time.
Therefore let us delay.

And Marvell also would have seen intuitively the speaker's best reply: Adapt to the informal, amorous disputation of the poem the disputant's favorite tactic. Distinguish a term in the opponent's argument, and

from the altered premise construct a counterargument. The word "enough" in the first line, I believe, represents this tactic, and it too therefore should receive spoken stress: "*Had we but World enough, and Time . . .*" Time they may have, as the lady has observed, but not time enough to justify postponing their erotic pleasures.

It is difficult to believe that Marvell, having thus begun his poem wittily, decisively, and with clear implications of the lady's prior argument, would have been careless about the validity of the speaker's argument and would have permitted an obvious, textbook fallacy to mar the poem's logic. Or did he do it, as Hackett conjectured, to play a joke on the speaker or to form part of the speaker's playful teasing of a witty opponent? As interesting as these speculations are, Marvell in fact did none of them, and Maxwell was right in sensing that the poem's argument is valid. More specific analysis is needed, however, in order to show why.

Help toward this end can be found in the most practical and perhaps most interesting logic text of the seventeenth century, *La Logique, ou L'art de Penser*, by the Augustinian theologian Antoine Arnauld. The Port-Royal Logic, as it came to be called, was published at Paris in 1662 and at London in French in 1664 and in several Latin and English editions during the remainder of the century.¹⁰ In 1674 the Royal Society authorized a translation,¹¹ which was listed in the *Stationer's Register* for April 2, 1674 as "*done into English by J. L.*"¹² The initials are intriguing, since Locke was a member of the Society at this time and later became an advocate of the Port-Royal Logic. Moreover, upon returning from a trip to France in 1672 Locke had translated and presented to Lady Shaftesbury three of the *Essais de Morale* by another Port Royalist, Pierre Nicole, who had helped Arnauld prepare the first edition of *L'art de Penser* and enlarge the text for later editions.¹³ But whether Locke helped launch the book in England or not, it became the familiar property of "the learned and the philosophers of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries." Over it "some of them certainly pored with profit if not even with some measure of inspiration."¹⁴ Today the Port-Royal Logic retains interest because of its historical influence and lucid practicality. Students of writing may be especially attracted, since Arnauld illustrates many points with passages from literature. Indeed, he discusses and judges valid several literary syllogisms similar to Marvell's famous argument.

Underpinning Arnauld's judgments is a keen sense of the difference between the logic of the schools and the logic of real discourse. "Logicians have ordinarily contented themselves with stating rules for simple syl-

logisms; moreover, the examples used are composed of incomplex sentences and are syllogisms so clear that no one would ever have thought seriously of advancing them in any discussion."¹⁵ Real arguments, on the other hand, risk rejection for invalidity when a reader attends only to "the letter of the rule" and fails to analyze the argument sufficiently to see that it conforms "to the good sense underlying the rule."¹⁶

Discussing the kind of fallacy attributed to Marvell, Arnauld writes that "some conditional syllogisms . . . though they appear to exhibit this . . . defect, are nonetheless valid, for the major premiss of such a syllogism contains an implicit exclusion."¹⁷ He cites such an argument in Cicero, then offers an example from Virgil that demonstrates exceptionally well the care needed when reducing poetic arguments to formal logic:

A similar analysis can be made of the argument in Virgil where Venus speaks of Jupiter:

If without thy leave and despite thy deity the Trojans
Sought Italy, then let them expiate their sin,
Nor further aid them; but, if by oracles
Of gods above and below, why then should
Anyone overturn thy bidding now or arouse the Fates anew? (*Aeneid*
X. 31-35)

Virgil's argument reduces to the following:

If the Trojans come to Italy contrary to the will of the gods, the
Trojans are to be punished.
But the Trojans did not come to Italy contrary to the will of the gods.
Therefore, the Trojans are not to be punished.

Observe that we have to make Virgil's argument more explicit, lest it resemble the following argument which is certainly invalid:

If Judas entered into the apostleship without being called,
Judas should be rejected by God.
But Judas did not enter without being called.
Therefore, Judas should not be rejected by God.

But what saves Venus' argument is the explicit treatment of the major premiss as an exclusive, as follows:

The Trojans are to be punished *only* if they came to Italy
against the will of the gods.
But the Trojans did not come against the will of the gods.
Therefore, the Trojans are not to be punished.¹⁸

Arnauld's analysis is obviously correct, but how, specifically, does the reader recognize that an exclusion exists in the Trojans-syllogism and not in the Judas-syllogism? Although Judas was called to apostleship, every reader knows another reason why he might be rejected. Absence of exclu-

sion in the if-clause, and thus the syllogism's invalidity, is clear to common sense. The last half of the Virgilian passage, on the other hand, shows that Venus believes no condition would justify punishing the Trojans except the one laid down in her major premise. If we reexamine the passage we see that Venus argues, If not P then Q; but if P then not Q. Since P is known—the Trojans sought Italy by order of the gods—not Q follows: They should not be punished. In this argument, "only" would be superfluous.

Exclusion is less obvious, perhaps, in Marvell's major premise, but it is present. His subjunctive verbs are the key, for they imply the bracketed alternative below and thus produce a syllogism similar in effect to Arnauld's example from Virgil:

If we had sufficient time, your reluctance would not be unreasonable.
[But since we do not have sufficient time, then it is unreasonable.]

Monroe C. Beardsley explains this point of logic lucidly, offering an example whose structure closely parallels Marvell's major premise. After identifying a complication in conditional syllogisms—"Some statements are conditionals, but they are *more* than that because they also assert something about the *truth* or *falsity* of the atomic elements inside the conditional"—Beardsley cites this example: "He *would* succeed, *if he were* willing to work hard." The crucial point follows:

When we use the subjunctive mood . . . in any of its tenses, we are asserting that the conditional is true, but that the antecedent and consequent are both *false*. So the . . . statement means,
If he is willing to work hard, then he will succeed, *and*
He is not willing to work hard, *and*
He will not succeed.¹⁹

The grammar and logic of Marvell's major premise are the same:

If we have sufficient time, then your reluctance is not unreasonable, *and*
We do not have sufficient time, *and*
Your reluctance is unreasonable.

Drawing upon powerful evidence from universal human experience, Marvell's antistrophe affirms the implicit meaning of the antecedent ("We do not have sufficient time"), and the conclusion follows with impeccable formal validity. One could scarcely hope to find a more elegant argument.²⁰

The truth of Marvell's syllogism is a separate question, however, and the reader who might still suspect, with Hackett, that "there's something wrong,"²¹ should scrutinize the major premise. For as Arnauld observes, "Man is more likely to err by drawing inferences from false principles than by inferring incorrectly from true principles; rarely are we led astray by an

argument whose conclusion is incorrectly inferred from the premisses."²² The major premise when fully developed in the first twenty lines relies on affectionate and playful hyperbole rather than literal truth in order to win assent. Paraphrased, it asserts, "Only if we had ages and ages in which to love, then your reluctance would not be unreasonable." Should the lady remain strictly logical after hearing all the poem, she could resort to the other preferred reply of the disputant—deny a premise outright²³—and counter-argue that even in the short span of human life there sometimes are reasons for delaying one's pleasures. One may doubt, however, that she would judge appropriate even so sensible a reply.

For, after the opening couplet that simultaneously suggests prior exchanges in an amorous disputation and implies the valid argument of the ensuing poem, "To His Coy Mistress" grows more entertaining and persuasive with each line. In the strophe the speaker showers the lady with erotic compliments that are far too extravagant to be insincere; yet by their extravagance they also affectionately ridicule the premium she places upon her "quaint Honour"; and this potent combination of emotional appeals might well give the lady pause about replying to the mere logic of the premise. The speaker changes tone in the antistrophe, accumulating images that stress the certainty of death so impressively that understatement suffices to release the intrinsic power of the minor premise. Then he concludes with urgent petitions that seem to hint the lady's growing inclination toward a passionate reponse:

And while thy willing Soul transpires
At every pore with instant Fires

The speaker's appeal is not merely to the lady's passion, however, but to a more inclusive and compelling value—completion and wholeness. Aristotle taught that happiness is achieved "by as perfect as possible a performance of activity on the part of the soul throughout life";²⁴ and the poem itself enables us to see the speaker's argument in terms of the Aristotelian ethics that Marvell studied at Cambridge along with Aristotelian logic. By using a logical argument, the speaker invites the lady to respond with her rational soul and to acknowledge and express her passion ("like am'rous birds of prey") so as not to languish in the mere biological existence of the vegetable soul (cf. "vegetable Love"). He invites her to exercise freely her full human powers, "Growth, Sense, Reason, all summ'd up in Man."²⁵ And, although no single net will capture all the resonances of the final couplet, near the heart of the passage is the thought of living life completely, in accordance with natural law:

. . . though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

They cannot halt time, for that would be against nature; but they can live optimally, making life run its full and natural course. Looking back upon the perfected circle of a life so lived, perhaps they would experience satisfaction like that of the redoubtable logician and complete person who several centuries earlier rejoiced, "I have had my world as in my tyme."²⁶

NOTES

- 1 "Andrew Marvell." *TLS* 31 March 1921. Cited by John Hackett. "Logic and Rhetoric in Marvell's 'Coy Mistress.'" *Tercentenary Essays in Honor of Andrew Marvell*. Ed. Kenneth Friedenreich. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977: 141. Hackett provides a valuable history of the criticism from Eliot's essay to 1972.
- 2 See especially J. V. Cunningham. "Logic and Lyric: Marvell, Dunbar, and Nashe." *Tradition and Poetic Structure*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960: 40-49.
- 3 See for example Barbara Herrnstein Smith. *Poetic Closure*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968: 133-35.
- 4 "Marvell and Logic." *Notes and Queries*, ns 17 (1970): 256.
- 5 "Sophistry and Truth in 'To His Coy Mistress.'" *College Literature* 2 (1975): 100.
- 6 "Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress': The Poem as a Linguistic and Social Event." *Poetics* 7 (1978): 357.
- 7 Hackett, 144, 148. See note 1.
- 8 *The Scholastic Curriculum at Early Seventeenth-Century Cambridge*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958: 14. My comments are based upon Father Costello's account (14-25).
- 9 *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*. Ed. H. M. Margoliouth. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1971: 27.
- 10 Wilbur Samuel Howell. *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1956: 351 and note.
- 11 Charles W. Hendel. Foreward. *The Art of Thinking: Port-Royal Logic*. By Antoine Arnauld. Trans. James Dickoff and Patricia James. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964: xix n.
- 12 Howell, 352 n.
- 13 Hendel, xix and note; *DNB* 12: 29-30; Howell, 351.
- 14 Hendel, xxiv-xxv.
- 15 Arnauld, 205. See note 11.
- 16 Arnauld, 204.
- 17 Arnauld, 220.

18 Arnauld, 221.

19 *Practical Logic*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950: 363-64.

20 J. V. Cunningham grasped this point with sure grammatical instinct: The "explicit condition contrary to fact . . . by all grammatical rules amounts to the assertion that we do not have world enough and time. There is no surprise whatever when the proposition is explicitly made in line 21. It would rather have been surprising if it had not been made" (47). But Cunningham's purpose was not to defend Marvell's logic, which had not yet been challenged, and subsequent critics have not used his observation.

21 Hackett, 143.

22 Arnauld, 175.


23 Costello, 20.

24 Costello, 65.

25 *Paradise Lost*, book 9, line 113.

26 "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," line 473.

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