



Andrew Marvell's To his Coy Mistress: Love in the Little Ice Age

This learning resource aligns with AQA AS- and A-level English Literature 3.1: Love through the Ages. It focuses on Andrew Marvell's poem, 'To his Coy Mistress', included in the *AQA Love Poetry through the Ages Pre-1900 Anthology*. Alongside Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' it also discusses poems by three other poets included in the *Pre-1900 Anthology*: Thomas Wyatt, William Shakespeare, and John Donne.

The background reading and activities in this resource should together take around 90 minutes to complete.

Produced by the Rising Tide of Humber team, University of Hull, with support from the Ferens Education Trust.

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Learning objectives

Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' is one of several poems in 16th- and 17th-century England to give expression to love and desire through the language of storms and floods. This learning resource explores the significance of flooding in Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress'. Marvell's poem is also compared to other examples of extreme weather imagery in other English love poems from the early modern period by Thomas Wyatt, William Shakespeare, and John Donne. This learning resource will consider a variety of reasons for why storms and floods feature in English love poetry, including:

- The influence on English love poetry of the Italian poet, Petrarch, who used storms as metaphors in several widely imitated sonnets.
- The importance of flooding in religious prophecies predicting the end of the world in Andrew Marvell's lifetime.
- The frequency of storms and floods in early modern England, a period today regarded as the climax of the Little Ice Age (1300-1800).

On completing this learning resource, you will be able:

- To discuss how, and why, Andrew Marvell uses the language of flooding to express love and desire in 'To his Coy Mistress'.
- To apply your understanding of the language of flooding in Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' to an analysis of flood and storm references in other contemporary English love poems.
- To make a judgement on whether Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' is a conventional or unconventional love poem, based on your understanding of how other poets use floods and storms to communicate love in this period.

Activity 1

This activity should take around 15 minutes to complete.

Step 1: Read the poem in **Source 1**, 'My Galley, Charged with Forgetfulness', by Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542), and look at the accompanying four images (5 minutes).

Step 2: Each image shows a particular weather event – for example, a storm at sea. Working in pairs, link up the weather event shown in each image to the corresponding line or lines in the poem where that same weather event is described. How many images can you link to lines in the poem? (5 minutes)

Step 3: Working as a group, use the deeper understanding of Thomas Wyatt's weather metaphors you have gained from the above activities to discuss how these metaphors affect our reading of love in the poem. (5 minutes)

Questions to consider:

Wyatt uses stormy weather as metaphors in this poem to describe the emotion of love.

1. What is the speaker's attitude towards love in the poem?
2. How far do the weather metaphors help Wyatt express this love to his readers?

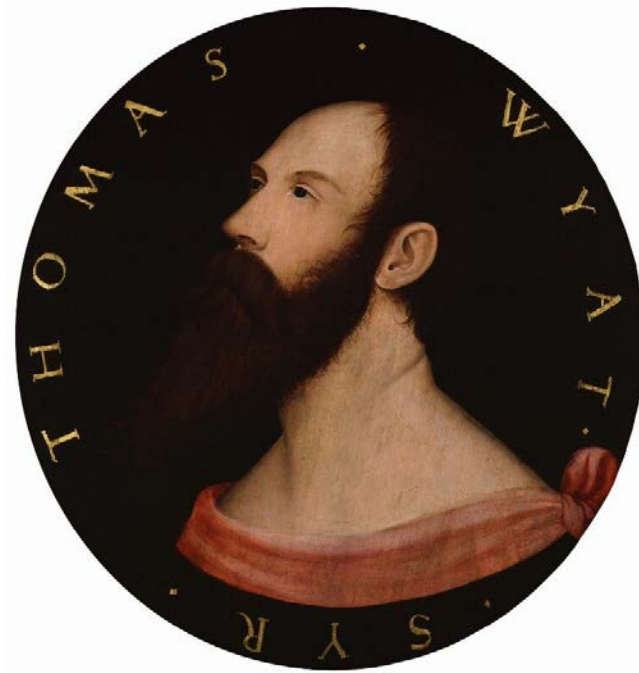


Figure 1: After Hans Holbein the Younger. Sir Thomas Wyatt (mid 16th Century, based on a work of c. 1540).
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Source 1: Thomas Wyatt, 'My Galley, Charged with Forgetfulness'

<p>My galley, charged with forgetfulness, Thorough sharp seas in winter nights doth pass 'Tween rock and rock; and eke mine enemy, alas, That is my lord, steereth with cruelty; 5 And every oar a thought in readiness, As though that death were light in such a case. An endless wind doth tear the sail apace Of forced sighs and trusty fearfulness. A rain of tears, a cloud of dark disdain,</p>	<p><i>boat</i> <i>laden</i> <i>stormy seas</i> <i>also</i></p>
<p>10 Hath done the wearied cords great hinderance; Wreathed with error and eke with ignorance. The stars be hid that led me to this pain; Drowned is Reason that should me comfort, And I remain despairing of the port.</p>	<p><i>frayed</i> <i>damage</i> <i>tied</i></p>



Image 1: Willem von de Velde, 'The Gust' (c. 1680).
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Image 2: Photo by [Eutah Mizushima](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Image 3: Photo by [Marcus Woodbridge](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Image 4: Photo by [mkjr](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Extreme Weather and English Love Poetry

Thomas Wyatt's 'My Galley, Charged with Forgetfulness' is an example of an English sonnet. The word sonnet comes from the Italian *sonnetto*, a 'little song', or 'little poem'. The sonnet form was brought from Italy to England by two poets, Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey (1517-1547). Both poets were influenced by the songs and sonnets of the Italian medieval poet, Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304-74).

Another sonnet by Thomas Wyatt is 'Whoso List to Hunt', which can be found in the *AQA Love Poetry through the Ages Pre-1900 Anthology*.

As well as being one of the first writers to import Petrarch's 14-line sonnet form into English love poetry, Thomas Wyatt also recycled the themes of Petrarch's Italian sonnets in his English love poems. Many of the weather metaphors Wyatt includes in 'My Galley, Charged with Forgetfulness', for example, are close translations of those found in the Italian poem that Wyatt used as the basis for 'My Galley', Petrarch's [Rima 189](#).

Wyatt's weather metaphors – including storms, heavy rain, and floods – reappear in other English love poems up to, and including, Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' (c.1646). In Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, in the *AQA Love Poetry through the Ages Pre-1900 Anthology*, for example, Shakespeare rewrites Wyatt's metaphor of love as a storm-tossed ship. In this sonnet, Shakespeare describes love as constant and unbending, even in the face of a tempestuous storm at sea. Love, Shakespeare writes,

'...is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempest and is never shaken' (lines 5-6).

In 'To his Coy Mistress', Andrew Marvell also borrows, and adapts, the weather metaphors of previous English poets to explore love and its relationship to desire.

A Closer Look: **Sonnets**

A sonnet is a highly structured poem of 14 iambic pentameter lines, divided into two parts, an octave of 8 lines, and a sestet of 6 lines. The octave, or first 8 lines, of the Italian or 'Petrarchan' sonnet (first adopted into English by Thomas Wyatt) rhymes ABBA ABBA. The rhyme scheme of the sestet varies: common variants in a 'Petrarchan' sonnet are CDC CDC, or CDE CDE.

Sonnets grew in popularity during the English Renaissance. In this period, the rhyme scheme of the sonnet developed considerably on the inherited Petrarchan model, with the octave splitting into two distinct quatrains, typically rhyming ABAB CDCD, and the sestet sub-divided into a third quatrain, typically rhyming EFEF, and a couplet (GG). Together, this formed the 'three quatrains and a couplet' of the classic English or 'Shakespearean' sonnet, used by Shakespeare throughout the 154 sonnets of *Shakespeares Sonnets* (1609).

An example of a Shakespearean sonnet rhyming ABAB CDCD EFEF GG is Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, including in the *AQA Love Poetry through the Ages Pre-1900 Anthology*.

Activity 2

This activity should take between 5-10 minutes to complete.

We have seen what a sonnet is and have explored how sonnets are typically divided into two parts. We have also noted the popularity of the sonnet form within English love poetry.

Step 1: Working in pairs, take a closer look at Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' in the *AQA Love Poetry through the Ages Pre-1900 Anthology* (5 minutes).

Questions to consider:

1. Is this poem written as a sonnet?
2. What is the rhyme scheme of this poem, and how is it structured?

Step 2: Share your answers with the rest of the group (5 minutes).

Key Profile: **Andrew Marvell (1621-78)**

Andrew Marvell is today one of the best known of English 17th-century poets. He was born on 31 March 1621 at Winestead-in-Holderness, fourteen miles south-east of the East Yorkshire town of Kingston-upon-Hull.

Marvell's family moved to Hull three years later when his father, a Church of England minister, was appointed master of the Charterhouse, an almshouse for the poor just north of Hull's town walls. Marvell attended Hull Grammar School between 1629 and 1633, leaving for Trinity College, Cambridge, in December 1633 and travelling in mainland Europe throughout the Civil War years in the 1640s. Marvell's Yorkshire connections later led him to Nun Appleton, near York, where in 1650–1652 he worked as tutor to the daughter of Thomas, Lord Fairfax, the former general of the New Model Army. He also tutored William Dutton, ward of Oliver Cromwell, and worked as a civil servant in Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate government, assisting the poet, John Milton, in Milton's work as Latin Secretary for the English Commonwealth. In 1659, Marvell was elected a Member of Parliament for Hull, a post he held until his sudden death in August 1678 of a fever he had contracted on a visit to Hull 'about the Towns affaires'.

Marvell's poetry has not always been as well received as it is today. Few poems were published in his lifetime, and in the 18th and 19th centuries he was better known as a political writer. The poet and critic T.S. Eliot's influential essay, published in 1921, marked the rise of Marvell's reputation as a lyric poet, and it was Eliot who was chiefly responsible for bringing Marvell's poem 'To his Coy Mistress' to the attention of modern readers. 'To his Coy Mistress' is widely regarded as Marvell's finest love poem and has even been called the best love poem in the English language. For study guides to 'To his Coy Mistress', see under 'References and Recommended Reading' at the end of this resource.



Figure 2: Vincent Galloway (1894-1977). Portrait of Andrew Marvell. © Hull Museums Collection KINCM 2005.37

Activity 3

This activity should take around 20 minutes to complete

This activity develops on the extreme weather metaphors we saw in Wyatt's sonnet, 'My Galley, Charged with Forgetfulness' to explore Marvell's reference to flooding and other cataclysmic events in his poem, 'To his Coy Mistress'.

Step 1: Read the passage from the start of 'To his Coy Mistress' (**Source 2**).

Note: The passage in Source 2 refers to two biblical events - Noah's Flood (see Genesis 6.7–8.22) and the Conversion of the Jews, an event believed by Protestants in Marvell's day to presage the Day of Judgement or Second Coming of Christ (see Revelation 19.1–21). Marvell's speaker refers to the idea that, 'Had we but world enough, and time' (line 1), he would be content to love his mistress from the very beginning of biblical time – 'ten years before the flood' (line 8) – to the Day of Judgement at the very end of time. The references to the Flood and Second Coming of Christ therefore express the enduring quality of Marvell's speaker's love, a love so strong it will last until Christ's Second Coming that will bring an end to time and the world together.

continued

Step 2: Compare this passage with Shakespeare's expression of the same idea in Sonnet 116 (below).

Note that Shakespeare's reference to 'doom' refers to Doomsday, or the Day of Judgement, the Second Coming of Christ foretold in Revelation 19.1-21.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 116, lines 9-12.

Step 3: Working in pairs, consider the following questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between Marvell's and Shakespeare's use of biblical time to express the constancy of love?
2. Is Marvell's speaker being sincere, do you think, when he says he would be content for his mistress to 'refuse' his love until the 'Conversion of the Jews' or Second Coming of Christ? What conditions does Marvell's speaker place on the ability of his love to outlast time? Be prepared to justify your answer to this question with reference to textual clues contained in the poem.

Step 4: Share your answers with the rest of the group.

Source 2: Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress', lines 1-10

	Had we but world enough, and time, This coyness lady were no crime.	<i>modesty, shyness</i>
	We would sit down, and think which way To walk, and pass our long love's day.	
5	Thou by the Indian Ganges' side Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide Of Humber would complain. I would Love you ten years before the flood :	<i>A river in India and Bangladesh</i> <i>A tidal estuary in eastern England</i> <i>See Genesis 6.7–8.22</i>
10	And you should, if you please, refuse Till the conversion of the Jews .	<i>A reference to events foretold in the Book of Revelation</i>



The Humber Estuary looking east, towards the Humber Bridge

Fire and Flood: To his Coy Mistress and 17th-Century Religious Writing

Andrew Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' and William Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 are both examples of how Doomsday, or the Second Coming of Christ, is used in English love poetry to express the constancy of a speaker's love. The same convention also appears in English religious poetry of the early 17th century, as the following example – John Donne's Holy Sonnet 5: 'I am a little world made cunningly' (**Source 3**) – makes clear.

Donne uses the sonnet form to express his spiritual love for God. In Sonnet 5, Donne's speaker imagines his body as the world, and first asks God to 'drown my world' (line 8), in a reimagining of the biblical Flood. He then calls on God to 'burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal' (line 13), in a reimagining of the Second Coming of Christ. You can read the whole of Donne's Holy Sonnet 5 in **Source 3** below.

Marvell's references to cataclysmic events in 'To his Coy Mistress', and Donne's similar language of fire and flood in Source 3, demonstrate that references to the Second Coming of Christ often featured in both love poetry and religious writing during the 17th century. Many of Marvell's contemporaries believed that the Second Coming of Christ would happen in their lifetimes, and some religious writers even dated the 'fire' that was believed to accompany the Second Coming to the year 1656 AD (see **Source 4**).

In **Source 4**, John Rogers relates the Second Coming of Christ at the end of biblical time to the Flood that happened soon after the Creation of the World. Rogers, who dates the Flood to the year 1656 since the World's Creation, argues by analogy that the fire of the Second Coming would happen in 1656 AD.

Such sources have also provided critics with a clue to dating Marvell's poem, with Elsie Duncan-Jones arguing in 1958 that if 17th-century writers were dating the Flood to the year 1656, then 'Marvell is unlikely to have written "ten years before the flood" without intending this to be understood as 1646' since the Creation of the World, and therefore as an implied reference to 1646 AD. This clue to when the poem was written has since been corroborated by other critics on stylistic grounds, and a date of around 1646-47 for the composition of 'To his Coy Mistress' is now generally accepted by Marvell scholars today.

Source 3: John Donne, Holy Sonnet 5

I am a little world made **cunningly** *cleverly*
Of **elements** and an angelic **sprite**, *earthly materials spirit*
But black sin hath betrayed to endless night
My **world's both parts***, and oh both parts must die.
5 You which beyond that heaven which was most high
Have found new **spheres**, and of new lands can write, *planets*
Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might
Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,
Or wash it, if it must be drown'd no more.
10 But oh it must be burnt; alas the fire
Of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore,
And made it fouler; let their flames retire,
And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal
Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heal.

* Donne here imagines the speaker's body (or 'world') made up of 'both parts' – that is, of both earthly materials ('elements') and of spirit ('sprite').

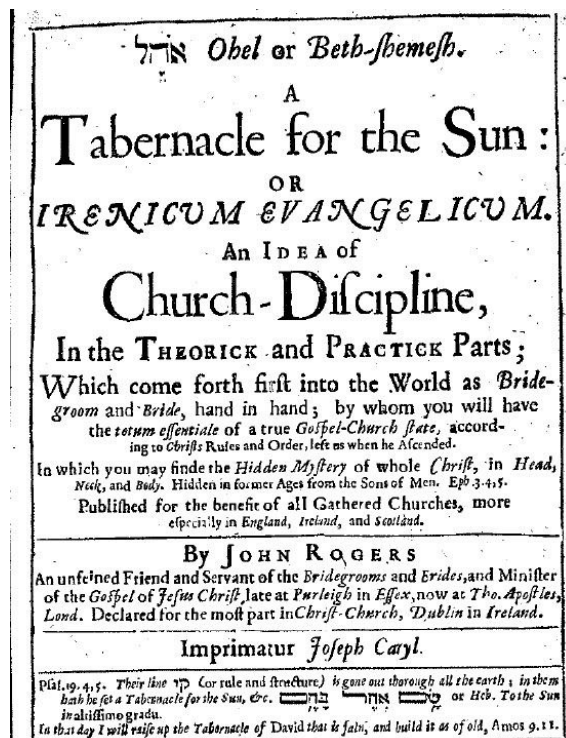


Figure 3: Unknown English artist. John Donne (c. 1595).

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Source 4: John Rogers, *An Idea of Church-Discipline* (1653), p. 23

But yet our troubles will be over as to us (and I think shortly too) for Anno 1656 (which is now near us) the Flood came on all the world (and so I think the Fire will) and lasted forty days (so may the Fire be for forty years).



John Rogers, *An Idea of Church-Discipline* (1653), titlepage.

English Love Poetry and the Little Ice Age



Figure 4: *Title-page woodcut, from A True Report of Certain Wonderful Overflowings of Waters (London, 1607).*
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So far, we have linked Andrew Marvell's lines 'I would | Love you ten years before the flood' in 'To his Coy Mistress' (lines 7-8) to the conventions of both love and religious poetry. We have seen how this reference to flooding in Marvell's poem takes its place alongside references to storms and tempests in Wyatt's 'My Galley, Charged with Forgetfulness' and Shakespeare's Sonnet 116. We have also noted that Marvell's 'flood' might refer to the biblical Flood, and that Marvell echoes Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 in using the flood, alongside his reference to the Second Coming of Christ, as a metaphor for expressing the idea that love can endure floods and tempests and remain constant to the very end of time.

The storms and floods that are a feature of English love poetry from the time of Thomas Wyatt onwards can in part be traced to sources in Petrarch's sonnets. However, it is also possible that these extreme weather events in poetry reflect increases in actual extreme weather events in 16th- and 17th-century England.

This period saw frequent storms and extreme weather events caused by a period of climactic cooling commonly referred to as the Little Ice Age (c.1300-1800). Estimated mean annual temperatures for Central England plummeted by just under 1°C at the peak of the Little Ice Age between 1550 and 1650 – a rate of decline almost precisely mirroring the mean annual Central England temperature *rise* of 1°C between 1920 and 2019. Frequent flooding from increased storminess is a known consequence of climate change today. Similarly, the changing climate of early modern England brought with it a spate of cold, wet springs and summers, leading to flooded fields and failing crops. Changes in weather patterns during the Little Ice Age are shown by the frequent re-issuing of dearth orders across the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

'To his Coy Mistress' and the 1646 Flood of Hull

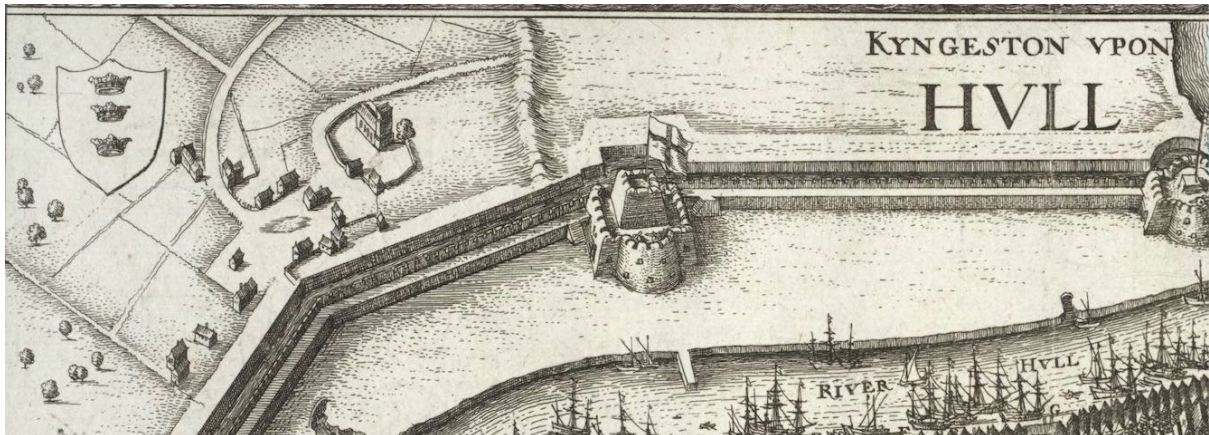


Figure 5: **Drypool village**. Detail from Wenceslaus Hollar, *Map of Hull* (c. 1640). © Hull History Centre, Hull. U DDMM/33/8.

In the years Marvell is thought to have written 'To his Coy Mistress' (1646-47) Marvell's hometown of Kingston-upon-Hull suffered serious flooding caused by the 'sharp seas' of a Humber storm surge. Surviving records relating to the village of Drypool on the east bank of the river Hull just outside Hull's town walls (See **Figure 5**) describe 'hideous & mighty windes' and a 'hideous Tempest' causing flooding on at least two separate occasions in March and again in November 1646. These records are clear that the flooding caused by these storms covered large areas extending 20 miles north of the Humber banks at Drypool, and that flood water also lay on the ground for upwards of 12 months in duration. It was not until October 1647 that the same records report the Holderness region 'freed at present, and for the future secured' from flooding.

In 1647, Marvell returned to England from mainland Europe, where he had been travelling and working as a tutor since February 1642. The exact date of Marvell's return to England is unknown, but we know he was in Cambridgeshire, signing property deeds, in November 1647. Recent scholarship suggests that Marvell likely went to Hull to visit his sisters and brothers-in-law before travelling to Cambridge. If so, he would have been in Hull by late summer 1647 and may therefore have witnessed the extensive flooding in and around Hull for himself, before the flood defences were reported repaired, and the region 'freed at present' from flooding, in October 1647.

The occurrence of this actual flood in the years Marvell is most likely to have written 'To his Coy Mistress' adds another interpretative layer to our reading of Marvell's flood reference in the poem.

Source 5: Recreating an historical storm surge from 1646 in 360 VR



Recreating an historical storm surge from 1646 in 360 VR. Source: risingtide.hull.ac.uk



Scan to find out more about how we created the town of Hull and historical flood in the Rising tide of Humber video.

This 360 VR (virtual reality) video recreates the different stages of the ‘hideous Tempest’ described in archival accounts for 1646-47, using gauge data from a Humber storm surge in 2013, applied to a digital model of Kingston-upon-Hull based on Wenceslaus Hollar’s map of Hull (c.1640). It shows the path of flooding caused by winter storms like the ‘hideous Tempest’ and the impact this would have had on Kingston-upon-Hull around the time Marvell was writing ‘To his Coy Mistress’ in 1646-47. See also the accompanying image of a scene from **Source 5**.



Visual impression of flooding caused by the Humber storm surge of winter 1646-47, looking south over the river Hull towards the Humber estuary. © University of Hull 2023. risingtide.hull.ac.uk

Plenary Activity

This activity should take around 20 minutes to complete

Step 1: Watch **Source 5:** 'Recreating an historical storm surge from 1646 in 360 VR' (5 minutes).

Step 2: Working in pairs, discuss how you think Marvell's language of flooding in 'To his Coy Mistress' should be understood by choosing which of the three options below (under **Questions to consider**) best fits your own understanding of the poem. (5 minutes).

Step 3: Share your ideas with the rest of the group (10 minutes).

Questions to consider:

How do you think we should interpret Marvell's speaker's reference in 'To his Coy Mistress' to loving his mistress 'ten years before the flood'? There are three options to consider.

1. Is this line best read in light of the conventions of English love poetry, from Thomas Wyatt onwards, that we have been examining in this resource?
2. Is it to be understood as a reference to religious prophecies, like the example given in **Source 4**, which foretell the end of the world at the time Marvell was writing 'To his Coy Mistress' in or around 1646?
3. Or, is Marvell's language of flooding best regarded as having been influenced by the storminess of the seventeenth century, and specifically by the extensive flooding in Hull in 1646-47 recreated in **Source 5**?

Key Terms

- **Iambic** One of several metrical feet used in English poetry. An 'iamb' is a foot or unit of verse consisting of a short followed by a long syllable (di-DUM) and is the most common foot found in English poetry. 'Iambic pentameter' refers to lines of verse consisting of five iambs, or ten syllables, per line.
- **Little Ice Age** A period of climatic cooling in the North Atlantic region between c.1300-1800. Over this period, mean annual temperatures across the Northern Hemisphere dropped by 0.6°C and weather patterns became more unpredictable.
- **Sonnet** A highly-structured poem of 14 iambic pentameter lines, divided into two parts, an octave of 8 lines, and a sestet of 6 lines. There are two main types of sonnet in English literature, the Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet and the Shakespearean, or English, sonnet.
- **Storm Surge** A bulge of water (above normal tidal level) produced when high winds and low-pressure weather systems coincide. When a storm surge coincides with a high tide, this creates a prolonged and exceptionally high tide. The severity of storm surges are affected by the shallowness of the sea, which is one reason why storm surges on North Sea coastlines can be particularly devastating.

References and recommended reading

Archives

- Records of the Commissioners of Sewers for East Riding of Yorkshire relating to the township of Drypool, 22 October 1646-21 April 1647. East Riding of Yorkshire Archives, Beverley: CSR 12/1, CSR 14/23, and CSR 14/24.

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Podcasts

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