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Lyric Bureaucracy: Andrew Marvell and the Aesthetics of Efficiency

How do we recognize efficiency? Is it a rational or an aesthetic affair? This paper explores whether the bureaucracy in which Andrew Marvell participates learns anything from his lyric verse. More broadly, it seeks to explain an incongruous phenomenon in seventeenth-century literary history: the hiring of poets as bureaucrats. On the one hand, this phenomenon reveals a craving for exactitude: poets attend to what words say much more intently than a general populace interested in communication and meaning. That's especially true for a poet like Marvell, whose verse tends toward demetaphorization. On the other hand, bureaucracy aspires to a spare aesthetic elegance, aped from poetic form, that gives the lie to a *rational* efficiency. In the end, Marvell's verse celebrates the austere beauty of the letter at the expense of the metaphorical ambiguities of the spirit and shows how bureaucratic efficiency is an aesthetic achievement, not a rational one.