

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress": A New Historicist Reading

The execution of Charles I in 1649 was an unprecedented event in English history, and, like the rest of the English nation, Marvell would have been acutely conscious of its political and spiritual implications. According to the contemporary doctrine of "divine right," the monarch was appointed not by the people, but by the divine ordinance of his birthright; thus any trespass against the king was a sin against God. The absolutist Charles, like his father James I (1603-25) would take this principle to an extreme; only God, he believed, could overrule his judgment.

Yet 1649 proved the culture's departure from unconditional monarchical loyalty; and in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the English had a new sense of themselves as autonomous subjects. Parliament's decision to execute their king came as a result of long-brewing discontent with both Charles's absolutism and his seeming encouragement of anti-reformist practice within the English church. His subjects condemned him not only for his marriage to the Catholic Henrietta Maria, but also for his alliance with William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a proponent of practices associated with the Catholic Church. Rather than individual, inward worship—the fundamental concepts underpinning the reformist church—Laud supported external ritual and the priest's authoritative role in church prayer.

Marvell, indicatory of this ambivalent historical moment, supported the anti-royalist Oliver Cromwell as England's Lord Protector in the country's interregnum government—even serving as tutor to Cromwell's family—yet also penned a sympathetic description of the executed king.¹ While Marvell thrived with such judicious self-

¹ In 1650, Marvell wrote his famous "Horatian Ode" that, acknowledging the momentousness of the historical moment, celebrates Cromwell's success in the war against Ireland and acknowledges the recent

positioning, his speaker in “To His Coy Mistress,” both the subject of the poem and a type of English “subject,” rebels unequivocally against the figure of the monarch, suggested in lines 1-20 in the figure of the beloved herself.

“Had we but world enough,” the speaker explains to his “coy mistress” in the beginning of the poem, he would praise her in perpetuity:

I would

Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow. (7-12)

Describing this hypothetical scenario, the speaker employs “Petrarchan” language, excessive and hyperbolic reverence for an elusive woman made famous in the medieval sonnets of the Italian poet Petrarch. Marvell’s rhetorical choice is significant as it would have evoked for his reader the lyrics of many sixteenth century poets who incorporated the genre in praise of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). As many critics have shown, these poets, courtiers who solicited the queen’s support, ingratiated themselves by representing her as an intangible, ideal beloved. Yet beginning in line 21, Marvell’s speaker urges—and presumes—physical gratification rather than insatiate yearning.

While Marvell’s monarch believed in his own omnipotence, this figure of the monarch,

execution of Charles. The poem, written in the “Horacian” style of critical detachment, describes the king nostalgically as a “royal actor” making his final, tragic appearance. Marvell portrays the actual death in

one evoking the last of the Tudor line before the absolutist Stuart Kings, James and Charles, is denied this kind of power. Marvell's speaker suggests that such promises of eternal devotion are inappropriate in a world that is governed by "Time's winged chariot," the universal experience of human mortality to which they are both vulnerable. While the Tudor and Stuart monarchs had referred to the "two bodies" of the king, the material body a correspondent to a divine form, here the speaker insists on only the former.

At the "turn" at line 21, the speaker turns his beloved from this immortal, ideal object of reverence to a possible co-conspirator against godlike "Time," which *does* hold the power of life and death. Forewarning his mistress of "Time's winged chariot," he gives a crude description of her dead body in the grave:

Thy beauty shall no more be found,
 Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
 My echoing song; then worms shall try
 That long-preserved virginity,
 And your quaint honor turn to dust,
 And into ashes all my lust. (25-30)

The speaker creates an image of chaos and disorder: worms will violate his beloved and his "lust" will become "ashes." Yet Marvell's intention is not simply to vilify the speaker's aggressive disregard for social mores; his defiant ranting, the poem suggests, is also that of a sympathetically powerless subject. The speaker's "vegetable

reassuring terms: Charles "bow'd his comely Head,/Down as upon a Bed."

love,” while lush and abundant cannot aspire to become “vaster than empires”; his own future evades his control, as its only certainty is death.

Despite his apparent sexual bravado with his “mistress,” the speaker demonstrates an acute consciousness of his own disempowerment throughout the poem. Ultimately, he will enlist his beloved’s complicity with his rebellious cant: in the final stanza of the poem, the speaker proposes a subversive overthrow of “Time” itself. In a tone both absurd and passionate, he describes the very act of love as a type of mutiny: like “birds of prey,” they will turn on “Time.” Rather than “languish” underneath its inscrutable power, they will charge the very “iron gates of life.”

The poem concludes with an ominous and thickly symbolic challenge to the “sun” itself—a common pun for the “son” of the monarch in contemporary literature. Perhaps here Marvell is speaking directly of the “son,” Charles II, who became his father’s successor with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. As the speaker and his beloved provoke this celestial object, emblematic of the monarch’s ostensible divinity, “carpe diem” becomes as much a cry of lust as one of insurrection.

With this poem, Marvell portrays his subject as a dangerous “subject,” and in doing so evokes the discord of the political moment. Yet he also casts compassionately his speaker’s rallying challenge to all forms of authority—one that perhaps anticipates Marvell’s own lyrics that critiqued the Restoration government.² As a poet employed by Cromwell, Marvell was aware of his own position more broadly as a dependent “subject.” In a broader sense, the poem in its systematic rejection of authority creates a possible outlet for Marvell’s own fantasy of autonomy. If Marvell was able to be a

² A member of Parliament from 1660 until his death in 1678, Marvell would for obvious reasons publish these poems anonymously.

perennially loyal subject, “To His Coy Mistress” celebrates a more subversive figure who, despite being governed by the sun, has no qualms about exerting himself against this all-powerful sovereign.