

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

Andrew Marvell's speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" invokes Petrarchan convention, a poetic mode originating in the fourteenth century in which a male lover uses exaggerated metaphors to appeal to his female beloved. Yet Marvell alludes to such excessive—and disempowering—pining only to defy this tradition of unrequited love. Instead of respectful adulation, he offers lustful invitation; rather than anticipating rejection, he assumes sexual dominion over the eponymous "mistress." The poem is as much a celebration of his rhetorical mastery as it is of his physical conquest. Through his verbal artistry, the speaker—perhaps a figure of the poet Marvell himself—manipulates his female subject, rendering her both as his idealized beloved and, eventually, as his vision of impending death. In the course of his invitation, he portrays her as alternately desirous and repulsive, but ultimately he identifies the female body itself as a loathsome symbol of human decay.

Beginning in line 5, the speaker describes their love as a magnificent geographical expanse. While he would "by the tide/of Humber . . . complain," creating laudatory verse at the river of his childhood home, she would leisurely "by the Indian Ganges' side . . . rubies find." Omnipotent and ubiquitous, they would be world travelers, traversing the world and enjoying its exotic riches. More than the acquisition of material goods, their relationship would be valuable for its immortality; he would indulge in such "complaints" and she would deny him in perpetuity. The speaker describes their love as an epic event, a romance that exists alongside the events of the bible itself. His "vegetable love" would grow between the flood in Genesis and the conversion of the Jews, which many seventeenth-century writers linked to the coming of the Messiah. Bookended by the two

biblical allusions, which together signify the beginning and end of Judeo-Christian history, the speaker locates their romance within the timeline of this spiritual history. These allusions also point self-referentially to poetic aspiration: the speaker (and thus, Marvell himself) strive to create words that are as eternal as that of the biblical text. Here, desire is evocative of creative production; the beloved's beauty will provide eternal fodder for his verse.

The speaker's initial tribute to his beloved mimics the excessive rhetoric of Petrarchan convention adopted by Renaissance poets such as Thomas Wyatt, Philip Sidney, and Edmund Spenser. He will solicit her love even if she does "refuse/Till the conversion of the Jews" (9-10). Yet the conditional phrasing of the poem's first line betrays immediately his hypothetical context: "*Had* we but world enough, and time,/This coyness, lady, were no crime" (emphasis mine). He depicts her as flirtatiously resistant, and with the ambivalent consent of her "coyness" proceeds to describe how he *would* woo her properly. Because the conventional Petrarchan lover's passion is unrequited, his verse becomes an exercise in futile pining; differently, Marvell's speaker, confident of sexual acquisition, speaks with bravado as he crafts his persuasive argument.

The "shoulds" and "woulds" that consistently punctuate the poem reach their pinnacle with the blazon beginning in line 13 as he describes how each part of her body "should" receive an appropriate number of years of homage:

An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,

But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart. (13-18)

The genre of the blazon, a verbal inventory of a woman's physical attributes, is certainly problematic for the way in which it objectifies the female body, and Marvell takes this objectification further by negating even the pretension of romantic sincerity that exists in the Petrarchan tradition. Beginning in line 21, the speaker reveals his mistress to be unworthy of such description and revises her instead as a harbinger of death. This drastic shift from the language of praise to that of threat, from lust to disgust, heightens the poem's devaluation of its female subject as it showcases the speaker's verbal adroitness.

While virginal female beauty does not become the speaker's inspiration as it does in other Renaissance verse, the image of a ravaged and ravished woman provides ample poetic material. In the latter half of the poem, the lover reveals the aforementioned "state" in which he will attribute "an age at least to every [body] part" to be illusory; his logic is not informed by visions of eternity, but rather by the insouciant logic of "carpe diem." Extravagant praise and professions of eternal love are inappropriate because he hears the ominous sound of "Time's winged chariot" (22), a reminder that they do not live in the "[d]eserts of vast eternity." He paints this inauspicious picture of mortality through a metaphor of the beloved's virginity, which he argues will only lose value with passing time: "worms shall try/That long-preserved virginity,/And your quaint honor turn to dust,/And into ashes all my lust" (27-30). The morbid description, and his warning that

she best lose her virginity while she is still able to garner male attention, suggests that it is in fact her beauty itself that evokes in him such fears of “Time’s winged chariot.”

With witty, erotic conceits, the speaker mocks contemporary notions of virginity and expresses disgust at the female body as a symbolic place of death. Rather than uphold the value of her virginity, he emphasizes its “quaint honor,” an oxymoron in which “honor” is negated by his use of “quaint,” a reference to female genitalia in medieval literature with which Marvell’s audience would have been familiar.¹ Though he notes how her “willing soul transpires,” the reference is ironic: in the poem, there are no intimations of her honor and virtue, only bawdy physical description.

Shakespeare in sonnet 130 satirizes Petrarchan convention when he declares that his mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun; Marvell similarly mocks this tradition and further imagines his coy mistress as a destructive force to be harnessed. Although she has yet to be enclosed within a “marble vault,” a “fine and private place” where “none . . . do there embrace,” his mistress is the subject of the speaker’s own fantasy of aggressive entrapment within the confines of his verse. Together they stand against the “slow-chapped power” of time, and yet the speaker also associates the woman with these devouring jaws and the maggots who consume her at line 27. This decrepit female body penetrated by worms also evokes the desires of the speaker himself, and subsequently renders their love-making a crude confrontation with death. He relates how they will “like amorous birds of prey” devour one another, an image of sexual consumption that is also cannibalistic. His celebratory and lascivious cry to “[l]et us roll . . . [o]ur sweetness up into one ball” and “tear our pleasures with rough strife” evokes ecstasy as well as antagonistic fury. His final description of consummation is a

triumphant “carpe diem” that is also, disturbingly, a violent indictment of the female subject.

¹ See Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales*.