

The Playful Wit of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress":

A Comedic Exploration of Love and Time

By Nicole McKinney

Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress* is frequently classified as a classic carpe diem poem as it urges the listener to seize the day before the inevitable finality of death. These more traditional interpretations and readings often highlight a level of manipulative undertones, which portrays the speaker as a man who is trying to push his mistress into a level of intimacy she isn't ready for. However, this type of reading overlooks the inherently comedic nature of the poem, which views this poem as an exaggerated debate between lovers infused with humor and irony. Through playful wit, hyperbolic reasoning, and intellectual teasing, Marvell crafts a work that is more satirical in both structure and content due to its absurd imagery and content. I argue *To His Coy Mistress* should be classified as a comedic exploration of the reality of time and love rather than a darkly persuasive argument leaning towards the creepy.

Richard Crider argues rather than this poem being a simple carpe diem poem, it is a syllogism (If this then not that; not this; therefore that). His evidence lies at the root of the opening for lines:

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 –

He argues the "had we" signals the audience the speaker has disagreed with the addressee before and is going to provide her a counterargument within this poem. Crider explains, the reader

“receives a clear sense of what the lady must have said, or what Marvell’s lines imply that she had said...The lady’s argument was: the world is all before us, and we have time; let us delay our pleasures” (Crider, 226). The opening lines are important because the audience can determine both the argument of the speaker and that of the addressee. It also establishes a kind of lovers’ quarrel or level of preexisting intimacy between two people who’ve rehashed this argument a few times and might bring a new level of teasing, wit, sarcasm, or comedy to get their point across.

The poem switches slightly in Lines 5 – 20 by moving to a level of exaggeration that reaches towards the absurd. The speaker starts small by comparing the Indian Ganges to “the tide of the Humber,” which is a comparison of size and space. So, we could say “Humber is to the Hull (an English equivalent, even in the jet ages, of “Squedunk,” “Hickville,” “the middle of nowhere”) as “Ganges is to India, as near is to far, as small is to big” (Brody, 55). As Marvell sets the audience up for this idea of vastness and space, he pushes the audience into an exploration of time. The speaker then declares to his lady “I would love you ten years before the flood” and he brings in her argument “and you should, if you please, refuse till the conversion of the Jews.” According to Moldenhauer, both of these lines “serve most directly to describe an enormous tract of time for the pleasures of wooing; but both of these termini suggest the death of the world,” which is incredibly ironic because the speaker is juxtaposing his infinite love with the finality of death (Moldenhauer, 197). In a way, this concept of death is foreshadowed for the eventual ruminations in stanza two.

The lines “my vegetable love should grow vaster than empires and more slow;” has been talked about across many sources, especially in regards to “vegetable love” and the doctrine of three souls (vegetative, sensitive, and rational) which is also called the tripartite soul. Hartwig

explains the vegetable soul is “the least active of all the types of souls; its potential includes only the power to attain and retain existence by the process of nutrition (including reproduction), decay, and growth (Hartwig, 572). Her definition supports this idea of space, but also a sense of time and death, which builds on the previous lines speaking about finality. Brody provides a juxtaposing interpretation of this soul as though it alludes to “the sense of sub-animal and sub-rational, but it means endless, limitless, timeless, infinite” (Brody, 54). This duplicity of meaning further exaggerates this idea of limitless love, which has a potential to grow slowly will eventually end, which is part of the speaker's argument. He's arguing through irony nothing is infinite, not even the time they have together. Furthermore, “because the vegetable's potential is the least of the divisions of being, the motion of actualization is reduced in this stanza to its minimum. For Man to actualize all of his potential at the minimum rate of vegetable motion, however, would require a maximum extension of space and time,” which explains why the speaker begins to further exaggerate time in lines 13 – 18 (Hartwig, 573).

Lines 13 – 18 lean towards the impossible because the audience knows this isn't feasible unless we had more time. In reality, bringing a level of absurdity by using large spans of time discredits the addressee's implied argument of having enough time to wait. He is literally pulling apart her argument, yet still making a promise to her within her reality. Brody argues, “The subtext of Marvell's opening stanza might be expressed as follows: If we did not live in the real world, I would love you even more wittily and artificially than do the poets of today and yesterday in their most cerebral fictions; but, since my passion for you is the real thing you must expect a different kind of poem – an altogether unprecedented kind of poem in which the lady, who also feels the real thing, will end up by showing her heart and, eventually, ‘the rest’” (Brody, 60-61). I absolutely agree with this sentiment because the speaker is calling out the

absurdity of courtship during this time by exaggerating it to a cartoon-level of comedy. He is making fun and pointing out the flawed reality of how artificial it is to whisper sweet-nothings into one's ear. Rather, he would like to stay grounded in the realistic than the unrealistic. As Moldenhauer puts it the speaker's "emphasis upon the mechanical character of his flatteries demonstrates to his mistress that such gestures are at best a hollow and passionless routine" (Moldenhauer, 197). Now, hammering his opening stanza home, he ends on "nor would I love at lower rate," which is incredibly ironic "as at the height of the compliment the lover's hyperbole turns playfully upon itself: regardless of his will, he could not love at lower rate because the idealized vegetable state is the minimum state available to any type of soul," which I explained earlier. So, not only does the speaker open with compliments to bold to be faked, he is also subtly making a point in his defense – time is short and we should love now, rather than later.

Based on the set-up in the first stanza, the second stanza shouldn't be altogether shocking, especially when the level of intellectual wittiness is revealed within this stanza. The speaker brings the audience back to reality rather than the idealization of love and what it means. He begins the stanza with "but," which brings in a contrasting idea and a rebuttal to everything that was just said in the first paragraph. This supports the idea that everything within this paragraph was a poke at the courting expectations during this time, which is comedic. The speaker says, "but at my back I always hear times winged chariot hurrying near," which brings back a fixed time to the argument as Helios, in Greek mythology, was the god who brought the sun across the west and set it in the east in a winged chariot. He further solidifies time's constraints by saying "and yonder all before us lie deserts of vast eternity," which juxtaposes infinity with an emptiness. The speaker is now shifting his argument entirely to this idea of

mortality and decay, but with a bit of teasing. The lines below are poking fun at the lady in question through well placed puns and poking at her virtues:

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 honour turn to dust,
 And into ashes all my lust;
 The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do their embrace.

He is reminding her beauty, in the way it's defined, does not last long – youth is short and so is the beauty in this time too. It is an interesting tactic because I don't think I've met any woman whose given in when a guy implies she's ugly, however it's quite funny in the way he had the audacity to say it.

Furthermore, he says she wouldn't be able to hear his “echoing song” if she was lying dead in a coffin as time doesn't stretch as far as he claimed in the first stanza. Interestingly, the word ‘vault,’ “defined as ‘one or another of certain concave structures or surfaces normally facing downward,’ was used as early as 1549, while the denotation of drain or sewer (and thus, by extension, privy) is even older. ‘Vault’ as a verb has been first applied to sexual congress well before Marvell's day...” (Moldenhauer, 201). So, not only is he using “vault” to symbolize a casket her dead body would lie in, but also to the reproductive organs, which is made clearer when he begins to talk about her “long-preserved virginity.” He begins questioning why she holds so tight to these social expectations when her “quaint honour” will simply “turn to dust.”

Marvell is drawing on another pun by using the word ‘quaint,’ which “has more numerous meanings in this context: ‘peculiar,’ ‘prim,’ ‘fastidious,’ ‘ingenious,’ and ‘artful’ or ‘cunningly designed.’ Most interestingly, ‘quaint’ is an old vulgarism denoting, in the Elizabethan John Florio’s definition, ‘a woman’s privities’” (Moldenhauer, 200). This would have gone over my head if I hadn’t read the Moldenhauer’s article as these words make sense in the surface level context they are used in. However, for its time, these would have been quite scandalous in its duplicity of meaning. So, “to paraphrase,” in the words of Moldenhauer, “long preserved or defended in life, and however well preserved or embalmed in the tomb, the mistress’s celebrated maidenhead is not proof against worms. The curious and pretentious honor associated with her ‘quaint,’ and the ‘quaint’ itself, will yet be reduced to insubstantial dust” (Moldenhauer, 200). The speaker is telling her it is pointless and she should, more or less, give in.

My favorite set of lines, while quite sick, were “the grave’s a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace,” which is the epitome of dark humor because it’s so morbid. It’s absolutely absurd to even think of a grave to use as a place to “embrace,” let alone casually be. It’s comedic to the level of its absurdity and audacity to even suggest. The only creepy enough person to even consider such a thing would be a necrophiliac, which is why it’s funny. Furthermore, these two lines are a commentary on time and, again, its finality. Hartwig argues, “the grave would, indeed, make a fine lovers’ bower, if the dead had being. But they do not, and, the poet says sternly, neither shall we. He forces her to recognize that they are caught in a vise: time’s hurrying on one side, eternity’s motionlessness on the other” (Hartwig, 574). This stanza only serves to bring the lady the poem is addressing to reality albeit in a teasing and subtly comedic way.

The last stanza is the speaker's ultimate proposition and point to its climax and begins with a slight remark of death and the constraints of time: "Now therefore, while the youthful hue sits on thy skin like morning dew." This "youthful hue" brings the audience back to the line about "thy beauty shall no more be found," as he is telling the lady to embrace the here and now while they're young and still alive. The "morning dew" does not last long; rather it eventually evaporates and disappears, which can be a reference to mortality and the finality of death. The next line, I think, helps contribute to the overall lighthearted and comedic tone, rather than a darker and manipulative tone: "and while thy willing soul transpires." A willing soul is someone who is eager or ready to participate without needing to be forced or coerced, which can be ironic too, especially with the tone of the poem thus far. His entire argument has rested on her telling him no to the speed of their relationship; however he also doesn't want her if she isn't ready. While the sentiment doesn't entirely match his argument, it does go to show a level of the speaker's character.

Other words within the lines like "sport us," "amorous birds of prey," "languish," "slow-chapped power," "pleasures with rough strife" are contradictory, yet match the themes of the poem – time is a machine eventually leading to a finality within death...everything ends. The term "sport us" means to do something in a playful or lighthearted manner, which in this case means to engage in a level of casual "embrace." This coupled with the idea of "amorous" (showing, feeling, or relating to sexual desire) birds of prey can lead towards this idea of two passionate people who end up devouring something. In this case, time because they become the devourers rather than live in times "slow-chapped power." "Slow-chapped power" means "slowly devouring jaws" which seems to have the speaker trapped within this state, so he argues when they join together in consummation, they will now be in-control of time together...as one.

This is further supported by the last two lines when they make the sun run, the center of our planetary system.

To truly understand the underlying structure of *To His Coy Mistress*, we must look at it through the eyes of a carpe diem poem, which “addresses the conflict of beauty and sensual desire on the one hand and the destructive force of time on the other. Its theme is the fleeting nature of life’s joys; its counsel, overt or implied, is...’seize the present,’” which is how Marvell’s poem reads (Moldenhauer, 190). The poem is deeply rooted in throwing caution to the wind and loving like there is no tomorrow due to the finite amount of time we have on earth. The speaker believes his lady shouldn’t hold so tightly to the social or personal feelings of her virginity. Furthermore, it follows a level of temporary fix to a more complex problem, which is time. The speaker believes by consummating with his lady, he will be able to control a level of time and finality. However, Brody argues he subverts the carpe diem poetry purposefully due to his understanding of the interworking of the poem. Brody explains “Marvell articulates the carpe diem genre ‘one, the string of first personal-plural ‘let us’ imperatives; two, the verb ‘sport;’ three, the formula ‘while we may’; four, the tempus edax rerum motif; and, finally five, the rhyme-couple ‘sun’/ ‘run’ which, as one of the staple appurtenances of carpe diem poems, functions both as a generic marker and as the index of standard, all but predictable thematic content” (Brody, 67-68). However, the sun/run cliché is flipped in Marvell’s poem, which brings a new level of calculated irony. A man as cleverly poetic as Marvell wouldn’t make this mistake unless it was calculated, as Brody suggests. On the contrary, “in a way that is entirely consistent with the structure and movement of this section, he proceeds to explode the artificiality of the conceit by diverting it from its usual function and reversing its usual meaning: let us transcend and transgress the limits and possibilities of the carpe diem poem whose every convention I am

in the process of violating; let us kill time, not be killed by it; let us run ahead not behind, and at such exorbitant speed that the sun itself must run to keep us with us, not – as the *carpe diem* poets would have it – we with it” (Brody, 68). This taking of the “rules” of a style and breaking it is its own level of comedy because it reshapes the meaning and intentions behind everything said within this poem. It is, in itself, a contradictory piece of writing, which for me, is the ultimate irony.

Ultimately, *To His Coy Mistress* is more than a simple *carpe diem*, but rather a subvertor of it through cleverly placed wit, irony, and hyperbole to create a comedic effect. The speaker is not a master manipulator; rather he is a man who wants to debate with his mistress through a logical and clever argument he has put thought into. He allows a level of exaggerated reasoning to absurd levels, dramatic syllogism, paradoxes, and teasing to subvert the classic idea of romancing a partner. In a sense, his straightforward plea for intimacy is actually a further subversion of the courtship expectations of his time, which would further the ironic and play to the comedic aspects of the poem. Marvell works to craft a beautiful poem dealing with the simple realities of time and love and how there is little room for superfluous gestures of love and we should just strive to live in the moment with the one we love.

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