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## Take His Word for It: Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"

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**Take His Word For It:**  
**Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"**  
L. Alene Theisen

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" showcases sexual persuasion at its cleverest but most distressing. Marvell presents a compelling case for sex, but leaves unanswered questions about the conflict at the center of the poem: why and how is his mistress coy? Why should she believe him? Despite the troubling conflict that lies at its center, "To His Coy Mistress" sets forth an amusing, charming, and ultimately successful case that life is too short to hide away one's physical and emotional intimacy.

Marvell's speaker offers lyrical descriptions of time and space to convince his lady of his affections. He begins by posing the problem: his mistress is "coy." He assures her that, "[h]ad [they] but world enough, and time, / This coyness, Lady, were no crime" (l.1-2). In fact, if they had an excessive amount of time and "world," he and she would have the luxury of lengthy walks to ponder how to spend their time together (l.3-4). Further, this leisurely pace and increased mobility would allow that his lady might walk "by the Indian Ganges' side / Shouldst rubies find," (l.5-6) while the speaker "by the tide / Of Humber would complain" (l.6-7). He assures her that she could "refuse" his love "[t]ill the conversion of the Jews" (l.10)—until the end of the world. In this fantastical world of laze and privacy, there would be no need for haste.

Marvell's speaker next uses a bizarre but charming description of his love: it is a vegetable. Far from the images of passion, fire, tenderness, or fate of most romantic poetry, the speaker's "vegetable love should grow" (l.11), a mundane, solid, earthy, and frankly silly description of affection. But beneath this ostensible goofiness is, perhaps, a reference to both the tripartite model of the soul popular in during his era and also to Aristotle's classification of souls (Hartwig 572). While the image of a vegetable may seem steadfast and somehow honest, the very perishability of the plants—as suggested by these models—further underscores the speaker's overall message of acting soon because life is short. This vegetable love may "grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow" (l.12), but it will eventually die and rot, just as humans do, and, perhaps, as affection can. This developing and maturing regard

will allow the speaker to act out the promises in his blazon. He would pass a century “to praise / Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze” (l.13-14), then another “[t]wo hundred [years] to adore each breast” (l.15), and finally “thirty thousand to the rest” (l.16)—time spent assuring his lady that he admires her beauty and sensuality. He would devote “[a]n age at least to every part,” (l. 17), but he would save the most important bit until the end, saying, “the last age should show your heart” (l.18). In case this praise seems excessive, the speaker assures his mistress that she “deserve[s] this state,” and that he would not “love at lower rate” (l.20)—that it is his pleasure and expectation to indulge her. His willingness to praise and adore her is meant to indicate that he is worthy of her physical affection.

The speaker then turns his attention to the present: he and his mistress are mortal and thus must act swiftly. He “hear[s] / Times wingèd chariot hurrying near” (l.21-22), reminding him that time is omnipresent. Far from the lazy, indulgent forever he imagines in the first twenty lines, eternity is a “vast desert” (l.24). In this world, his lady’s beauty will fade, her body will die, and “worms shall try / That long preserved virginity” (l.27-28). She may have fervently maintained and protected her chastity, but insects and decay will eventually penetrate where she would not allow any man to. Once the couple is dead they will have privacy, but the grave will not prove a romantic setting, for “none... do there embrace” (l.32). Death has no respect for the body and will imminently end their relationship, so the speaker and his mistress ought to “embrace” while they still can.

With the dangers and threats of time enumerated, the speaker now turns his attention to a plan of action. His lady, he suggests, must act quickly, “while the youthful hue / Sits on [her] skin like morning dew” (l.33-34). They must take advantage of their lust and her “willing soul” (l.35) by loving now. The speaker declares that they ought to act as “amorous birds of prey” (l.38) and aggressively take hold of their lives, “devouring” it all at once rather than letting time eat away at *them*. Time will wear away their bodies, lust, and affection with “his slow-chapped power” (40), but it is not too late if they take control immediately. The speaker tries to sell his argument to his mistress in one last forceful and enticing image, saying, “[l]et us roll all our strength, and all / Our sweetness, up into

one ball" (l.41-42) and then "tear our pleasure with rough strife, / Through the iron gates of life" (l.43-44). Time and death may hound them, but their physical union will allow them to experience those elements of life on their terms, with no regrets. Marvell's speaker concludes his argument by underscoring the power of physical and emotional unity: "Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run" (l.45-46). They will be empowered by their conscious decision to act in the face of oblivion, and will in their way defeat time.

Marvell's speaker sets forth a clear logical argument which is difficult to argue with—he so thoroughly and charmingly sets forth his proposition that the inherent flaw of his position is swept aside. The speaker first describes what would be an ideal situation (to the lady at least), then shows how their real lives are quite different, and finally presents a plan for how to act in order to make reality as close to perfect as possible. This argument can be summarized as follows:

P1: If we had unlimited time and space, we could waste time.

P2: We do not have unlimited time and space.

C: We cannot waste time.

Seeing the speaker's argument laid out plainly reveals that it is inherently flawed. His argument is the equivalent of stating "if an object is red then it is an apple; this object is not red, therefore it is not an apple"—it clearly ignores that there are other qualities which contribute to applehood and similarly that other factors contribute to being able to waste time. The lack of unlimited time and space does not necessarily preclude the ability to waste time. Despite this very deep logical flaw, Marvell's speaker is wonderfully persuasive, if perhaps disturbingly manipulative. He implies to his lady that he understands her needs and reservations and that, were he not restricted by unwelcome outside forces, he would happily cater to her needs and desires in order to relieve her misgivings. Unfortunately, cosmic forces are acting on them, making her ideal impractical and impossible. Thus, they must act together to make a statement against their oppressor, who would otherwise take the lady's virginity and both their affections—the sexual equivalent of "you can't fire me, I quit." They will beat time and death—together!—by copulating. The speaker ingeniously allies himself with the lady, never mentioning that he is the one who has broached the subject in the first place. In

the universe of the poem, the speaker does not want to rush things either, but is being forced to—clearly not true, or he would not be pressuring his mistress in the first place: time rarely taps one on the shoulder and demands sexual intercourse.

Buried underneath this witty and raunchy logical argument lies the subject of the poem, the lady herself. While the speaker seems to take her “coyness” lightly, as mere feminine silliness, the reader receives no assurances that he is being fair to her. This coyness may be flirtation—the lady may be a tease who wishes to be persuaded, who desires praise before committing. His response would then be his part of the game. Her delay may be unsteadiness—this woman may be a maiden who needs to be reassured, who requires comfort to settle her fears. His words would then be a needed pledge of adoration. Or perhaps her refusal is absolute. She may worry about her comfort, her body, her morality, her faith—she may not want to be persuaded. If this scenario is accurate, then it is hurtful and manipulative of Marvell’s speaker to imply that this lady somehow owes it to herself and to him to fornicate. Unless this first option is correct, however, “To His Coy Mistress” paints a picture of a much more sympathetic and noble woman than often provided by social commentators of the time. In fact, a lady who resists the sexual advances of a man not her husband seems to uphold the chief Christian virtue for women: chastity. Far from the sexual temptress described in Joseph Swetnam’s “The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women,” this lady wishes to protect her chastity. Swetnam’s work, a satirical look at attitudes towards women in his time (*Longman* 1514), portrays women as leeches, forever taking advantage of men because they cannot care for themselves. These “ladies” are whores and temptresses who “will make thee believe that thou are hard by God’s seat, when indeed thou are just as hell’s gate” (*Longman* 1517). The lady of “To His Coy Mistress” may be such a trollop, demanding praise and loyalty in exchange for her body. She may, though, be a chaste and honest woman who has determined her limits in physical intimacy. Far from leading her suitor along and dragging him into sin, he must implore her to give herself to him—he is dragging her towards impurity and transgression, a clear reversal of the female stereotypes of the time.

Despite her position at the center of the action, the lady is a minor concern to the reader, and, perhaps, to the speaker

himself. The appeal of his words is the argument itself, not what he hopes to gain from it. She is merely an audience, albeit a more immediate one than the reader. Because the words themselves and the complex system of images and obligations they create are so engaging, the disturbing notion that this poem may effectively force a sex act on an unwilling participant never truly settles in. This argument, with its charming rigor, is effective where pleas about loyalty and blue balls are not. That Marvell's speaker is able to present the lady's ideal image of sexual intimacy, show how that ideal is flawed, and then offer his own demand as a replacement is both sleazy and brilliant. It is alarming that he successfully contains his mistress's concerns, replacing them with a new picture which belittles her sexual agency, but the worst part is not what the argument does to the woman. The worst part is that the argument is successful. The speaker is clever, witty, and engaging – he is wholly disarming, defusing any resistance to the subject matter. He has offered an argument which cannot be refuted: we are mortal, time has no respect for our chastity or promiscuity, and we might as well go for it.

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