Andrew Marvell and Annie Finch: Different Views on Time and Modesty

by Jessica Carrell

Annie Finch’s poem “Coy Mistress” is a direct response to Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” “Coy Mistress” serves arguably as an antithetical rebuttal to and social critique of Marvell’s carpe diem mentality. While each poet addresses the abstract concept of time, their attitudes towards it are entirely opposite. Marvell’s poem places a time restriction on love and focuses on the futility of remaining chaste, incorporating deathly imagery and suggestions of intercourse. By contrast, Finch’s speaker is strongly reserved and clearly refutes Marvell’s attempted rhetorical seduction by insisting on the enduring power of poetry. Despite the poems’ key differences, each poet’s attitudes towards the gendered performance of coyness proves deeply ironic. Marvell advocates sexual promiscuity at a cultural moment that emphasized female chastity, while Finch supports modesty at a moment that premarital sex is relatively conventional.

In the beginning lines of his poem, Marvell suggests that modesty is criminal: “Had we but world enough, and time / This coyness lady, were no crime,” (ll. 1-2). Read in conjunction with the poem’s title, the “crime” Marvell alludes to is clearly coyness, and the opening lines introduce Marvell’s dubious and unnerving theme that it is criminal to waste time on romance and wooing outside of the bedroom. The entire first stanza features a succession of hyperboles that mock the expectations women have before sex:

An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to adore the rest.
Alluding to the literary tradition of the blazon with a flippant attitude, Marvell’s speaker exaggerates the years a woman desires admiration. Lines 17 and 18 convey an implicit sexual frustration Marvell seems to have with women’s hesitancy, taking “ages” to be bedded. According to Lorna Hurston’s *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, male sexual frustrations were rather standard during the Renaissance and even grounded to physiological terms because “the male might suffer from retained sexual juices” (Hurston 156). However, normalizing male sexual urges led to an unavoidable cultural paradox: if a Renaissance woman engaged in premarital sex, she was considered “disorderly”; ironically, then, the privileged sexual desires of men could not be satisfied without the expense of their bachelorhood or a woman’s reputation. Additionally, Marvell’s poetic – and sexual – propositions may be implicitly taking advantage of an inevitable gendered stigmatization towards women during the Renaissance era. Women were considered “disorderly” whether they were chaste or not; in other words, they had a tainted reputation to begin with. “Disorderliness” was viewed as a defining quality of the female sex due to “Eve [being] the first to yield to the serpent’s temptation and incite Adam to disobey the Lord” (Hurston 156). In the Renaissance perspective, women were innately “disorderly” and therefore socially disadvantaged. The same medical reference Hurston incorporates in her analysis states that while “disorderly” feminine sexual desires manifest itself in hysteria, “[a man] had the wit and will to control his fiery urges by work, wine, or study”; this male “wit” to write out sexual frustrations is arguably demonstrated in Marvell’s poetic work (156).

Marvell’s second stanza develops his unnerving proposition by presenting the disturbing image of a female
corpse rotting away in a tomb:

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 quant honor turn to dust,
And into all my ashes my lust[.]
(ll. 25-30)

Given the disturbing nature of this image, the speaker’s intentions seem unclear: is he really trying to seduce his mistress through an unattractive image of her future grave, or is he trying to frighten her off? Either way, the lines unnervingly demonstrate the futility of chastity by stating that the worms will have the mistress’s virginity. While certainly unappealing, the image is nonetheless effective in arguing against wasting time with modesty. The prospect of worms having your virginity rather than a man is monumentally distressing. The image also successfully implies that potential suitors will cease to be: “And into ashes all my lust” (l. 30). Men do not lust over the old and withered; therefore, the speaker urges his mistress to take advantage of him as her prospective lover while she is still desirable. Joseph J. Moldenhauer provides additional support for the analysis presented here in his acknowledgment that “the conflict of beauty and sensual desire on the one hand and the destructive force of time on the other [...] appeals to the young and beautiful to make time their own for a while” (190). Additionally, Moldenhauer’s analysis confirms Marvell’s perspective of “coyness” as “crime” insofar as Moldenhauer argues that the central conflict within the poem is the “speaker’s desire for erotic fulfillment against the hesitancy of his lady (193). While readers (such as Moldenhauer) may assume that the poem imagines the “lady” as his, the poem might be understood to represent a generic, rather than specific, gender dynamic.
Bernard Duyfhuizen considers the implications of Marvell’s generically gendered “textual harassment” from the perspective of female readers of the poem. In particular, he critiques the “unsettling emotions that such an egoistic assault on her virginal autonomy would provoke” (415). Grant Williams likewise sees a similar male egotism manifest in rhetorical engagement with the “narcissistic structure” of the blazon – a structure present in Marvell’s poem (46). Williams argues that figures such as the blazon “serve as instruments for mastering [the] other, an attempt which, [...] is really only a deluded attempt at self-mastery” (45). This same “deluded attempt at self-mastery” can be seen in Marvell’s use of the blazon. He attempts to master the other, the female, by capturing her in the lines of his work and enticing her to his bed – a linguistic prison of sorts. This speaks to the aforementioned Renaissance medical claim that men controlled or demonstrated “self-mastery” over their sexual urges through their work. Marvell’s flippant attitude towards women and their modesty, coupled with his use of the blazon, is an instance in which he can reaffirm his masculinity through demonstrating mastery over the female sex.

In contrast, Finch demonstrates an entirely different attitude of respect and patience towards time and what is worthy of it. Her opening lines “Sir, I am not a bird of prey / a lady does not seize the day” declares the poem as a response to Marvell (ll. 1-2). It is a reproach to Marvell’s “and now, like am’rous bird of prey” (l. 38). Finch’s beginning statement clearly and concisely establishes the overall nature of the poem as a sophisticated rebuttal towards Marvell’s message of “seize the day.” There is also the subtle but noteworthy difference of Finch capitalizing “Lady” in the second line, where Marvell fails to do so in the exact same place, thereby targeting Marvell’s first instance of
disrespect. The next lines suggest that the speaker believes in enjoying youth despite its brevity: “I trust that brief Time will unfold / our youth, before he makes us old” (ll. 3-4). Time will snatch our youth anyways, so we should appreciate it while we can rather than rushing towards more mature actions such as sex. Again, Finch is disputing Marvell’s encouragement of the opposite.

She then begins to make a defense for time from a poetical standpoint, creating a common ground with Marvell: “How could we two write lines of rhyme / were we not fond of numbered Time” (ll. 5-6). Without proper adherence to time, rhyme, rhythm, and meter would be nonexistent. Therefore, poetry itself would not exist and in turn, neither would either of them be able to classify themselves as poets. Additionally, it takes time to write poetry, and skillfully abiding by time and toying with poetic tools in relation to time betters them as poets. While Marvell is concerned with the sexual attributes of life, Finch goes on to recognize that death does not just cease the physical attributes of life but the intellectual parts as well: “The Grave’s not just the body’s curse; / no skeleton can pen a verse!” (ll. 9-10). Their contrast of ideals is clearly expressed when considering Finch’s lines in relation Marvell’s “The grave’s a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace” (ll. 31-32). Finch is more concerned with the cessation of poetic output rather than Marvell’s concerns over one’s postmortem inability to have sexual intercourse. Unlike Marvell, Finch believes the best way to overcome the transient nature of mortal life is through the undying life of written poetry. Therefore, writing poetry is considerably worthier of time spent than sex. She continues to reproach Marvell by suggesting that if they give Time poetry, Time itself may give back: “let’s sweeten Time with poetry, and Time, in turn may sweeten Love and give us time our love to prove” (ll. 12-13). Finch personifies time and proposes that if they heighten Time with sweet poetry, Time may return the favor and strengthen their love and increase the duration
they have to express it. She drives her argument home in the concluding couplet: “You’ve praised my eyes, forehead, breast; / you’ve all our lives to praise the rest” (ll. 15-16). Here, Finch is again directly addressing Marvell and the blazon he mentions. While Marvell complains about spending time on admiration, Finch believes it is time well spent and her suitor will have all the time allowed to admire even more of her, preferably her intellectual qualities, and it should arguably take the form of poetry. The overall reserved attitude of Finch in relation to sexual promiscuity is somewhat surprising considering the contemporary time it was written, when cultural attitudes towards premarital sex are more tolerant and less condemning than those during the English Renaissance period.

Andrew Marvell’s poem “To His Coy Mistress” and Annie Finch’s “Coy Mistress” can be read together as a tongue-and-cheek battle of wit and clever word play. Marvell’s poem is composed of irony, sarcasm, and mockery towards modesty. Finch criticizes and rebukes Marvell’s attitude towards the supposed limitations and pressures time imposes on sex. She defends time through poetry and the art of romance and remains unchanging in her appropriate “Lady”-like behavior. Each poem thus speaks to a gendered performance of coyness, one which proves to be particularly ironic in light of prevailing cultural norms at the time of each poem’s composition.

Works Cited


