

# The logic of metaphor in marvell's "to his coy mistress"



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Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" was written when Cromwell's Calvinism constrained liberty and free-will, and the poem exemplifies an unconventional assertion of love and sexual propositioning, while validating the request to yield in sexual activity with three "arguments", structured into stanzas. These segments of the poem consider what would happen if the speaker and his beloved had eternity, the reality of life's brevity and the potential joy of the sexual union. Marvell employs a range of linguistic-stylistic devices to sustain his central method of sexual imagery. The enhancement of the poem caused by his use of enigmatic metaphors in rhymed couplets within an iambic tetrameter makes us question whether Marvell is condemning deceitful male chauvinism or the coyness of females.

The Petrarchan language used by Marvell fundamentally determines the structure of "To His Coy Mistress," as the speaker commences the poem by suggesting the consequences of acquiring eternity to pursue their courtship: "Had we but world enough and time, this coyness, lady, were no crime". By applying hyperbole, metaphor and the conditional tense to this devious speculation he implies that the speaker lacks boundless amounts of time to wait for their sexual union, however he attains such a persuasive trait, through metaphor, that unlocks the emotional barrier of doubt in the "mistress". Marvell recognises that "metaphor is pervasive in language"[1] as the "listener is thrown into a state of momentary uncertainty"[2] which creates an alternate dimension to her view of reality. He suggests that this woman's "coyness" is almost criminal through the imagery fabricated by the use of the word "crime". This implies that rejecting sex automatically makes her a lawbreaker, alluding to the religious and moral expectations of 17th

century society, where fornication was seen as a crime as the church morality dominated social behaviour.

The tone of the poem is rather didactic as the speaker presents the " lady" as " coy" which connotes reluctance with an underlying urge to be mischievous; it implies insincerity. The poem's title suggests then that the mistress is merely pretending that she doesn't want to participate in sex with him, and the poem goes on to explain why he labels " coyness" is a " crime." The poet's concerns transcend merely the narrator's view of the 17th century's personal or everyday moral constraints, and articulates how all readers should grab life with both hands and live every moment to the fullest without having to think about every detail therefore presenting " a very modern view of chastity". On the other hand, as the first stanza proceeds Marvell depicts the " crime" of wasting immeasurable time by implicitly criticising the seducer through " The rich brew of symbolic suggestion"[3] (24c) as he states the oxymoron " My vegetable love should grow, vaster than empires and more slow". This could be seen as associating his " love" with a startlingly erotic, exceedingly suggestive " vegetable" which may have shocked 17th century readers, but equally it could suggest how inert and bland their love would be if they were to postpone physical desire indefinitely. The overall effect of the first stanza is that the victim feels as if he is almost patronising and over-indulging her with every woman's desire of true love and that the speaker could be a potential lover, however as the second stanza progresses he outlines scenarios that easily reveal he is self-seeking and manipulative and question whether his actions are

In the second stanza, the movement of the verse is flowing and unfettered as he begins with the connective " But" as to imply reluctance to any word but " yes", so there is a clear contrast between the first section and the second to show that the speaker is eager to pursue his desires at once. Marvell employs the signalling metaphor " And yonder all before us lie, deserts of vast eternity" to juxtapose " time" with the vastness of a " desert" suggesting that their future is represented by a desert in the sense that deserts symbolise desolation and emptiness, if they postpone sex for too long. The speaker attempts to persuade the mistress to have sex with him but graphically and unusually suggests that " worms shall try, that long-preserved virginity". This powerful image is apparently a shock tactic aimed to present an unattractive alternative to his proposition as " it is typical that metaphors use concrete images to convey something abstract, helping to communicate what is hard to explain"[4] (14d). The reader sees this as Marvell criticising the seducer because the comment is so counterproductive that it is likely to defer the potential lover with its cynical almost horrific image but the speaker is manipulating her to think that a dreadful occurrence would become her if she did not succumb to his will. Therefore the response of the representative hyperbole (that if she rejects his offer, that she will stay a virgin forever) will be disgusting to her as her virginity would be taken away from worms in the grave anyway. Marvell continues this interestingly elaborate notion of time through critiquing the mistress by stating that her " quaint honour" will " turn to dust" and all her " ashes" will behold his " lust"; this mockery of her possession of her " quaint honour" signifies how when she dies she would have regretted not experiencing such a vital part of life with him so it is important the experience is grabbed now.

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The rhyming between "dust" and "lust" draws absurd comparison between death and love, suggesting that love (or in this case - making love) is such an essential part of life and the relationship of death and love is one of antagonism that would make the seducer want to participate in sexual intercourse with him and so avoid death.

Marvell also personifies time as a "winged chariot hurrying near" "This pattern of concretisation", where we try to capture the essence of an abstraction by recasting it in terms of something more palpable....."[5] (16a) to help us sense a moving vehicle quickening towards us, it is an echo of Apollo's chariot - a reference to classical mythology. The idea of a journey appeals to the reader's kinetic senses as the thought-provoking imagery that time moves and travels would have been current as the invention of the first clock was in 1656, so contemporary readers would have had an immediate understanding of the events described. 'If we make love as I want, it will be momentous' is the speaker's message he wants the final stanza to portray to the mistress, which is evident in his repetition of the imperative "now". This demonstration of his reluctance to wait is also portrayed in the simile "Now let us sport us while we may, and now, like amorous birds of prey", by comparing their companionship to "amorous birds of prey" the narrator creates conflicting ideas in the reader's mind as "amorous" expresses love and "birds of prey" are animals that viscously hunt. This echoes a desperate, savage lust as a hunt or sexual "sport" of freedom showing that "Elaboration involves capturing an existing component of the source domain in an unusual or unconventional way"[6] (17a). "Let us roll all our strength and all our sweetness up into one ball" continues the idea of sex being a

sport and is one of the few images that is genuinely expressed as spirited yet direct and passionate in the form of a metaphor. The fact that this one of the few modest lines in the poem displays how he must not desire a genuine relationship with his mistress and simply wants to use her for sex. Hence Marvell can be seen to use metaphor to criticise the seducer. Conversely, Marvell also reprimands the victim through the seducer as he states " while the youthful hue sits on thy skin like morning dew" symbolising how her youthful appearance (" like morning dew") will diminish as the days develop however these lines of brightness and vitality use antithesis in relation to the rest of the poem which talks of darkness and death. This demonstrates how Marvell is " implicitly criticising the would-be seducer rather than his victim".

" Language is the ultimate form of the construction of symbolic power, the means to stir humanity to pursue conquest." [7] This idea enables Marvell to builds the speaker up, then construct his downfall till with the last couplet showing how much of a lothario he is, hence why " the concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and consequently, the language is metaphorically structured" [8] (22b). Here, I believe, Marvell is showing how the speaker convinces himself that chastity is not as important as passion and desire which demonstrates a " very modern view of chastity". However, he does not simply criticise the speaker on his attempt to seduce a woman as the motif of " Carpe Diem" is interlaced throughout the poem. Marvell acknowledges the inevitability of death and how instead of becoming morally constrained human-beings we should all ' seize the day'.

[1] Critical Anthology: The importance of metaphor [2] Chapter 1: The presence and power of metaphors [3] Critical Anthology: The importance of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson(1980) Metaphors we live by [4] Critical Anthology: The importance of metaphor [5] Critical Anthology: The importance of metaphor, Knowles and Moon (2006) Introducing metaphor [6] Critical Anthology: The importance of metaphor, Knowles and Moon (2006) Introducing metaphor [7] Chapter 1: The presence and power of metaphors [8] Critical Anthology: The importance of metaphor, Simpson(2004) Stylistics