

# The portrayal of women in to his coy mistress and damon the mower, two poems by a...

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A woman's agency is not something that is given lightly by the male authors who dominate the poetry we've read thus far in class. The portrayed women are individualized solely by the male's attempt to court her; she is defined by the complaints against her and ultimately characterized as a difficult and pain-causing creature. In two poems by Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress" and "Damon the Mower," both narrators hold distinctly different approaches to the object of their desire. This raises questions regarding the difference of women in Marvell's poems—are the women characteristically different in the poems because they themselves are distinct individuals, or are the men simply employing different techniques to reach a common goal? Considerations of these questions suggest that the agency of women in Marvell's poetry is limited by the landscape that he constructs them against—for example, the emphasis to the addressee in "To His Coy Mistress" is primarily on the inevitability of her beauty's decline whilst the woman in "Damon the Mower" reigns as the unconquerable beauty of a landscape he cannot architect. Thus, although each poem features beauty as the woman's primary appeal, varying levels in the women's agency appears due to the difference in approach that each speaker takes in his address.

There is a striking contrast in tone between Marvell's poems. "To His Coy Mistress" practices a restrained, educated tone to impress the speaker's physical desire for the woman. We understand his desire to be predominantly physical because of the arguments he employs: he focuses on her current beauty and hints ominously at its imminent decline to weaken her moral resolve against him: "Thy beauty shall no more be found/Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound/My echoing song" (lines 25-27). By appealing

to her vanity, the speaker is simultaneously reasserting his dominance as a male and inviting her to accept him as worthy of her attentions. During this time, courtship was an opportunity for a woman to prove her chastity, regardless of the intentions of the man. The presence of the “courtier” voice used by the speaker in “To His Coy Mistress” represents his desires as socially acceptable even as he attempts to coax the object of his desires into socially unacceptable actions.

While the speaker in “To His Coy Mistress” cultivates the confident courtier’s approach, Marvell invokes the pastoral in “Damon the Mower” to portray a much more sincere attraction. “Like her fair eyes the day was fair/But scorching like his am’rous care” (lines 5-6) The repetition of the word “fair” invites a double reading, because of the two distinct definitions the word imposes on the trifecta of Juliana, the day, and Damon. While fair most obviously implies that both the girl and the day are lovely, the latent suggestion is that the natural forces of her beauty and his desire are in conflict; as natural as it is for her to be beautiful, so too is it for him to love and want her.

Unlike the tone in “To His Coy Mistress,” “Damon the Mower” suspends its dignity in professions of love in spite of the pain of rejection. “Sharp like his scythe his sorry was/And withered like his hopes the grass” (lines 7-8).

Likening his pain to his mowing tool suggests that Damon anticipates pain as a way of cultivating his love for Juliana in the same way that he cultivates the land—both his love and the grass grow heedless of her rejection and his scythe. Further, although his hopes may be shrunken and pitiful compared to

what they were at the onset, “sharp like his scythe” reminds us that grass is always growing, thus, so too is his desire for Juliana. In this respect then, her role in cutting him down is as necessary as it is for him to cut the grass; her rejections are somehow maintaining his earnest desire for her in the same way that his job maintains the boundless grass.

The role of women rejecting men in Marvell’s poems introduces a determination to women’s agency that frustrates the speakers in different ways; the rejections of both women are not surprising, but it is the difference in the man’s temperament that dictates the trajectory of his desire from that initial rejection. The man in “To His Coy Mistress” utilizes his ability to articulate her feminine attractions that have caught his attention in a way that criticizes her rejection of him as a waste of herself—“For, Lady, you deserve this state/Nor would I love at lower rate/But at my back I always hear/Time’s winged chariot hurrying near” (lines 19-22). Here, he declares that if it were up to him, she should never lose her present attraction and beauty, but he feels obligated to remind her that as appealing as he finds her now, even if he wanted to, Time would ensure that eventually, even he wouldn’t be able to find a physically redeeming quality in her. In doing this, however, the speaker assumes that she feels obligated to her beauty before her morals, an insinuation that is not present in “Damon the Mower.”

While both speakers in Marvell’s poems construct their desirous verses around the beauty of the woman, the superficiality of their attraction actually portrays the women as having agencies distinct from the men’s design on them. For example, although both women in the poems are rejecting the

men, their manner in doing so reflects differing priorities. “ And you should, if you please, refuse/Till the conversion of the Jews (lines 9-10). The addressee in “ To His Coy Mistress” is clearly emphasizing her desire to remain virtuous despite his advances to her. Although he attempts to withhold granting her agency by writing on his responses to her rejections, which are never explicitly described, the continuous stream of arguments he uses implies a steadfast determination on her part to repeatedly deny him even as he rebounds with reasons she should accept him. Further, the speaker’s single-minded focus on her beauty rejects the notion that he is attracted to her on any other grounds, which causes his argument to escalate in ridiculousness and eloquence as he likens his lust to ash in the event that her beauty fades (although this argument is neatly veiled in his concern over her dying a virgin—lines 28-32).

Ironically, it seems that it is the superficiality of the speaker’s attraction to the woman in “ To His Coy Mistress” that grants her agency. As determined as he is to seduce her into transgression of society’s values, she is equally as adamant in her refusal of him. Based on his repetitive, reworded sentiments, we can infer that he appeals to her vanity in the hope that her fear of declining societal value due to age outweighs her fear of being devalued in the eyes of society as immoral and unchaste. “ Had we but world enough, and time/This coyness, Lady, were no crime (lines 1-2). From the very onset of this poem, the speaker seeks to rewrite the lady’s values as they have been written to her by society, making his argument so extensive because of the careful unraveling he must do to the very expectations that men such as

himself impose on women they wish to marry. Though it is clear that he has no intention of marrying the addressee in his poem, he is clearly attempting to manipulate the standard in a way that convinces her to acquiesce to him—he invokes the excitement and necessity in “breaking the rule” rather than making her an exception to it.

The speaker in “Damon the Mower” is much more willing to grant the woman in his poem agency. Though it remains to be examined if his motives are truly any purer than those of the other speaker, from the very onset of the poem, the addressee wields power as an identified individual: Juliana. Although it can be argued that the speaker in “To His Coy Mistress” refrained from identifying the object of his desire by name so as to protect her, the superficiality of his attraction to her indicates no thought for her beyond his immediate desire. On the other hand, Damon’s inclusion of her name gives Juliana liberal agency from the onset of the poem. “Hark how the mower Damon sung/With love of Juliana stung! (lines 1-2). The elements at play in these two lines imply the attraction Damon feels for Juliana as far more complex than that which the speaker in “To His Coy Mistress” felt. Further, the prominence of the pastoral throughout the story serves to both naturalize his attraction to her on the grounds that he is powerless against the forces of nature as well as introduce a purity to his attractions. Nomenclature serves to enhance Juliana’s agency in a way that is impossible due to the absence of one in “To His Coy Mistress.”

Naturalizing his attraction to Juliana casts Damon in a particularly sympathetic light. Naturalizing the feelings that Juliana elicits from him also

allows him to liberally metaphorize her character against the backdrop of a literal landscape, a consequence of which is that she claims a potent agency throughout the poem: “ Tell me where I may pass the fires/Of the hot day, or hot desires (lines 25-26). Here, Damon’s command to Juliana is rendered a plea by the inclusion of the phrase “ I may,” which requires Juliana to participate in an exchange with him to move the poem forward. We are told of a refusal on her part in his exclamation—“ Alas! I look for ease in vain” (line 29)—but what makes her rejection so poignant is that even after it has happened, Damon confesses that he cannot return to his previous state, that is, he cannot rest easy, as a consequence of her rejection.

A shift in power from Damon to Juliana occurs in the presence of the snake Damon weaves into the poem—“ Only the snake, that kept within/Now glitters in its second skin” (lines 15-16)—and then ties off a few lines later: “ To thee the harmless snake I bring/Disarmed of its teeth and sting” (lines 35-36). Not only has Juliana successfully recognized Damon’s redoubled efforts towards her, if we read the snake as a metaphor for Damon then it is evident that Juliana also recognizes that Damon threatens her simply by virtue of his maleness, which is encapsulated by the “ teeth and sting.” Essentially, Damon is much more physically powerful than her, a fact that he acknowledges and seeks to alleviate her preoccupation with by disarming the snake (himself). By straightforwardly baring his intentions, Damon furthers Juliana’s agency as holding not only the decision to cut him down, but also as a judge of his own qualities, through which he invokes potent

imagery of his relationship with nature in the hope that she will concede that his desire for her is pure before it is natural.

Although women's agency is present in both of Marvell's poems, it is clear that it is conditionally granted. The speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" constrains the woman's agency to the superficiality of his own attraction to her (her power of choice is, rather depressingly, between dying a virgin and allowing him to have her). In "Damon the Mower," Damon shapes his attraction to Juliana against the sting of her rejections, a sentiment that is veiled from us in "To His Coy Mistress." Rather than weakening Damon's verse though, the vulnerability he displays as a product of her rejection actually serves to heighten the tension between him and Juliana. The absence of any speaker vulnerability in "To His Coy Mistress" ultimately detracts from his argument to the addressee, particularly because he emphasizes her beauty in an exploitative manner that severely limits her agency. The prominence of beauty in both of Marvell's poems thus determines the type of agency the women possess; it is not a matter of them possessing any agency inasmuch as the approach of the speaker grants them certain levels of autonomy.