

To his coy virgins



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The concept of *carpe diem* or “seize the day” is a popular poetic credo. Seventeenth century poets Andrew Marvell and Robert Herrick address *carpe diem* by admonishing young virgins against coyness and procrastination. Despite differences in device, motive, and narrative voice, Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” and Herrick’s “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time” are unified by an urgent message. This message emphasizes that a young girl should utilize the gift of youth while she is still able, or she will later regret having not lived. More specifically, the virgin should not remain chaste her entire life, and should relinquish her virginity while young so she does not cheat herself out of the pleasures of youth. The two poems share much imagery. Both poets personify the sun and time as looming reminders of mortality. Marvell sees the sun as life’s adversary, and asks his mistress to challenge fleeting time by living deliberately with him, “Thus, though we cannot make our sun/Stand still, yet we will make him run” (45-46). Herrick takes a more passive approach to the sun, seeing it as a mark of time’s inevitable passage, “The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun/The higher he’s a getting/The sooner will his race be run/And nearer he’s to setting” (5-8). Herrick and Marvell also approach the entity of time differently. In the first half of “To His Coy Mistress” the speaker makes glorious promises on the hypothetical basis of having an eternity to fulfill them: “Had we but world enough and time/This coyness, Lady, were no crime” (1-2). However, after the speaker records his extensive list of noble intentions, he claims it is impossible to act upon them because “...at my back I always hear/Time’s winged chariot hurrying near/And yonder all before us lie/Deserts of vast eternity” (21-24). In contrast, Herrick does not use the image of time as a manipulating force. He actually encourages the virgins to live as they see fit,

as long as they acknowledge the existence of time and intend to utilize it, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may/Old Time is still a flying" (1-2). It is apparent that Marvell takes a negative, urgent approach to these images while Herrick is calm, passive and somewhat didactic. The speakers in these two poems have different, but not necessarily opposing, agendas. Herrick seems to take the role of a sage, giving advice to a younger generation of women, not one particular girl. The speaker in Marvell's poem is specifically addressing his mistress, with the ulterior motive of winning her virginity. His poetry, filled with promises and pleas, has the blatant intent of seduction. In the latter half of "To His Coy Mistress," the speaker invokes grotesque images of the grave, worms, and dust to as a desperate attempt to intimidate his obstinate mistress into acquiescence, "...then worms shall try/That long preserved virginity/And your quaint honor turn to dust, and into ashes all my lust" (27-30). In addition to extensive flattery, Marvell resorts to playing on his mistress' fear of death in order to seduce her. His message: The only fate worse than death is dying a virgin. He ignores all repercussions of immediate physical consummation, and only acknowledges the backlash of never acting upon sexual desire, which is an odd inversion of conventional morality. Interestingly enough, Marvell does not once mention the prospect of marriage in this poem. The reader is left wondering how noble his intent truly is. From a philosophical standpoint, one could say that Marvell is "seizing the day," living in the immediate present, and viewing each moment as an isolated chance for happiness with no bearing on the future. However, It is clear that the notion of carpe diem is merely a cheap, self-serving concept for this speaker, who could possibly be a mindless hedonist. Herrick also warns virgins against coyness, but to his merit, the last stanza

recommends the virgins to “...while ye may, go marry” (14). Both poets use metaphors and a constant, predictable rhyme scheme. Herrick’s metaphors, such as the gathering of rosebuds, are very conventional, yet effective. Interestingly, he does not use simile. The effect is that the speaker appears less seductive or flattering than Marvell’s. Rather, Herrick’s tone is more didactic. Marvell’s language is overflowing with excessive, hyperbolic metaphor and simile. The majority of his images are quite grandiose, such as “ My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires and more slow” (11-12). Marvell is normally classified as a metaphysical poet, and many of his far-fetched metaphors, like “ vegetable love,” are characteristic of this movement. For rhyme scheme, Herrick’s uses abab, while Marvell uses the simple rhyming couplet, aabb, etc. Yet, unlike the near-perfect rhyme in “ To the Virgins...” there are two couplets in “ To His Coy Mistress” where slant rhyme occurs. Lines 23 and 24 rhyme “ lie” and “ eternity”; lines 27 and 28 couple “ try” and “ virginity.” Both “ To His Coy Mistress” and “ To the Virgins” deal with the progression of carpe diem as an ideal for a young woman who still possesses her virginity. The former poem’s approach is seductive and self-interested, and the latter is more didactic. Yet both end with the implicit message of “ seize the day, or you shall wither away!” Robert Herrick’s closing lines, “ For having lost but once your prime/You may forever tarry” (15-16) express this sentiment perfectly, implying that excessive coyness will result in a limbo, and a loss of life and love.