# To His Coy Mistress

## POEM TEXT

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.
    But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
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 quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust;
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.
    Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,
And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

## SUMMARY

If we had all the time in the world, your prudishness wouldn't be a problem. We would sit together and decide how to spend the day. You would walk by the river Ganges in India and find rubies; I would walk by the river Humber in England and write my poems. I would love you from the very start of time, even before the Biblical Flood; you could refuse to consummate our relationship all the way until the apocalypse. My slow-growing love would gradually become bigger than the largest empires. I would spend a hundred years praising your eyes and gazing at your forehead and two hundred years on each of your breasts. I would dedicate thirty thousand years to the rest of your body and give an era of human history to each part of you. In the final age, your heart would reveal itself. Lady, you deserve this kind of dedication—and I don't want to accept any lesser kind of love.

But I am always aware of time, the way it flies by. For us, the future will be a vast, unending desert for all of time. Your beauty will be lost. In the grave, my songs in praise of you will no longer be heard. And worms will take the virginity you so carefully protected during life. Your honor will turn to dust and my desire will turn to ashes. The grave may be a quiet, private place—but no one has sex there.

Therefore, while your beauty sits right at the surface of your skin, and every pore of your body exudes erotic passion, let's have sex while we can. Let's devour time like lovesick birds of prey instead of lying about letting time eat away at us. Let's put together our strength and our sweetness and use it as a weapon against the iron gates of life. We may not be able to defeat time in this way, but at least we can make it work hard to take us.

## THEMES

### LOVE AND DEATH

"To His Coy Mistress" is a love poem: it celebrates beauty, youth, and sexual pleasure. However, the

speaker of the poem is haunted by mortality. Though he imagines a luxuriously slow love that takes thousands of years to reach consummation, he knows such a thing is impossible: he will die before it can be accomplished. Death cannot be delayed or defeated; the only response to death, according to the speaker, is to enjoy as much pleasure as possible before it comes. He urges the woman he loves not to wait, to enjoy the pleasures of life without restraint. The poem draws a contrast between two kinds of love: the full, rich love that would be possible if everyone lived forever, and the rushed, panicked love that mortal beings are forced to enjoy.

The first stanza of the poem poses a question and explores a hypothetical world: what would love be like if humans had infinite time to love? In response, the speaker imagines a world of unlimited pleasure. For example, he describes his mistress finding precious stones on the banks of the Ganges; he describes himself spending two hundred years praising a single part of her body.

The key to this paradise, then, is that the normal limitations of human life have been removed. The sheer length of the mistress's and the speaker's lives allows them to delay consummation of their love indefinitely: the speaker announces that his mistress might "refuse / 'Till the conversion of the Jews"—which, in the Christian theology of Marvell's time, was expected to occur during the biblical Last Days. In this ideal world, the speaker feels no urgency to consummate their relationship.

The speaker has no questions about whether his mistress deserves this long courtship, but he does have qualms about its viability. He is, he notes at the start of stanza 2, always conscious of the passage of time—and thus of the fact that both he and his mistress will eventually die. Stanza 2 diverges from the beautiful dream of stanza 1, reflecting instead on the pressing, inescapable threat of death.

Death, as the speaker imagines it, is the opposite of the paradise presented in stanza 1: instead of endless pleasure, it offers "deserts of vast eternity." The speaker's view of death is secular; he is not afraid of going to Hell or being punished for his sins. Instead, he fears death because it cuts short his and his mistress's capacity to enjoy each other. In death, he complains, her beauty will be lost and—unless she consents to have sex before she dies—her virginity will be taken by worms. The language of this stanza is grotesque. This is a poem of seduction, but it feels profoundly unsexy. The speaker's horror of death overshadows his erotic passion, but it also makes the speaker seem more sincere: while at first it might seem that the speaker is saying all these things primarily because he just wants to have some sex, the despair in the poem implies that the speaker's arguments are not mere rhetorical statements but rather deeply held beliefs and fears.

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker finally announces his core argument: since death is coming—and since it will strip away the pleasures of the flesh—his mistress should agree to have sex with him soon. What's more, he imagines that their erotic "sport" will offer compensation for the pain and suffering of life. "Our pleasures," he argues, will tear through "the iron gates of life." Though he does not imagine that their pleasure will defeat death, he does believe that pleasure is the only reasonable response to death. Indeed, he even says that enjoying pleasure is a way to defy death. However, the grotesque language of stanza 2 may overwhelm the poem's insistence on the power of pleasure. If sexuality is a way to contest the power of death, it nonetheless seems—even in the speaker's own estimation—that death is an overwhelming, irresistible force.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-46

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*Had we but world enough and time,*
*This coyness, lady, were no crime.*

In the first two lines of "To His Coy Mistress," the poem establishes its form and its central concern. The speaker addresses someone directly, whom he calls "Lady." (This introduces one of the poem's key devices, apostrophe: the rest of the poem will be an apostrophiac address to the Lady). His tone is familiar, teasing, and also a bit stern. Though the speaker seems to know the Lady well, he nonetheless disapproves of her choices, and wants to convince her to change, to live differently. The lady that the speaker address is the same woman mentioned in the title, "His Coy Mistress." The word "mistress" means something different now than it did in Marvell's time. Though contemporary speakers use the word to describe a woman who has an affair with a married man, Marvell uses the word in a much more general sense: it simply describes a woman who holds authority of some kind, such as a female head of household.

The reader may wonder what authority the mistress of Marvell's poem holds. It's a tricky question to answer, because the poem doesn't tell its readers much about her. In fact, at most, the reader knows that she is "coy:" she is flirtatious, but she has refused the speaker's advances. The speaker begins the poem by reproaching her for doing so. He emphasizes, though, that her reticence and delay is not a crime in and of itself: if the two "had...world enough and time" it would be perfectly acceptable. In other words, if both the speaker and the mistress were immortal, then the mistress could flirt and delay as long as she wanted to. But, the speaker implies, since they are not immortal—since they can and will die, perhaps soon—it is a

"crime" to delay, to flirt, as the mistress has seemingly done in the past.

The first two lines stand as a formal unit. Each line is in flawless iambic tetrameter, and the lines rhyme with each other in an AA scheme. Further, the first line introduces a thought which the second line completes. This establishes a pattern for the poem: the speaker's thoughts often fall into two-line rhyming units, or couplets. When they do not—that is, when a thought ends halfway through the second line or continues into a third—this is a potentially significant variation in the formal structure of the poem. The poem binds together the various concepts it introduces in these opening lines through alliteration, for example using a repeated /w/ sound, which stretches into line 4. The opening lines of the poem also establish the poem's logical structure, which is a syllogism: introducing its major premise: if we had all the time in the world to love each other, you could be as coy as you want.

## LINES 3-7

*We would sit down, and think which way*
*To walk, and pass our long love's day.*
*Thou by the Indian Ganges' side*
*Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide*
*Of Humber would complain.*

In lines 3-7, the speaker begins an extended thought experiment: what would love be like if human beings did live forever—that is, if he and his mistress had "world enough and time"? In response to this implicit question, the speaker describes a luxurious, utopian world, spending most of the first stanza mapping it out, outlining its pleasures, and presenting his idea of what ideal love should look like. In the first section of this thought experiment, he focuses on his and his mistress's activities: what they would do in a world without death.

He describes them wandering over the face of the earth, sampling its pleasures and luxuries. His mistress goes all the way to the Ganges River in India—just about as far from England as one could get in the 17th century. And he employs rich patterns of assonance and consonance through these lines, which intensifies their luxurious, musical feel. Meanwhile, the speaker remains closer to home, spending his time by the Humber River in East Yorkshire, near Marvell's real-life home. The two lovers thus spread out across the world—but the distance between them is no issue in this paradise. Notably, however, the speaker has not given up "complaining," as he notes in line 6. The speaker uses the word "complain" in an unusual sense, at least to modern readers. He does not mean that he will spend eternity whining; rather, he will be writing love poems, often called "complaints" in the period. This is an important note, which the speaker picks up in the lines that follow. Love poetry is important to his idea of paradise; indeed, only in such a paradise can love poetry be fully realized.

The poem's form continues to be regular through the end of line four: once again, lines 3 and 4 rhyme with each other and follow iambic tetrameter. Though the steady meter and rhyme continue through lines 5-7, the organization of thought becomes a little bit looser: instead of introducing and concluding each thought in two lines, the speaker pauses in the midst of line 6 and completes his thought one foot short of the end of line 7. Despite the pleasures these lines describe, there is a bit of awkwardness to them, as though they don't quite fit—and, in fact, the way that the thought ends before the completing of line 7 means the pleasures actually physically don't fit—which underlines, perhaps, the extent to which this is a fantasy, rather than an achievable reality.

## LINES 7-12

*I would*
*Love you ten years before the flood,*
*And you should, if you please, refuse*
*Till the conversion of the Jews.*
*My vegetable love should grow*
*Vaster than empires and more slow;*

In lines 7-12, the speaker continues to imagine what love would be like if he and his mistress could live forever. In the previous lines, he meditated on their activities, imagining them wandering the earth in search of luxurious pleasures. In lines 7-10, by contrast, he imagines the duration of their love, radically extending their relationship. Under normal conditions, a relationship between people might last—at most—sixty or seventy years. By contrast, the speaker employs hyperbole to imagine that, in a world without death, he and his mistress would be able to love each other for all of recorded history, beginning "ten years before the flood" and stretching to "the conversion of the Jews"—which, in the Christian theology popular during Marvell's lifetime, was supposed to happen during the Last Days, immediately before the Second Coming of Christ and the End of Time.

Notably, the speaker frames his love in Biblical terms, alluding to Biblical history—from the flood to the Second Coming—as his reference points for the duration of their love affair. This religious engagement is largely missing from the later parts of the poem. And in lines 11-12, the speaker swerves away from these Biblical references. Emphasizing again the duration and intensity of their love in a world without death, he uses metaphor to compare his love to a slow-growing "vegetable" and claims that it will eventually be larger than an empire. Rather than make a Biblical reference, here the speaker instead compares his love to man-made political entities—though the political too largely disappears from the later parts of the poem.

With infinite time to love each other, the speaker has no problem with the mistress's refusal: she can continue to put him off, turn him down, as long as she wants. That is, the extended duration of their relationship allows the speaker to tolerate the mistress's coyness. Though this might serve as an

opportunity to give the readers more information about the mistress, the speaker declines to do so: the reader learns only that she will continue to refuse indefinitely. Instead of learning who she is, what she likes, what she's interested in, she continues to be defined exclusively through her refusal—that is, in relation to the man who wants to sleep with her.

After the slight disruption in the structure of lines 5-7, the poem regains its footing in lines 7-12. After the end of line 7, the poem once again falls into two-line units, each featuring end rhyme and iambic tetrameter—and each two line unit introducing and concluding a new thought.

## LINES 13-18

*An hundred years should go to praise*
*Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;*
*Two hundred to adore each breast,*
*But thirty thousand to the rest;*
*An age at least to every part,*
*And the last age should show your heart.*

In lines 13-18, the speaker tells the reader, in detail, how he would spend eternity if his love for his mistress could extend forever. The reader has already received some hints along these lines: for example, in line 7, the speaker announces that he will spend his eternal life "complaining"—that is, writing love poems. But in lines 13-18, the speaker gives the reader—and his mistress—a sense of what those love poems will be like. He will spend, he announces, once again employing hyperbole, a hundred years praising her eyes, a hundred gazing on her forehead, two hundred "adoring" each of her breasts, and thirty thousand years in, total, on the rest of her body.

The speaker's description here closely resembles an important tradition in Renaissance poetry, the blazon. In a blazon, a poet praises a woman's body by comparing each part of it, separately, to something beautiful: her hair is like a golden net; her teeth are like pearls, etc. Though the blazon purports to offer dazzling praise, many readers in the Renaissance and since have been disturbed by the gesture: the way it breaks a woman's body into separate pieces, makes them into objects, and then reassembles them. The result feels potentially grotesque: imagine if a woman really did have pearls for teeth and golden wire for hair (Shakespeare himself mocked the blazon in his Sonnet 130 by *refusing* to compare his mistress to beautiful objects)! The speaker of Marvell's poem does not go quite so far as a typical blazon in describing his mistress. He does not tell us what his mistress's eyes look like, for example—merely that he will study them for an extended, super-human period. But the results are similar. In place of meaningful information about the mistress—what she looks like, who she is—the speaker gives the reader information about his own desires. He wants to gaze, adore, describe; he requires, presumably, the mistress to remain quiet, pliant, and still while he conducts his extended survey of her body. Only at the end of time, the "last age" will "show your heart."

The poem continues its formal regularity through these lines, falling easily into iambic tetrameter and rhymed couplets, the first line of which introduces a thought that the next completes. This formal smoothness gives the poem a feeling of skill and inevitability. Further, each of the lines is an end-stopped line, so the reader is invited to pause and contemplate each of the speaker's proposals. Though the speaker is imagining a utopia, a world without death, the standard modes of love poetry in his culture continue to operate in that utopia. In other words, the utopia the speaker imagines does not significantly challenge the norms of gender, sexuality, or poetic practice that dominate the speaker's culture.

## LINES 19-22

*For, lady, you deserve this state,*
*Nor would I love at lower rate.*
*But at my back I always hear*
*Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;*

In lines 19-20, the speaker ends his long digression, wrapping up his fantasy about what love would be like in a world without death. He does so by once again addressing his mistress directly. He assures her that she deserves nothing less than the luxurious love he has described—and he insists that, if it were up to him, he would give her such love. The implication, however, is clear: he *cannot* give her such love, and so she must accept a less than ideal form of love. With that, the first stanza of the poem comes to a close. The first stanza of the poem is 20 lines long—and it might seem initially that the poem will fall into units of twenty lines. However, the next two stanzas are shorter. The poem is not organized in a predictable stanza structure. Rather, it's set up as an argument: it follows an "if...but...then" structure. The first stanza presents the "if:" "If we lived forever we could wait as long as you want before having sex."

The second stanza starts the next phase of the poem's syllogism, unfolding its minor premise and, with it, the speaker's objections to the major premise: "But we won't live forever." In fact, the speaker announces in lines 21-22, he is always aware of time, the way it flies by, carrying him and his mistress toward the grave. He uses a strange and original image to convey his understanding of time: it is (or has) a "wingèd chariot." This is an allusion to two separate traditions for representing time. Though it was traditional to represent time as a being with wings—and though it was also traditional to portray it riding in a chariot—no one prior to Marvell is known to have combined the two images. Placed together, they intensify each other. Not only does time ride in a chariot, a proverbially speedy vehicle, but that chariot also has wings—making it even faster and more inevitable. The allusions also personify time: giving it power and agency, and making it all the more terrifying.

As the speaker moves from stanza 1 to stanza 2, and his

argument shifts from "If" to "But," the form of the poem remains relatively steady. Lines 19-20 follow the pattern the poem has established, featuring rhymed couplets in iambic tetrameter. However, the entrance of "Time" in line 22 seems to disrupt this rhythm. Line 22 maintains the iambic tetrameter, but only barely; the words "chariot" and "hurrying" both appear to have three syllables, which would interrupt the meter completely. Both can actually be pronounced with two syllables (think "chair-yet" and "hurr-ying") to maintain the line's meter, but these words' appearance gives the reader an impression of trying to fit too much into a small space—just as the speaker is trying to fit his love into a life that's too short.

## LINES 23-27

*And yonder all before us lie*
*Deserts of vast eternity.*
*Thy beauty shall no more be found;*
*Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound*
*My echoing song;*

In lines 23-27, the speaker begins to articulate the consequences of being mortal. He and his mistress will not live forever; they cannot enjoy the slow, luxurious kind of love he describes in stanza 1. Indeed, he suggests in these lines, just the opposite awaits them. Instead of wandering the earth and sampling its riches, they can expect vast deserts for all of eternity: bleak, unchanging, desolate. Instead of slowly surveying his mistress's beauty over the course of more than thirty thousand years, the speaker will watch her beauty disappear, claimed by aging and death. And once she is in the grave, he will no longer be able to praise her beauty in his poems. The world that the speaker and his mistress live in is thus almost exactly the opposite of the world he imagines in stanza 1. (And it is a remarkably secular world: he does not imagine a Christian afterlife for either himself or his mistress. She will not live on in heaven—or in hell. Instead, she and her body will lie in the grave, unredeemed).

Point by point, the speaker tests his fantasy against a bitter reality. The implication of this reality, as the speaker describes it, is relatively clear: given the future that awaits them, the mistress's coyness *is* a crime. She should stop refusing and give in to his advances. But the speaker does not make this implication explicit until stanza 3. Instead, he devotes the rest of stanza 2 to elaborating on the point he makes here, dwelling with horrified fascination on the fact of death and its effects on the body.

What is perhaps most striking about these lines, then, is how beautiful they are: even as the speaker describes horrifying, eternal desolation, he uses elegant and mellifluous language to do so, employing assonance and consonance. One might expect the form of the poem to change as it engages with death, but lines 23-27 are fairly regular: rhyming couplets of iambic tetrameter. However, there is a slight disturbance in lines 26-27; the thought the speaker begins at the start of line 26 comes to an abrupt end in the midst of line 27, an example of caesura. Here the speaker breaks the poem's underlying pattern—where each thought occupies two lines—and the use of caesura emphasizes the violence he describes here: he is imagining the abrupt end of his own poems.

The formal continuity between the first two stanzas suggests two things at once. First, it underlines that—different as the stanzas are—they are all part of one larger argument, a broader attempt to seduce the mistress. Second, it suggests that the speaker's fascination with death is just as powerful as his fantasies about eternal life, and that the goal of his attempted seduction is not simply to get his mistress into bed, but rather a more profound defiance in the face of inevitable death.

## LINES 27-32

*then worms shall try*
*That long-preserved virginity,*
*And your quaint honour turn to dust,*
*And into ashes all my lust;*
*The grave's a fine and private place,*
*But none, I think, do there embrace.*

In lines 23-27, the speaker outlines the consequences of living—and loving—in a world where both he and his mistress will die. In lines 27-32, he continues that grotesque and upsetting meditation, focusing and intensifying his anxiety about death until it reaches a state of intense hyperbole. He began the stanza by considering the effects of death on beauty and poetry. He ends it by focusing on its effects on sexuality. He starts by thinking about the mistress and her sexuality, revealing in the process an important detail about her: she is a virgin and she has preserved her virginity for a long time. (At least, it seems like a long time to the speaker—the mistress may feel otherwise). But, he argues, there's no point in remaining a virgin forever. If she does, he notes, in a singularly grotesque rhetorical flourish, then worms will take her virginity when she's in the grave. Her virginity and the honor that comes with it, he argues, are only worthwhile while she's alive—and they're only worthwhile if she cashes them in, exchanging them for some particularly rich pleasure.

The speaker applies the same standard to himself: just as the mistress's honor will turn to dust, so too will his erotic desire turn into ashes. Death, for both of them, marks the end of sexual pleasure. Here the speaker pointedly breaks from one of the cherished clichés of his culture: a culture in which "to die" was often a euphemism for orgasm. For Marvell's speaker, death is not the image of sexual pleasure, but rather its opposite. In case the reader—or the mistress—has missed his point, he makes it explicit in the final two lines of the stanza. Though a grave might seem like the perfect place—quiet and private—no one has sex there.

The speaker's tone throughout these lines is grotesque.

Though he seems, at points, to be joking, his jokes are unsettling—particularly in a poem of seduction. In these lines, it seems as though the speaker may actually be interested in shocking—and mocking—his mistress rather than seducing her; indeed, even as he threatens that worms will take her virginity, he also makes light of her commitment to preserving it. As his rhetoric becomes increasingly mocking and grotesque, however, he maintains the smooth flow of his verse. These lines fall easily into iambic tetrameter couplets, the speaker's ideas divided naturally into the couplets, and they contain elegant plays of sound—particularly assonance, in their repeated /a/ sound. Though his lines might disturb the reader and the mistress, the speaker seems to remain unfazed by the grotesque argument he makes here.

## LINES 33-37

*Now therefore, while the youthful hue*
*Sits on thy skin like morning dew,*
*And while thy willing soul transpires*
*At every pore with instant fires,*
*Now let us sport us while we may,*

In the first stanza, the speaker poses a hypothetical: what would love be like if he and his mistress lived forever? In the second stanza, he explains why that kind of love is impossible, emphasizing their shared mortality in grotesque terms. In the final stanza of the poem, he reaches the final part of his syllogism and presents his conclusion: the outcome of the argument he's been slowly building over the previous two stanzas. His mistress, he argues in lines 33-37, cannot afford to wait one moment longer. She should have sex with him immediately: "Now let us sport us while we may," the speaker insists.

In making this argument, the speaker focuses once again on the mistress's body, describing how it looks to him with a slightly ominous simile: it is so young and beautiful it looks like morning dew. (Like morning dew, it will evaporate shortly). And, in a complex pair of lines (35-36), he suggests that it exudes sexual desire. Her "willing soul transpires"—that is, it escapes like steam rising from a vent—through her pores. This is a revealing suggestion. The speaker assumes (perhaps with reason) that his mistress is not entirely sincere in her refusals; she is full of sexual desire. Hence, perhaps, his use of the word "coy" in the title and the first stanza of the poem: the word implies a certain amount of calculation and perhaps deceit. The speaker evidently regards her refusal as part of a game; he thinks she's playing hard to get. The reader has no opportunity to evaluate whether the speaker is correct in his evaluation: since the mistress never speaks, and since the speaker hardly describes her, the reader has only the speaker's word to go on.

This is a key moment in the poem: where the speaker finally makes his case. On a formal level, the speaker manages the moment with skill, maintaining rhymed couplets in steady iambic tetrameter. Further, lines 33-36 form natural two-line pairs, the first line of each pair introducing a new thought and the second line completing it. Line 37, however, stands on its own—fittingly, since it is, in a sense, the poem's thesis statement. The speaker breaks the rhetorical organization of the poem up to this moment to emphasize this line and its message.

## LINES 38-40

*And now, like amorous birds of prey,*
*Rather at once our time devour*
*Than languish in his slow-chapped power.*

In line 37, the speaker presents the thesis statement of the poem: "Now let us sport us while we may." Over the next 9 lines, the speaker explains why he and his mistress should indulge in sensual pleasures immediately, offering a series of reasons. In lines 38-40, he lays out his first reason. Using a simile to comparing himself and his mistress to "birds of prey"—i.e. a hawk or an eagle—he argues they should be as vicious and voracious as such birds, "devouring" their time on earth, rather than daintily picking at it. Though they remain implicit, the speaker seems to expand his anxieties about mortality here. Not only do he and his mistress have a limited time on earth, but they may actually shorten it by indulging in pleasure together. The speaker draws here on widespread beliefs in Renaissance medicine, which held that some kinds of sexual activity could weaken or diminish the body, particularly the bodies of men.

Nevertheless, the speaker thinks it's worth the risk: the alternative is horrifying. If they don't devour their time on earth, time itself will slowly consume them: they will languish in its jaws as it slowly breaks their bodies apart. Better to get it over with quickly—and better to be the ones devouring, rather than the ones who are devoured. The speaker thus advances an almost cynical, nihilistic position here: he recognizes that death is coming for him no matter what, so it's better to enjoy himself as much as possible before it comes. He does not hold out hope for relief from death—through, for example, Christian salvation. Indeed, as elsewhere in the poem, there seems no possibility of an afterlife.

Following line 37, which stands on its own conceptually, the three lines from 38-40 of the poem form a single unit conceptual unit, breaking from the two-line pattern the speaker upholds elsewhere in the poem. Nevertheless, the lines are otherwise smooth and formally regular. Whatever anxiety lies underneath it, the speaker maintains his composure as he makes this desperate and disturbing comparison.

## LINES 41-46

*Let us roll all our strength and all*
*Our sweetness up into one ball,*
*And tear our pleasures with rough strife*

*Through the iron gates of life:*
*Thus, though we cannot make our sun*
*Stand still, yet we will make him run.*

In the poem's final six lines, the speaker lays out the last element of his argument, expanding on the simile of the birds of prey in line 38 to offer another reason why the mistress should stop refusing and take the speaker as her lover. He begins in lines 41-44 with a complex and puzzling image: he wants to "roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball." The image is obscure and scholars have dedicated considerable energy to unpacking it, without arriving at consensus. Perhaps most convincingly, it might be taken as an allusion to a speech by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. In that text, Aristophanes argues that human beings were originally shaped like balls, with two heads, four arms, and four legs. However, these ball-people were too strong for their own good and made war on the gods. Zeus, the King of the Gods, responded by splitting them in half, so that human beings spend all their lives looking for their other half, the part of them that was cut off by the gods. Marvell seems to imagine he and his mistress making themselves into such a ball. It is at once a touching image and an obscene one: touching, because he suggests that she is his missing half; obscene, because of course they would create such a united body by having sex.

The speaker then imagines that he and his mistress will challenge the powers that govern their lives, tearing "with rough strife / through the iron gates of life." The image is once again obscure, with scholars debating what, exactly, "the iron gates of life" represent. Some have said that the image likely represents the mistress's virginity and the speaker's plan to deflower her. While this may be true, there are also other suggestions in the line: there seems something suicidal about the act, as though the speaker and his mistress willingly seek out death. The intention seems to be to shock and surprise the forces that govern their lives—forces like time and perhaps death itself. Indeed, in the poem's final couplet, the speaker outlines his grandest ambition: though he and his mistress cannot make time (presented, metonymically, by the sun, whose motion marks the passage of time) stand still, they can shock it, force it to work harder to catch and capture them. Once again, the speaker's position veers into cynicism. He does not imagine being released from time or mortality. Instead, he imagines pleasure as a desperate and temporary refuge from death. As the speaker's thinking turns desperate, however, his verse remains smooth as it has throughout the poem: rhyming couplets in iambic tetrameter, each couplet with its own thought. Part of the poem's charm, then, lies in the way its sauve, urbane surface contrasts with its dark undertones—undertones the speaker is barely able to control.

## SYMBOLS

### HEART

The speaker spends much of stanza 1 imagining that he will spend eternity slowly, luxuriously describing and praising each part of his mistress's body. His focus is on physical features and physical beauty: her forehead, eyes, and breasts. In line 18, however, the speaker turns to the mistress's "heart." One hopes this is not literal: that he does not plan to cut into her chest and describe the organ itself. Rather, the heart functions symbolically here, representing the mistress's innermost character. The use of the symbol—and the timing of its introduction—suggest some important things about the utopian world the speaker imagines in this stanza. In this world, the mistress can delay revealing her true self until the very end of time. Though the speaker continues to love her, passionately, she does not have to reciprocate until she's good and ready. It also suggests something about what's at stake for the speaker: he wants to have his mistress's heart, hinting at a genuine romantic love rather than simple lust. This is a rather chaste desire: the rest of the poem is much more explicit. The speaker withholds the full force of his desire here, early in the poem, restraining his more sexual ambitions until much later.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 18:** "heart."

### DESERTS OF VAST ETERNITY

In line 24, the speaker compares death to "deserts of vast eternity." The deserts he has in mind are not literal spaces. Instead, they represent time itself, symbolically. In using this symbol, the speaker draws on a key tradition in western thought. Deserts are important spaces in western religion and art. In Christianity, for example, the desert is often a space of trial and tribulation. Jesus, for example, is tempted by Satan in the desert. (This temptation forms the subject of a poem by Marvell's close friend, John Milton—*Paradise Regained*). And the early saints of Christianity often retreated to the desert to attain spiritual clarity and to live free of sin.

Marvell's speaker, however, consciously rejects this tradition: instead of being a space of religious meaning, it is a blank and empty space, devoid of pleasure, devoid of content. It does not contain either the punishment or the paradise that Christians expect after death. It belongs, in other words, to a surprisingly secular worldview: one in which death is an absolute end with nothing beyond it. This view of the world suits Marvell's speaker, since he wants to convince his mistress to have sex with him immediately, without saving her honor for the afterlife. The desert thus symbolizes the speaker's nihilistic,

even atheistic beliefs about the afterlife, and it also marks the extent to which he has turned his back on the traditional images of Christianity.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 24:** "Deserts of vast eternity"

### DUST AND ASHES

At the end of stanza 2, the speaker notes that, in the grave, his mistress's virginity (and the honor it represents) will "turn to dust." Death reduces something vital and living to an inert substance. Dust is an important symbol of death and decay in the history of western thought: for example, casting Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, God announces to them, "For dust thou art and to dust thou shall return." To be mortal, in this Biblical framework, is to be made of dust. Life itself is only a temporary escape from being dust. The speaker extends and even subverts this traditional symbol. In his account, it is not the mistress's body but her honor which is dust. Honor is an abstract concept, a social convention, rather than something physical. But the speaker's use of the symbol suggests that it does have material value. He makes this claim strategically, to support his argument. Honor, he suggests, is just as fragile as the body. Like the body, it will be devoured by death. There is no sense in trying to preserve it, since it will turn to nothing as soon as death comes.

In this sense, the symbol is similar to, but also different from, the "ashes" that appear in the next line. It is traditional to invoke ashes when discussing lust: lust is like a fire, and like a fire it burns out. Like the dust in the previous line, death reduces a vital, living force to an inert substance. However, Marvell is content to employ the symbol of ashes in a relatively traditional way, in contrast to his subversive discussion of dust in the previous line.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 29:** "dust"
- **Line 30:** "ashes"

### MORNING DEW

In line 34, the speaker compares the mistress's youthful skin to "morning dew." Dew is often used as a symbol for youth—and for fragility. Dew is a liquid that appears on plants and grasses in the morning, as the temperature changes. It generally evaporates as the sun rises, disappearing by mid-morning. These properties make it an attractive symbol for poets to use. Human life is often compared to a day, with the morning symbolizing youth and the evening symbolizing old age. The dew seems almost an ideal symbol for youth itself: the way it is beautiful and delicate; the way it evaporates quickly as life progresses. Here, the speaker uses the symbol in this traditional—indeed, almost clichéd—sense.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Line 34:** "morning dew"

## POETIC DEVICES

### PERSONIFICATION

In "To His Coy Mistress" the speaker uses personification to describe time as though it has the human qualities of power, agency, and intelligence. For instance, in line 40 the speaker describes time as having "slow-chapped power"—suggesting that it has the capacity to break things apart. Similarly, in line 22, time is described as having a "wingèd chariot." In the poem, time owns things, moves around, drives horses.

Even as the speaker describes time as an inexorable force, he also describes time as a character, with intelligence and power. In this sense, the poem comes to seem like a drama, a fight between two kinds of intelligence, human and non-human. In this battle, the speaker seems almost ready to concede defeat: as a character, time seems in this poem omnipotent, incapable of being defeated. One might read this as part of the speaker's strategy: he wants to seduce his mistress by showing her she has no better option. But the personification of time also makes its power seem overwhelming, so much so that one might imagine the speaker is making his case so strongly that the mistress's reaction might be one of panic and existential dread, rather than erotic pleasure.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Line 22:** "Time's wingèd chariot "
- **Line 40:** "in his slow-chapped power"
- **Line 46:** "we will make him run"

### METAPHOR

"To His Coy Mistress" contains a number of metaphors. The speaker employs the device to add nuance to his account of love, time, and sexual pleasure, rendering these abstract categories visceral and immediate. For example, in line 23, the speaker describes what awaits him and his mistress: "And yonder all before us lie / Deserts of vast eternity." It's a bleak and affecting image; the speaker suggests that there is no life after death, and therefore no reason to wait to enjoy earthly pleasures. Comparing eternity to a "vast desert," he also suggests that eternity is desolate, dull, and painful—in sharp contrast to the luxurious world without death he imagines in

stanza 1. The use of metaphors like these creates some of the poem's uncanny power. Though the speaker seems to set out with a simple goal in mind—to convince his mistress to sleep with him—his language takes on a life of its own, describing death and time with an unsettling (and unsexy) power.

Similarly, in the poem's final lines the speaker employs a complex and somewhat obscure metaphor that is also an allusion to classical philosophy. First, he instructs his mistress to "roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball." This odd image may be an allusion to Aristophanes's speech in Plato's *Symposium*. Aristophanes argues that humans were originally shaped like balls, with four arms and four legs, before the gods split them in two; now, human beings spend their lives trying to unite with their other halves. It's a sweet and suggestive allusion: it implies that the mistress is the speaker's soulmate; it also suggests that they reunite through sex.

After this allusion, though, the speaker has further instructions: they should "tear our pleasures with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life." It is not entirely clear what the "iron gates of life" represent. Some critics suggest that they represent virginity; others say that they represent the force of death and decay, which prevents the speaker and his mistress from loving each other forever. In either case, it is a painful and disturbing image: the speaker and his mistress may be united as soulmates, but once they come together their activities are violent and rough. As a metaphor, "iron gates of life" underlines the rough, painful, and potentially violent nature of their union—and once again bends the poem away from its ostensibly seductive intent.

**Where Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- **Line 11:** "My vegetable love "
- **Line 18:** "the last age should show your heart"
- **Line 22:** "Time's wingèd chariot"
- **Line 24:** "Deserts of vast eternity"
- **Lines 35-36:** "thy willing soul transpires / At every pore with instant fires"
- **Line 40:** "his slow-chapped power"
- **Lines 41-46:** "Let us roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball, / And tear our pleasures with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life: / Thus, though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run."

## SIMILE

In addition to the metaphors peppered throughout the poem, "To His Coy Mistress" contains two similes in its third stanza. After describing the power of time and the terror of death in the second stanza, the speaker returns, at the start of stanza 3, to describing the mistress's body. Unlike the first stanza, though, this description is not hypothetical: he tells us what she actually looks like. Or, more precisely, he tells the reader what she looks like *to him*: "the youthful hue," he notes in lines 33-4, "sits on thy skin like morning dew." This simile performs a number of tasks at once. First, it tells the reader that the mistress is—or looks—young: her skin is fresh, un-aged. Second, it tells the reader that her youth is evanescent. It may glimmer and shine like the morning dew, but it will evaporate as soon as the sun falls on it. (In this way, it subtly sets up the final two lines of the poem, where the speaker calls on the mistress to challenge "our sun"). Third, it reminds the reader that they encounter the mistress only through the speaker's account of her. Because this is a simile, the reader does not get a literal description of the mistress. Instead, the reader is given a sense of how the speaker sees her.

Later in the stanza, the speaker expresses his ambitions for his union with the mistress: they will "sport" "like amorous birds of prey." Like many of the poem's metaphors, the simile may say more than the speaker intends to. On the one hand, it imagines the speaker and his mistress enjoying sensual pleasure voraciously, like a hawk or eagle consuming its prey. On the other hand, it suggests that there is something violent and predatory about their pleasure. Line 39 heightens this predatory suggestion. The birds of prey do not devour some innocent mouse or vole, but rather "our time": that is, they devour themselves. The speaker thus suggests there is something self-destructive about their pleasure—a terrifying, rather than sexy, image.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 33-34:** "the youthful hue / Sits on thy skin like morning dew"
- **Line 38:** "like amorous birds of prey"

## ALLITERATION

"To His Coy Mistress" is a highly alliterative poem. The speaker uses alliteration to emphasize and underline his argument, building connections between apparently unrelated concepts and categories—connections which allow him to build his case. The reader can see this strategy on display in the opening lines of the poem, where the speaker alliterates on three sounds: *w*, *l*, and *c*:

> Had we but world enough and time,
> This coyness, lady, were no crime.
> We would sit down, and think which way
> To walk, and pass our long love's day.

The pattern of alliteration binds the passage together. For example, the activities the speaker lists in lines 3-4 (walking and sitting) are linked to the opening "we" and "world" by alliteration, emphasizing their conceptual connection. (These are, after all, the things the speaker and his mistress would do if they had "world enough and time"). Likewise, the alliteration of

"coyness" and "crime" suggests that coyness *is* a crime, before the speaker explicitly makes this case. In this sense, alliteration helps the speaker underline his argument and suggest its future direction.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "w," "w"
- **Line 2:** "c," "l," "w," "c"
- **Line 3:** "W," "w," "w," "w"
- **Line 4:** "w," "l," "l"
- **Line 7:** "w," "w"
- **Line 8:** "y," "y"
- **Line 9:** "y"
- **Line 11:** "v"
- **Line 12:** "V"
- **Line 14:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 16:** "th," "th"
- **Line 21:** "B," "b"
- **Line 25:** "sh"
- **Line 26:** "sh"
- **Line 27:** "sh"
- **Line 29:** "A"
- **Line 30:** "A"
- **Line 34:** "S," "s"
- **Line 35:** "s"
- **Line 37:** "s"
- **Line 39:** "o," "o"
- **Line 40:** "l"
- **Line 41:** "L," "a," "a"
- **Line 44:** "l"
- **Line 45:** "m"
- **Line 46:** "m"

## ASSONANCE

"To His Coy Mistress" generates much of its charm—and its persuasiveness—from the sheer pleasure of its language, which is bright and musical throughout. Alongside its use of alliteration and consonance, the speaker uses assonance to generate this linguistic music. For example, in lines 4-5, the speaker employs a repeated /a/ sound:

> To walk, and pass our long love's day.
> Thou by the Indian Ganges' side

Note that the pattern of assonance extends across the end of one sentence and into the start of the next. The assonance thus guides the reader, suggesting that one should treat the second sentence as a continuation of the first. The music of the poem thus also performs a structural function, helping the reader to move through its complex and extended argument.

Further, the use of assonance often underlines the poem's argument. For example, in line 27, the speaker uses an *o* sound through the center of the line: "...My echoing song; then worms shall try..." The repetition underlines the connection between the loss of the speaker's song and the invasion of the worms, suggesting that—for the speaker at least—they are equally severe losses.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "a," "y"
- **Line 4:** "a," "a," "a," "y"
- **Line 5:** "a," "a," "i"
- **Line 6:** "i," "I ," "i"
- **Line 7:** "ou," "l"
- **Line 9:** "ou"
- **Line 10:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 11:** "o," "o"
- **Line 12:** "o"
- **Line 13:** "o," "o"
- **Line 17:** "A," "a," "ea," "y"
- **Line 18:** "A," "a," "a"
- **Line 19:** "a"
- **Line 20:** "a"
- **Line 23:** "ie"
- **Line 24:** "y"
- **Line 27:** "o," "o," "o," "y"
- **Line 28:** "o," "y"
- **Line 29:** "A," "ou," "ou"
- **Line 30:** "A," "a"
- **Line 31:** "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 32:** "a"
- **Line 33:** "ou," "ue"
- **Line 34:** "y," "i," "ew"
- **Line 35:** "i," "y," "i," "i"
- **Line 36:** "i," "i"
- **Line 37:** "o," "u," "u," "ay"
- **Line 38:** "o," "ey"
- **Line 39:** "ou," "ou"
- **Line 40:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 41:** "a," "a"
- **Line 42:** "a"
- **Line 43:** "ea," "ea," "i"
- **Line 44:** "i," "i"
- **Line 45:** "u," "ou," "u"
- **Line 46:** "u"

## CONSONANCE

Alongside its use of assonance and alliteration, "To His Coy Mistress" makes frequent use of consonance, another tool in its musical repertoire, which contributes to the poem's melodic feel; that is, the way that the poem manages to charm even as it tries to convince. From a critical standpoint, the poem's use of such plays of sound is most interesting when the speaker uses them to underline or expand his argument. For example, as the speaker describes death for his mistress, he falls into a

repeated /n/ sound:

> ...then worms shall try
> That long-preserved virginity,
> And your quaint honour turn to dust,

The smooth /n/ sound binds together the various things he lists here, helping the reader understand the connection between "virginity" and "quaint honour." It also emphasizes the sense of fear and anxiety that the speaker wants to instill in his mistress: the repeated /n/ sound gives these lines a pulsing, anxious sonic quality that runs alongside and underneath his argument. Here the sound of the poem acts to reinforce and intensify the speaker's argument, giving it more force.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "d," "t," "d," "n," "t," "m"
- **Line 2:** "n," "d," "m"
- **Line 3:** "d," "d," "n," "k"
- **Line 4:** "k"
- **Line 5:** "n," "d," "n," "n," "d"
- **Line 6:** "t," "t," "d"
- **Line 7:** "n," "d"
- **Line 8:** "d"
- **Line 9:** "d," "s," "s"
- **Line 10:** "n," "s," "n," "s"
- **Line 11:** "l," "l"
- **Line 12:** "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 13:** "h," "d," "r," "d," "r," "s," "r," "s"
- **Line 14:** "s," "h," "z"
- **Line 15:** "h," "d," "d," "d," "st"
- **Line 16:** "t," "d," "st"
- **Line 17:** "st," "r," "t"
- **Line 18:** "st," "rt"
- **Line 19:** "d," "d," "st," "t"
- **Line 20:** "t"
- **Line 21:** "m," "w," "r"
- **Line 22:** "m," "w," "r"
- **Line 23:** "ll," "l"
- **Line 25:** "t," "ll," "nd"
- **Line 26:** "t," "nd"
- **Line 27:** "n," "t"
- **Line 28:** "n," "n"
- **Line 29:** "n," "n," "n," "st"
- **Line 30:** "n," "st"
- **Line 31:** "v," "n," "v," "c"
- **Line 32:** "n," "n," "n," "c"
- **Line 33:** "N," "th," "l," "th," "th," "l"
- **Line 34:** "S," "th," "s," "n," "n"
- **Line 35:** "l," "th," "ll," "l," "s," "s"
- **Line 36:** "n," "t," "n," "t," "s"
- **Line 37:** "N," "t," "s," "s," "t," "s"
- **Line 38:** "n," "m," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 39:** "R," "r," "m," "r"
- **Line 40:** "n," "n," "n," "pp," "p"
- **Line 41:** "ll," "ll," "ll"
- **Line 42:** "n," "n," "n," "ll"
- **Line 43:** "r," "r," "r," "r," "f"
- **Line 44:** "r," "r," "f"
- **Line 45:** "nn," "r," "n"
- **Line 46:** "n," "m," "m," "n"

## ENJAMBMENT

"To His Coy Mistress" is conceptually organized into two-line units : in the first line, the speaker introduces a new thought or idea, which he completes in the second line. (It is also organized into two-line units sonically, since it is in rhyming couplets). This organization might mean that every other line in the poem should be enjambed, as in the opening four lines of stanza two:

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.

Line 21 and 23 end with verbs, "hear" and "lie," and the reader learns in the next lines the objects of those verbs are. That is, lines 22 and 24 complete the thoughts that begin in lines 21 and 23; as a mark of this completion, each of the concluding lines is end-stopped.

This might be taken as a kind of ideal organization toward which the poem aspires: a state of coordination, confidence and control. However, the poem rarely achieves that goal, for a range of reasons. Sometimes, the speaker's thoughts don't fall into two line units, as lines 5-6, where the speaker's thought ends in the middle of line 6. In that case, the speaker ends up with two enjambments in a row, as he begins his next thought. In other places, his thoughts only take up a line each, as in lines 14-20. In this case, there are six end-stops in a row. This is a disruption, but it is significantly less disruptive than what happens in line 6. Even though each of the lines in 14-20 is end-stopped, the reader can still pair them together as two-line units that form complete thoughts. For example, in lines 14-15, the speaker lists his mistress's body parts with considerable detail and specificity. In the next pair of lines, 16-17, he becomes more general about which parts he will address and how long it will take. Though the enjambments have disappeared, the basic organization of the poem remains intact. Not so in line 6, where the start of one thought and the beginning of another jostle for space. In studying the poem's use of enjambment, the reader should focus on moments like this one, where the speaker seems to lose control. These points seem to betray a lack of confidence on the speaker's part, or

perhaps even a crisis of his imagination.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "way "
- **Line 4:** "To walk"
- **Line 5:** "side"
- **Line 6:** "Shouldst," " tide"
- **Line 7:** "Of," "would "
- **Line 8:** "Love"
- **Line 9:** " refuse "
- **Line 10:** "Till "
- **Line 11:** "grow"
- **Line 12:** "Vaster"
- **Line 13:** "praise "
- **Line 14:** "Thine"
- **Line 21:** "hear "
- **Line 22:** "Time's"
- **Line 23:** "lie "
- **Line 24:** "Deserts"
- **Line 26:** "sound "
- **Line 27:** "My," "try "
- **Line 28:** "That"
- **Line 33:** "hue "
- **Line 34:** "Sits"
- **Line 35:** "transpires "
- **Line 36:** "At"
- **Line 39:** "devour "
- **Line 40:** "Than"
- **Line 41:** "all"
- **Line 42:** "Our"
- **Line 43:** "strife "
- **Line 44:** "Through"
- **Line 45:** "sun "
- **Line 46:** "Stand"

## END-STOPPED LINE

"To His Coy Mistress" is organized into two-line units. When the poem is working smoothly and the speaker is at the height of his confidence and poetic power, each of his ideas divides into two lines, beginning at the start of the first line and ending at the end of the second. Often, this means that the second line of each two-line pair is end-stopped, since it marks the end of a thought. The reader can observe this pattern in the poem's first four lines:

> Had we but world enough and time,
> This coyness, lady, were no crime.
> We would sit down, and think which way
> To walk, and pass our long love's day.

The first and third lines are enjambed; the second and fourth are end-stopped. Each couplet forms its own unit conceptually, introducing and completing a single thought. There is a full and seamless accord between form and content here, with the poem's ideas fitting perfectly into its rhyming couplets.

However, the speaker is not always so successful at achieving this accord—and there are frequent places in the poem where enjambment and end-stops get out of sync with the poem's rhyming units. For example, lines 28-30 are all end-stopped. Here the speaker simply lists the consequences of death, without binding them together into carefully balanced two-line units. The speaker seems carried away, overwhelmed by the power of death--even deprived of his capacity to control the poem. The result is a series of short, discrete thoughts that pile on top of each other willy-nilly. The key to interpreting the poem's use of end-stop and enjambment is thus to measure it against the poem's two-line pattern—and to observe carefully where and why it breaks that pattern.

**Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "crime"
- **Line 3:** "W"
- **Line 4:** "day. "
- **Line 5:** "Thou"
- **Line 8:** "flood, "
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "Jews. "
- **Line 11:** "My"
- **Line 12:** "slow; "
- **Line 13:** "An"
- **Line 14:** "gaze; "
- **Line 15:** "Two," "breast,"
- **Line 16:** "But," "rest; "
- **Line 17:** "An," "part,"
- **Line 18:** "And," "heart."
- **Line 19:** "For," "state,"
- **Line 20:** "Nor," "rate. "
- **Line 22:** "near;"
- **Line 23:** "And"
- **Line 24:** "eternity."
- **Line 25:** "Thy," "found; "
- **Line 26:** "Nor"
- **Line 28:** "virginity, "
- **Line 29:** "And," "dust,"
- **Line 30:** "And ," "lust; "
- **Line 32:** "embrace. "
- **Line 33:** "Now"
- **Line 34:** "dew, "
- **Line 35:** "And"
- **Line 36:** "fires,"
- **Line 37:** "Now," "may, "
- **Line 40:** "power."
- **Line 41:** "Let"
- **Line 42:** "ball,"

- **Line 43:** “And”
- **Line 44:** “life:”
- **Line 45:** “Thus”
- **Line 46:** “run.”

## CAESURA

"To His Coy Mistress" contains a number of caesuras. Some of these caesuras are incidental and unimportant to interpreting the poem. For example, there's a caesura early in line 14: "An hundred years should go to praise / Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze..." The pause is definite and marked. However, it serves mainly as an occasion for the speaker to gather his thoughts and add another item to the list of things he'd do in a perfect world. It does not fundamentally disrupt the organization of the poem or change the reader's sense of the speaker's priorities.

More important are the cases where strong caesuras divide up different thoughts in the space of a single line. Since the poem is divided into two line units, with each unit introducing and then concluding its own, discrete thought, any such caesura marks a sharp break from the poem's general pattern. One can find a good example of the force of such a caesura in lines 25-28:

> 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...

The trouble begins at the end of line 25. The speaker's thought ends abruptly there instead of continuing onto the next line. Then line 26 introduces a new thought, which spills over onto line 27 and ends mid-line. The next thought also takes up a line and a half. The mid-line caesura in line 27 is thus a symptom of a broader disorganization in the speaker's thoughts: he has already lost the smooth, controlled flow that characterizes his thinking elsewhere in the poem, and the result is an awkward mid-line pause. Reading these lines, one feels the extent to which the speaker is not simply describing death for rhetorical effect, but is himself overcome by anxiety and fear of death--anxiety that he cannot entirely manage. The caesura thus serves as an index, not only of the speaker's disordered thinking, but also of his disordered feelings.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “;”
- **Line 7:** “.”
- **Line 27:** “;”
- **Line 46:** “.”

## APOSTROPHE

"To His Coy Mistress" reads like a long dramatic monologue or letter: the speaker of the poem is speaking to his mistress, trying to cajole and convince, intimidate and persuade. One sees this apostrophe early in the poem, when the speaker addresses the mistress directly, calling her "lady" in line 2. However, the mistress is silent throughout the poem: the speaker (and the poet) do not give her space to respond, to defend herself, to explain her perspective. The use of apostrophe through directly addressing the mistress thus contributes to two key aspects of the poem. First, it accounts for the poem's argumentative character. This is not simply a poem that describes love and death; it is a poem that tries to persuade the mistress to take a specific action—and it speaks directly to her in service of that goal. Second, it accounts for the mistress's silence in the poem. This is a poem in which the speaker possesses a monopoly over speech; the mistress's role in the poem is simply to receive his message. A different kind of poem might allow dialogue and debate, but such a poem would not be apostrophiac.

**Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-46

## ALLUSION

"To His Coy Mistress" contains a number of allusions, drawn from geography, Biblical history, classical mythology, and philosophy. At times it employs these allusions in relatively predictable ways. For example, the speaker's allusion to the Ganges river in line 5 is designed to emphasize the extent of the mistress's hypothetical wanderings: she can travel to the far side of the world, to a distant and (to a seventeenth-century English person) exotic place. The history and cultural significance of the river are not particularly important to the poem. Though one might accuse the poet of cultural insensitivity, this allusion matches the way most English poets of Marvell's period thought about eastern cultures and geographies. In this case, allusion reinforces the speaker's argument, strengthening his vision of utopian love in a world without death.

Allusion works in similar ways throughout the poem, underlining and emphasizing the development of the speaker's argument. But in some places, he deviates from the traditions that underlie his allusions. For instance, in lines 21-22, he notes that he "always hear[s] / Time's wingèd chariot..." Here he combines two separate traditional images of Time. In the Renaissance, time was often portrayed with wings or riding in a chariot. Both images emphasize the speed of time and the way it flies by. However, until Marvel's poem, they were separate images. Combining them is a bit like squaring a number: the two images amplify and intensify each other. In the speaker's mind,

time is not just fast--it's super fast. Marvell thus breaks with the traditions that underlie his allusion, but he does so to add to the force and power of his argument.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "Ganges'"
- **Line 7:** "Humber"
- **Line 10:** "the conversion of the Jews"
- **Line 22:** "Time's wingèd chariot"

## HYPERBOLE

"To His Coy Mistress" is a poem of persuasion and seduction: the speaker tries to convince his mistress to have sex with him, using every rhetorical means at his disposal—including hyperbole. Indeed, at times the speaker goes far beyond the boundaries of common decency, describing death and the decay of corpses in grotesque detail. In lines 27-28, for instance, he notes that, if the mistress fails to sleep with him, then she will die a virgin and "then worms shall try / That long-preserved virginity." This is probably not literally true. Instead it is a disturbing exaggeration, designed to shock the mistress so profoundly that she gives in to the speaker's demands. One might wonder how effective this tactic actually is; such lines seem more likely to shock than seduce. The poem's indulgence in hyperbole seems at times to threaten its project, which reveals something about the speaker. His fear of death is not simply a rhetorical tool to get his mistress to sleep with him. Instead, it is powerful enough to overwhelm his ostensible goal—persuading the mistress to sleep with him—and effectively take over the poem, turning it from a poem about the pleasures and joys of sexuality into a morbid meditation on the fragility of human life.

**Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 13-18:** "An hundred years should go to praise / Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze; / Two hundred to adore each breast, / But thirty thousand to the rest; / An age at least to every part, / And the last age should show your heart. "
- **Lines 27-28:** "then worms shall try / That long-preserved virginity, "
- **Lines 29-32:** "And your quaint honour turn to dust, / And into ashes all my lust; / The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace"
- **Lines 33-36:** "while the youthful hue / Sits on thy skin like morning dew, / And while thy willing soul transpires / At every pore with instant fires, "
- **Lines 45-46:** "though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run."

## SYLLOGISM

"To His Coy Mistress" is a poem designed to persuade. In making his argument that his mistress should sleep with him, the speaker falls back on one of the key techniques of classical rhetoric: the syllogism. Following the structure first advanced in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, "To His Coy Mistress" might be divided into three separate sections: a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. Each of these sections occupies a single stanza. In the first stanza, the speaker advances his major premise. Indeed, it appears in the poem's first two lines: "Had we but world enough and time, / This coyness, lady, were no crime." The speaker begins by advancing a hypothetical: if he and his mistress could live forever, it would not be a crime to be coy. He spends the rest of the stanza elaborating that hypothetical scenario, exploring what love would be like in a world without death.

In the second stanza, the speaker advances his minor premise. Once again, he does so in the opening lines:

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.

There is no time to waste, the speaker argues: time is always rushing by and it leads, inevitably, to death. The speaker spends the rest of the stanza articulating the force and power of death, describing what it will do to the mistress's body in grotesque terms.

The speaker does not expand the implicit consequence of his argument until the start of the third stanza, where his syllogism reaches its conclusion:

> Now therefore, while the youthful hue
> Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
> And while thy willing soul transpires
> At every pore with instant fires,
> Now let us sport us while we may,

Because time is always flying by, the speaker argues, he and his mistress must have sex—"now," he says repeatedly. The rest of the stanza describes what this will look and feel like. The poem's three stanzas thus correspond to the three parts of a syllogism, a logical argument which moves through its premises to a forceful conclusion. This would have been a particularly pleasing conceit to a Renaissance readership, who would have been well-educated in the techniques of classical rhetoric and apt to recognize their use in poetry.

**Where Syllogism appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-2:** "Had we but world enough and time, / This

coyness, lady, were no crime. ”

- **Lines 21-24:** “But at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near; / And yonder all before us lie / Deserts of vast eternity. ”
- **Lines 33-37:** “Now therefore, while the youthful hue / Sits on thy skin like morning dew, / And while thy willing soul transpires / At every pore with instant fires, / Now let us sport us while we may, ”

## VOCABULARY

**Coyness** (Line 2) - The word "coy" describes a series of contradictory behaviors. Someone who's being coy is simultaneously flirtatious and withholding, expressing interest but refusing to act on it. In contemporary English, one might describe it as "playing hard to get"—which is certainly how the speaker of the poem interprets the mistress's behavior. However, coyness is a matter of interpretation: one might plausibly wonder if the mistress is truly being coy or simply trying to let the speaker down easily. Since the speaker gives us little information about the mistress, it is difficult for a reader to judge her intentions or her behavior.

**Ganges** (Line 5) - The Ganges is a river in the Indian subcontinent. It flows along the border between the countries of India and Bangladesh. The river is sacred to Hindus, and is important in various religious rituals. One may wonder how much Marvell knew about the religious and cultural significance of the river; he wrote at a time when there was not yet much direct contact between India and England (though India eventually became an important British colony). He invokes the river simply as a distant place, associated in his imagination with the foreign and the exotic—without much interest in or consideration for its importance to Indian culture.

**Humber** (Line 7) - The Humber is a river and tidal estuary in East Yorkshire, a region in northeastern England. It runs through the city of Hull. Marvell was born close to the city and to the river. The river is not particularly well-known and is not evoked by other poets, or even by Marvell beyond this particular poem. Its invocation here is thus highly personal—and it suggests that the speaker and Marvell are more or less the same person. Further, it stands in contrast with the Ganges, mentioned in line 5. Where the Ganges is foreign and exotic, the Humber is nearby and familiar. While the mistress explores the world, sampling its riches, the speaker remains committed to what he knows--that is, writing poetry close to home.

**Flood** (Line 8) - The speaker here makes reference to a flood that happens in the Bible, in Genesis 6:9-17. In the Bible, God punishes mankind for its sin by unleashing a devastating flood. Only Noah—a righteous man, whom God warned ahead of time—survives the flood, along with a male and a female member of each animal species, riding out the storm for forty days and nights in an ark built especially for the purpose. After the flood passes, Noah and his family see a rainbow in the sky, a promise between God and man that such a devastating event will never happen again. The flood is thus the starting point of human history: it erases everything that happened before it and allows humanity to restart. Marvell's speaker invokes it here precisely because of its position at the start of human history: it indicates that he would love the mistress from the very beginning of record history.

**Conversion of the Jews** (Line 10) - The flood marks the beginning of Biblical history. For some Christians—in Marvell's time and in the present—the conversion of the Jews to Christianity marks its endpoint. In Romans 11:25-26a, Saint Paul writes, "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved..." Though there is considerable debate about how to interpret this statement, some Christians believe that it is a form of prophecy, indicating that the Jews will convert to Christianity immediately before the End of Days, the Second Coming of Christ. For the speaker, it is a convenient marker for the end of Biblical time. He would love his mistress from the earliest point in history to its last point—if only he could live forever.

**Vegetable** (Line 11) - English speakers generally use the word "vegetable" as a noun—referring to things like potatoes and cucumbers. But the speaker uses the word as an adjective: it describes the characteristics of his love. This is an unusual but not unprecedented usage. Indeed, it derives from a philosophical distinction—important in medieval and Renaissance medical science—first drawn by Aristotle that distinguishes between vegetative, animal, and rational spirits. According to Aristotle, all life possesses at least one of the spirits, and the higher animals possess more of them. Human beings possess all three; animals possess vegetative and animal spirits; plants have only vegetative spirits. The vegetable is thus the lowest, least dynamic form of life; it is sluggish and slow-growing. For Marvell's speaker, the characteristics of vegetable spirits are probably more pertinent than the idea's philosophical pedigree. He describes his love as slow-moving and slow-growing, patient and restrained—unlike the flighty, fast-moving love that might characterize an animal or a rational spirit.

**Time's Wingèd Chariot** (Line 22) - In poetry and art from the Renaissance, time is often represented with wings. It also often has a chariot. Both representations convey the speed of time and the way it tends to fly or rush by. However, Marvell seems to be the first poet or artist to join the two images. Here, time not only rides in a chariot; the chariot itself has wings. The result is an intensification of time's defining characteristic: the speed at which it moves. Marvell's speaker tries to find a way to

stress this speed and ends up combining two related images of time.

**Quaint** (Line 29) - The word "quaint" literally means "old-fashioned" or "out of date." The word often describes something cute or charming, the fact that a village or a value, for example, is "quaint" can suggest that it is picturesque or admirable in some way, calling us back to an earlier and simpler time.Alongside this positive sense, however, is another, less wholesome implication of this word. Throughout Renaissance literature—and particularly in comedic writing—the word "quaint" is used as a pun for an obscene, slang term for a woman's vagina. Even as the speaker suggests there is something admirable about his mistress's commitment to her virginity, he also makes an obscene pun at her expense, undercutting his initial generosity.

**Transpire** (Line 35) - "Transpire" as used here is related to the word "respire." Like "respire," it describes something like breathing: a gas exiting or entering the body. But respiration happens through the mouth; for something to transpire it must pass through the skin. The word describes, in other words, a gas or a vaporous liquid coming out of or off of someone's skin. The speaker uses this already obscure word in a figurative sense: the mistress's "willing soul" is coming out of her skin. This is a complicated way of saying that she is full of erotic desire, erotic desire that the speaker believes he can see in her body itself.

**Sport** (Line 37) - The verb means, literally, "to play." Marvell's speaker uses it an extended, bawdy sense: here it means "to have sex." This sense was in wide use during the Renaissance. For example, in Shakespeare's long poem, *Venus and Adonis*, Venus announces: "For my sake [he] hath learnd to sport, [...]Making my armes his field, his tent my bed."

**Amorous** (Line 38) - In Latin, "amore" means love. To be *amor*ous is thus to be full of love—and all of the feelings that come along with love, including erotic desire. The word describes people who are possessed by erotic desire—or who are more broadly full of desire itself, regardless of its object.

**Birds of prey** (Line 38) - The speaker has in mind a specific group of birds: birds that hunt and eat other animals. This group includes hawks, falcons, raptors, and eagles. In the Renaissance, these birds were often associated with nobility, dignity, and heroism. They were also known for their voracious appetites--the way they gorged on their food, rather than nibbling at it daintily.

**Languish** (Line 40) - The verb "to languish" has both a positive and negative sense. In its positive sense, it can refer to a kind of luxurious inactivity or utter relaxation. In its negative sense, however, it signifies a different kind of inactivity: being constrained, prevented from doing things or accomplishing anything. For instance, a prisoner might be said to "languish" in jail. The speaker uses the word here in its second, negative sense: he imagines being caught in time's jaws as a kind of torture and imprisonment. But the positive sense is also hinted at: the kind of languishing he and his mistress will do in life is the opposite of the blissfully relaxed immortality he imagines in stanza 1.

**Slow-chapped** (Line 40) - The compound phrase "slow-chapped" is an ambiguous and strange formulation in an otherwise direct poem. The first part of the phrase is fairly straight-forward. Time's power is "slow." This characterization stands in tension with the speaker's characterization in stanza 2, where time has a "wingèd chariot." There, time is all velocity and frenzied energy. The contradiction begins to unravel if the reader turns their attention to the second word in the phrase, "chapped." "To chap" is to make something crack or to split it into pieces. The speaker is saying, in other words, that time has the power to slowly break down anything. Time itself runs quickly, but its power is more gradual. Alongside the word "languish," earlier in the line, the speaker thus suggests that Time will slowly torture the speaker and his mistress, dragging out their demise over a long period. Better, then, to die all at once in a burst of pleasure, as he suggests in line 39.

**Strife** (Line 43) - The word "strife" usually suggests contention and opposition, as in a fight between people who disagree with each other, sometimes violently. In this instance, however, the two people in the poem are, the speaker imagines, in perfect accord with each other: their conflict lies with time, not with each other. The strife that the speaker describes thus comes from the conflict and tension that crops up as the speaker and his mistress confront time. Since this is part of a long and strange image, it remains plausible that the strife the speaker describes is accompanied by real, physical violence: the confrontation of their soft "ball of sweetness" against "the iron gates of life."

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"To His Coy Mistress" is a poem in rhyming iambic tetrameter couplets, as the poem's first two lines establish. There are no evident restrictions on the stanza length: some stanzas are longer than others. Though the poem is in form, it is not in a fixed or inherited form; Marvell seems to have generated the form specifically for the poem. Indeed, the poem seems to playfully resist the expectations that its early readers would've had about proper form. In the 17th and 18th centuries, English poets often wrote in a form called "heroic verse:" rhymed iambic pentameter couplets. As its name suggests, this kind of verse was often reserved for heroic subjects: battles, epic journeys, etc. Marvell's poem falls just short of this heroic meter. Marvell seems to be winking at his reader. The poem is *almost* heroic: he comes close to taking himself seriously, but

backs off. In contrast with heroic verse, which often feels stately and dignified, "To His Coy Mistress" seems punchy and fast-paced: the missing foot in each line makes the poem feel lighter, smoother, and less serious.

Though the poem contains a number of metrical variations, it maintains its light, fast-paced rhythm throughout, coupling this rhythm with strong end rhymes The slight hiccups in the rhythm exist mostly for variety and do not significantly affect the reader's experience of the poem. More interesting are the variations in the poem's conceptual organization. Frequently, the speaker organizes his thoughts into two-line segments, again shown in the poem's first two lines. Notice that the speaker's thought begins at the start of line 1 and ends at the end of line 2. A new thought begins at the start of line 3. (Occasionally, the speaker will extend his thought beyond the boundaries of the couplet—while maintaining the couplet as the basic structure of his ideas. This happens in lines 41-44, which make one complete thought, broken up into two parts, with a couplet for each). The speaker breaks this pattern occasionally in the poem, sometimes in moments when he loses his composure, or when he wants to emphasize a point. One can find a case of the latter in line 37: "Now let us sport us while we may." The line is conceptually discrete from the lines around it. It sticks out. And for good reason: it is the poem's thesis statement, its main point. The speaker isolates it exactly so that it stands out.

In addition to the careful conceptual organization of the poem's ideas into couplets, the poem's overall argument is organized into three sections, each of which gets its own stanza. The poem functions like a syllogism. In the first stanza, the speaker proposes a hypothetical: "What if..." In the second stanza, he demonstrates why the hypothetical is impossible: "But..." In the final stanza, he demonstrates the consequences of his demonstration: "Therefore..." The poem thus reads like a three-part sentence: "If...but...therefore." This structure contributes to the feeling that the poem is trying to persuade; it takes the form of a logical argument.

## METER

"To His Coy Mistress" is in iambic tetrameter throughout—an unusual meter on its own. (It does commonly appear in ballad meter, where it alternates with lines of iambic trimeter). The poem's meter is relatively smooth. Indeed, long passages of the poem are perfectly metrically regular, as in the poem's first four lines:

Had we | but world | enough | and time,
This coy- | ness, lad-| y, were | no crime.
We would | sit down, | and think | which way
To walk, | and pass | our long | love's day.

The lines are almost monotonous in their regularity—a monotony that the speaker eventually needs to break. Metrical variation is inevitable—even necessary—in a poem as long as "To His Coy Mistress." Marvell's metrical variations tend to be inobtrusive and, for the purposes of interpreting the poem, not particularly significant. For example, Marvell is found of using a trochee instead of an iamb in the first foot of his lines, as in line 5:

Thou by the | Indian | Ganges' | side

The line opens with two dactyls rather than the expected iambs and follows these feet with a trochee, plus the extra syllable "side" at the end of the line. However, the reader hardly notices this irregularity. The variations keep the rhythm of the poem lively but they do not significantly affect the reader's experience of it.

Arguably, there is a more significant and pervasive metrical variation at work in the whole poem. With its rhymed iambic tetrameter couplets, "To His Coy Mistress" closely approximates a prestigious and widely used verse form in the Renaissance: heroic couplets. However, "To His Coy Mistress" is consistently one foot short of being proper heroic couplets: its tetrameter lines are eight syllables long, where a Renaissance reader—well-versed in heroic couplets—would expect ten. The poem consistently feels like it's falling short, failing to achieve the placid, dignified smoothness a reader expects in heroic couplets. This is a kind of *mea culpa* on Marvell's part: he admits that his poem is not quite as serious as a poem on a heroic subject should be. But it's also an advantage: what the poem loses in dignity and seriousness it makes up for in lightness and playfulness.

## RHYME SCHEME

"To His Coy Mistress" is organized into rhyming couplets. Each couplet has its own rhyme; after Marvell completes one rhyme, he moves on to the next. One can see this pattern in the first 10 lines of the poem, which are rhymed *aabbccddee*. The couplets are designed to feel separate—and not just in terms of their rhyme. Many of the couplets in the first ten lines are conceptually distinct from each other. For example, the first two lines of the poem are a complete sentence, a complete thought:

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.

Notice that the speaker's thought begins at the start of the first line and ends at the end of the second line. In the third and fourth lines, he embarks on a new thought. The unit of rhyme thus serves to divide the poem both formally and conceptually.

The poem also contains a number of rhymes that look like slant or half rhymes: for example, "try" and "virginity" in lines 27-28. However, English pronunciation has shifted since Marvell's time. Though they may sound off to contemporary readers, for

Marvell these were strong, full rhymes.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "To His Coy Mistress" is an anonymous lover, though he may be a stand-in for Marvell himself. He spends the poem trying to convince his "mistress" that she should have sex with him. Over the course of his passionate argument, however, the reader learns little about either the mistress or the speaker. At the end of the poem, the reader may be left wondering about the most basic details of their relationship—how they met, why they love each other, their relative social classes, the history of their relationship. Indeed, the reader doesn't even know how long the mistress has been refusing or putting off the speaker. The poem seems little concerned with providing this kind of personal information. Instead, its two central figures—the speaker and his mistress—are ultimately generic figures: they stand in for all lovers, in all times. It seems that this is a poem that is meant to apply to lovers in all ages, regardless of the political and personal circumstances of their relationship.

## SETTING

The setting of "To His Coy Mistress" is, broadly speaking, the earth. Indeed, in the first stanza, the speaker imagines himself and his mistress wandering across the whole earth, from East Yorkshire (where the poet was born) in England to the Ganges River in India. Despite these geographical references, the poem doesn't say much about the cultural or political context in which it was written. Mostly likely composed during the 1650s—though it was not published until the 1680s, after Marvell's death—"To His Coy Mistress" was written during a tumultuous period in English history. The English Civil War had concluded recently, with King Charles I being executed by a revolutionary group, and the English state was under the control of a party known as the Parliamentarians because they supported Parliament over the King. Marvell was an active, if sometimes reluctant, participant in these momentous political events; indeed, he sat in Parliament for much of the 1650s.

"To His Coy Mistress," however, does not acknowledge this political turmoil. Though the speaker makes reference to "empires" and "power," the "empires" and "power" he invokes are highly general; they are not tied to any political event or party, or even any nation. The poem may thus be said to retreat from the political complications of its time. It imagines sexuality—and love itself—as though they are free from politics and nationhood, or perhaps even a refuge from those burdens. The distance that the poem puts between itself and its historical context serves in large part to make its message universal; it seems that the speaker and his mistress could be any lovers living in any setting.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Andrew Marvell belonged to a literary group known as the "metaphysical poets." Metaphysical poetry developed in the 1590s and early 1600s, and its most prominent early practitioners included poets like John Donne. Metaphysical poetry is marked by its philosophical intensity: it often takes up big topics and tries to think through them in poetry. But, it is also marked by its playfulness and its willingness to use irony, everyday language, and elaborate, strange metaphors and similes. Marvell belongs to the second generation of metaphysical poets, alongside poets like Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughn; Donne himself had been dead for more than twenty years by the time Marvell wrote "To His Coy Mistress." The poem thus reflects the influence of the metaphysical poets, while also drawing on other poetic traditions. For example, in the first stanza, the speaker imagines spending more than thirty thousand years praising each part of his mistress's body. This is a rhetorical tactic similar to a blazon, a literary technique drawn from the tradition of Petrarchan love sonnets in Italian, French, and English. "To His Coy Mistress" thus draws on a variety of poetic sources, cobbling together several different traditions of love poetry.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"To His Coy Mistress" was likely written in the 1650s, during a period of significant political turmoil in English society. In the 1640s, the nation had endured a bloody civil war. The civil war was provoked by religious and political tensions, especially between radical Protestants and more conservative Anglicans. But it quickly became a broader conflict over the nature of government itself, with Royalists—who supported the monarchy and the Anglican Church—pitted against Parliamentarians—who supported a democratic form of government and a Puritan church. The civil war culminated with the execution for treason of the King, Charles I, in 1649. Oliver Cromwell, a Parliamentarian, assumed control of the government for most of the 1650s—a period called the "Interregnum." Marvell himself was an active participant in these events. Though he spent the war in Italy and France, working as the tutor for a noble British family, he returned to England in the early 1650s, living for several years at Nun Appleton Hall near York (where he wrote his famous poem, "Upon Appleton House") and later served as Latin Secretary, alongside the poet John Milton—an important role in Cromwell's national government. He joined Parliament in 1659, representing Kingston-Upon-Hull. After the restoration of the monarchy in the 1660s, Marvell managed to escape punishment for his participation in the revolutionary government, and he worked to prevent the new king, Charles II, from executing John Milton. Important as this political turmoil

is to Marvell's life—and his writing—it is notably absent from "To His Coy Mistress." In the poem, Marvell's speaker seems to have withdrawn from all such political complications; he experiences love apart from the politics of the world in which he lives.

## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "To His Coy Mistress" read by Tom Hiddleston — The full text of "To His Coy Mistress" read by Tom Hiddleston. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDJwycpIfRQ)
- Arts & Ideas: "To His Coy Mistress" — An episode of BBC Radio 3's podcast Arts & Ideas dedicated to "To His Coy Mistress." (https://play.acast.com/s/artsandideas/landmark-andrew-marvells-to-his-coy-mistress)
- An Early Manuscript Copy of "To His Coy Mistress" — Images of an early manuscript copy of "To His Coy Mistress" from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/an-early-manuscript-copy-of-marvells-to-his-coy-mistress)
- Metaphysical Poetry — A brief guide to metaphysical poetry from the Poetry Foundation, with links to the work of other metaphysical poets and an extended essay on metaphysical poetry by Stephanie Burt. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/metaphysical-poets)
- Allen Ginsberg on "To His Coy Mistress" — Twentieth century beat poet Allen Ginsberg lectures on "To His Coy Mistress." (https://allenginsberg.org/2018/01/monday-jan-22-marvell-coy-mistress/)

## HOW TO CITE

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