

COYNESS AS POWER IN MARVELL'S "TO HIS COY MISTRESS"

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ABSTRACT

"To His Coy Mistress" is a strong testimony on the postmodern notion of the endless multiplicity of significations. The mistress's coyness and her passivity in the face of the lover's onslaught on her autonomy and privacy comprise an act of resistance to a hedonistic patriarchy bent on devouring the female to achieve its narcissistic goal of attaining pleasure and eternity. By showing the contradictions of patriarchy in 17th century England, Marvell, like Dryden and John Donne, subtly criticizes the hypocrisy of his society and champions the coyness and silence of the seduced woman.

Keywords: Marvell, seduction, woman, 17th century English poetry

ÖZET

"Utangaç Sevgilisine", çoğul anlamların sınırsızlığını öne süren Postmodern görüşün güçlü bir tanığıdır. Erkeğin kadının bağımsızlığı ve mahremiyetine yaptığı saldırıya, kadının utangaçlık ve edilgenlikle karşılık vermesi, erkek egemen zevk düşkünlüğünün kadına boyun eğdirerek bencil zevk ve ölümsüzlük isteklerini karşılama hedefine direnme eylemini de içermektedir.

17. Yüzyıl İngiltere'sinin erkek egemenliğinin çelişkilerini gösteren Marvell, Dryden ve John Donne gibi, toplumun ikiyüzlülüğünü inceliklerle eleştirirken, baştan çıkarılan kadının utangaçlığı ve sessizliğini savunur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Marvell, baştan çıkarma, kadın, 17. Yüzyıl İngiliz şiiri

"To His Coy Mistress" has polarized critics' and scholars' attention for so long to the extent that it becomes a strong testimony on the postmodern notion of the endless multiplicity of significations. In this article I want to point out, using a feminist position, that the mistress's coyness and her passivity in the face of the lover's onslaught on her autonomy and privacy comprise an act of resistance to a hedonistic patriarchy bent on devouring the female to achieve its narcissistic goal of attaining pleasure and eternity.

As Guerin observes, the structure of the poem reflects the "heightening intensity, of the lover's suit, from the proper and conventional complimentary forms of verbal courting to more serious arguments about the brevity of life and finally, to the bold and undisguised affirmation that sexual joy" is the gateway to eternity (1999: 8-9). As a matter of fact, the poem's structure accentuates, in Duyfhuizen words, its "androcentric plot" (1988: 414) to the extent that one may ask with Duyfhuizen whether the 17th century virgin-female-listener would have endorsed such narcissistic and bizarre male notions of the passage from temporality to timelessness at the expense of her virginity.

As "coyness" in Marvell's text designates, to use Duyfhuizen's words, "a narrative movement of delay" (1988: 417), it presents a discourse that opposes the discourse of desire and seduction put forward vehemently by the speaker. In the first stanza, the speaker labors hard to attack and subvert the opposing discourse of coyness:

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 Loves Day. (1999: Lines 1-4)

Duyfhuizen argues that the speaker launches his counter discourse through a semantic game of seduction. The Lucifer-like male seeks to confuse the listener and awaken her desire by obscuring the "conventional definitions of proper behavior" (1988: 419). In the mind of the seducer, the woman is perceived as committing a crime by her coyness. He willfully ignores that her demureness or mute discourse of delay is somewhat compatible with 17th century patriarchal codes of behavior imposed on the female by the same patriarch who is ironically urging her to adopt a Baudrillardian approach to her body.

Baudrillard maintains that one has a libido that should be expended, a subconscious that should speak, a body that should give and maintain pleasure, and a sex that must be put to good use (1990: 37). In view of this, the implicit male association between "coyness" and "crime" in the opening lines not only echoes in Duyfhuizen words, "the politics of repression", but also the inherent contradictions that mark "patriarchal attitudes toward women and female sexuality" (1988: 419).

In the second stanza, through a deliberate stratagem, Duyfhuizen maintains, the seducer makes the woman's reluctance to fully relish the delights of love appear perverse, as he envisages that her soul and body visibly reveal what she cannot bring her face or her voice to accept: that she is as vehemently driven toward the pleasures of coitus as he is:

And while thy willing soul transpires

At every pore with instant fires,

Now let us sport us while we may. (1999: Lines 35-37)

The voicing of the female's state of mind and body in the poem is tantamount to an act of colonization in which the male-speaker attempts to overpower the woman-listener by taking on her voice. In his Machiavellian attempts to attain his purpose (pleasure and eternity) the speaker turns into an egomaniac who allows no expression he has not ventriloquized.

Duyfhuizen further maintains that as the woman passively and voicelessly refuses to give in to her seducer; the speaker changes stratagem by resorting to intimidating her with the cruel images of the loss of her comeliness, "the marble vault, and the worm-tried violation of 'that long preserved virginity'" (1999: 419).

Thy Beauty shall no more be found;

Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound

My echoing Song: then Worms shall try

That long preserv'd Virginity:

And your quaint Honour turn to dust; (1999: Lines 25-29)

Such male intimidation is somewhat reminiscent of John Donne's "The Apparition" where an identically frustrated egomaniac lover threatens to terrorize his indifferent and unyielding woman with his own terrible ghost:

When by thy scorn, O murd'ress, I am dead
And that thou think'st thee free
From all solicitation from me,
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed, (1999: Lines 1-4)

In the face of such masculine onslaught on her female autonomy; and in order to protect her virginity or what Marvell's "society" in Fletcher's terms "defines as her moral and economic worth," (1995: 43) the beautiful woman resorts wittingly to the discourse of coyness and silence, though it coincides, in Duyfhuizen's words, "with another patriarchal plot of control" (1988: 419). Duyfhuizen insightfully maintains that the woman intuitively sees that the fleeting sensual rapture celebrated by the male seducer foretells potential ruin and social disasters for her: sex and possible pregnancy out of wedlock in the 17th century means social death; and marriage to a 17th century man of the caliber of the seducer may not bring better prospects, either. At best, Duyfhuizen wittily observes, she will metamorphose into a property for the husband who seduced her with his "philosophic argument; ... and she will be subjected to the tyranny of the English law that sanctioned her powerlessness" (1988: 417). As a result, and this is something we read through the traces and silences of the text, the woman's discourse of coyness becomes powerful in its own terms as it enables her, on the one hand, to resist the immoral amorous advances that are likely to compromise her status as a woman in her society; and on the other hand, it frustrates and defeats the objectives of her male seducer/tormentor. For as long as the woman remains silent and coy she maintains control over her life and destiny.

To conclude, the poem articulates a male desire of domination, control, power, conquest, and violent appropriation if not rape of the woman's virginal body and her autonomy. This male desire is legitimized, in Duyfhuizen's words, by elevating this "demeaning seduction to the level of high seriousness as a universal construct of man's desire to conquer his own mortality" (1988: 418). Guerin suggests that there is something "poignant in the way the lover must choose the most exquisite pleasure he knows, sensuality, as a way of spitting in the face of his grand tormentor and victorious foe, Time." (1999: 33)

Alternatively, the male desire is defeated by the female desire to remain, paradoxically enough, coy and passive to maintain and protect her interests in a 17th century patriarchal society replete with unsettling contradictions. The paradoxical nature of Marvell's patriarchal world manifests itself in the double standards of its approaches to sexual politics. On the one hand, it is the patriarchal society that prescribes chastity and strict moral codes to women; and values women economically and socially in relation to their adherence to these moral codes. After all, whether it is fact or fiction, it is Europe's

medieval and early renaissance patriarchy that invented the chastity belt to enforce its notion of morality and honor mainly on the expense of woman. I believe Marvell's phrase "Thorough the Iron gates of Life" (1999: Line 44) alludes to these devices worn to prevent easy access to the vagina. On the other hand, Marvell's society condones male adultery while denying women the same privilege. Men are way freer than women to boast about their libertine and adulterous behavior.

The insidious contradiction of the patriarchy verges on the pathological: for how can man require chastity from a woman and then at the same time coerces another to fornicate with him? Is the woman he encourages to abandon her chastity and drop down her chastity belt different from the one he wants her to remain virgin and chaste? By showing the contradictions of patriarchy in 17th century England, Marvell, like Dryden and John Donne, subtly criticizes the hypocrisy of his society and champions the coyness and silence of the seduced woman. In short, had the woman submitted to the whims of her seducer, she would not only have lost her social status but also she would have forfeited Marvell's poem. In this respect, the poem in itself becomes a feather added to the cap of coyness hanging on the head of a silent and defiant woman.

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