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Marvell's To His Coy
Mistress

A Feminist Reading
Paper Theories

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defined and women
normative and men as equals
should be better, worse, or more natural than the other.

A Feminist Reading

"To His Coy Mistress" begins with Petrarchan convention, a poetic device consisting of a despairing male speaker addressing an unattainable woman with exaggerated praise. While at first would seem to put the woman in power, Marvell in fact only uses this convention of excessive and unsatisfied desire to turn the tradition of courtly love to lust; instead of honorable courtships, the speaker offers the woman sexual congress; instead of expecting her to reject him, the man assumes he will succeed from the outset by calling her "mistress". The poem shows off the speaker's mastery of rhetoric perhaps more even than his assumed physical prowess, and through

this mastery he manipulates the image of the female that the reader sees. First she is portrayed as the woman of his dreams, a woman to be worshiped for all of her fair qualities, and then is subsequently spoken of as succumbing to death. Throughout the course of the poem, the whole thing an invitation to her for sex, the speaker shows to women to be first desirable and then disgusting, but in the end it is the female body itself that becomes to him a repulsive symbol of the death and decay to which all eventually descend.

Early in the poem the speaker explains to the woman he so desires what their travels around the world would look like, how expansive their love would be to encompass so much of it and so much time. Indeed, from the beginning the man frames their relationship between the two endpoints of Judeo-Christian history: the Flood and the "conversation of the Jews," which was thought at the time the poem was written to be linked with the return of Christ. In this way, their love is an epic romance that fills all of history, despite the fact that he will be constantly giving her "complaints," pleading for her body, and she will deny him. Furthermore, it is only within this eternal framework that her being coy with him is not a "crime" against him, implying that her denial of his desires in their real, short human lives is inappropriate. The problem arises when one realizes the conditional that begins the poem: "Had we but world enough, and time/This coyness, lady, were not crime" shows her resistance to him as indeed criminal since they do not have enough time, and certainly do not have all the world for all of time.

It is after the first stanza that Marvell's speaker begins to veer away from the Petrarchan, who is by nature a pining and hopeless lover. The speaker in this poem fully intends to make the woman he so desires his, and his imitation of the other form was only to lead in to his real persuasion. How he desires to control her is obvious with the number of times that "should" and "would" crop up in the poem, beginning as early as line 13 in the description of each part of her body and the time he would devote to it (which itself reduces the beloved woman to her mere parts). The objectification of her body as a sexual object is hardly the beginning of her troubles, however, for not a few lines later any possibility of that lust being tempered with love or concern is washed away when he turns her into an object of death.

Beginning at line 21 the language becomes aggressive, tinged with more disgust than lust, which only further devalues the female subject for what seems the simple purpose of showing off the speaker's mastery of the language and of metaphor yet again. The original elaborate praise is further undermined when we reach the third stanza and the speaker reveals he has been quite aware of the pressure of Time throughout this persuasion, rendering any promises of eternal love or extended passion useless and disingenuous. He uses this awareness of Time's threat upon them to put a threat on her virginity, implying not only that it will lose its worth as she ages, but that

soon she will lose her appeal to men altogether and never find one to have her, losing her innocent instead to the worms in her grave. He expresses marked disgust at the female body and its association with death and decay.

While Marvell is not the first to use Petrarchan convention against itself (Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 is an excellent example as well), it is the violence and aggressiveness of this piece that sets it apart. The speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" seems to believe that the woman he so idealizes is both desirable for her beauty and cursed because it will rot away, that she is both withholding from him her body and yet a destructive force likened to death. The speaker associates the woman with the disgusting things that will happen to her (female) body after death. The penetration by the worms is not least of these images, and like the woman herself, the idea both mirrors his own desires and is revolting to him. The parallel of the worms penetrating her, especially after death, not only makes the desires of the speaker seem that much more suspect, but also cause any sex that would occur between them to be an encounter with death rather than the amorous pleasure full of life the speaker so desires. The words of violence in relationship of the act further enforce this point, and leave the audience disgusted with the speaker for this inconsistency and his reduction of the woman he desire to the object of his desire, to be manipulated and presented as he pleases.

To His Coy Mistress

Feminist Criticism

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his lordship over himself.

is the sun, if only to retain

Feminist Criticism

Feminist theory is difficult to pinpoint because feminism is hardly a monolithic movement. Very broadly speaking, feminist theory can be divided into three groups: (1) theories with an essentialist focus, (2) theories looking to establish a feminist canon, or to examine the existing canon from a less patriarchal perspective, and (3) theories focusing on sexual difference and sexual politics. These are only the divisions present within feminist theory itself and not within the movement as a whole, which is even more widespread and varied. Nevertheless, among the clusters of theories and all of feminism as a whole there are a number of fundamental beliefs and concerns that transcend dividing lines and distinguish a given school of criticism as a variety of feminism rather than a separate school altogether.

The first distinction of a feminist scholar is the recognition and exploration of the difference between sex and gender. For feminists, gender is not inherent, but learned from the culture in which one lives and performed accordingly. Gender encompasses all of the meaning assigned to sex differences in a given culture, which can only be constructed by that culture, not naturally a part of the person. Although feminists certainly apply different levels of importance to sex as a biological category, the idea that the gender

norms assigned to each sex can be changed is utterly foundational to feminist theory. The second distinction of a feminist scholar is intimately tied to gender as well, emphasizing how sex and/or gender are almost always used in language to organize difference spheres (physical, emotional, philosophical, etc.), usually working to benefit men. Because of this, feminist scholars are concerned with gender as a category of analysis and treat any method of interpretation that fails to take gender into account at all as incomplete and unsatisfactory.

The third way in which feminist scholars distinguish themselves from other critical schools is their deep investment in breaking down the idea that maleness is the default. That is, most cultures are androcentric in thought and practice, and therefore put forth men as the norm. Feminists try to shed light on these biases in order to change them and at the same time work to examine the biases and their practical implication from the viewpoint of the Other. One of their primary concerns is to alter how women and other marginalized groups are seen as objects rather than subjects. This is an integral part of the final common thread in feminist theory: all feminists believe that the inequalities that exist between the group(s) in power and those without can and ought to be broken down. This necessitates a political element in feminist theory, and though these politics may not always be stressed in particularly work of feminist criticism, they also will not be denied.

In short, the goal of feminist scholarship, including feminist theory, is not merely to create a department or discipline that focuses on women, but rather to address the deep-seated assumptions culture feeds us about gender roles. An examination of the sources of these stereotypes and a subsequent discussion of their ultimate "truth" or lack thereof will inevitably lead to new, informed ways of addressing historical, political, social, and economic problems as well. The ultimate goal of feminist scholarship, then, is to change the way that women are seen for the better, such that true equality can be defined and sought earnestly. In the end, women ought to be seen as equally normative and men as equally socially conditioned in their roles, and neither should be better, worse, or more natural than the other.