THE NYMPH’S REPLY NINE MONTHS LATER

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Come live with mee and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That vallies, groves, hills and fieldes,
Woods, or steepie mountaine yeeldes.¹

The simple, sensuous lyrics of Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” beckons his listener to follow him into an enchanted world of sylvan valleys and verdant fields preserved from the ravages of time. In the last verse of the poem the shepherd reasserts the pleasant refrain of the moment by describing how “The shepherd swains shall dance and sing / For thy delight each May morning” (ll. 21-22) as if every day will be spring. The shepherd attempts to propel his “Love” outside time’s grasp, and for good reason; time is love’s greatest enemy. Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” uses a similar premise for the purposes of seduction, but cast in very different terms. Rather than promise his mistress that love stops the effects of time, he harshly reminds her that the effects of time destroy the joys of love, since the ravages of age create such a drastic transformation of the body rendering it unfit for love:

Had we but World enough, and Time
This coyness, Lady, were no crime
...

But at my back I alwaies hear
Times winged Charriot hurrying near ....²

Following fast on the heels of old age, death brings an even more odious change by turning the woman’s body into something horrific, a process which Marvell describes to his mistress in detail:

... then Worms shall try
That long preserv’d Virginity:
And your quaint honor turn to dust;
And into ashes all my lust.³

In these frequently anthologized poems, Marlowe and Marvell both deftly employ the rhetoric of *carpe diem*: “seize the day”, and the chance for sexual delight, before the physical decay of aging makes attracting a lover nigh impossible. Lyrics on the topic of women and love have long enchanted readers with their delightful participation in the classical tradition inherited from Catullus and Anacreon. The fear of death, and the urgency it generates, are essential to the *carpe diem* convention, which casts the easeful valley of sensual paradise in the shadow of lurking spectre, and the cry to “eat, drink, and be merry” is inevitably followed by the sobering thought that “tomorrow we die”.⁴

While claiming that time will quickly take away the beauty that makes the coy lady so desirable, the *carpe diem* poem subsequently reinforces her desirability, and encourages her to enjoy love while she is still able to be its object. Yet the reminder “to seize the day” before it is too late also warns the beautiful maiden against valuing virginity too highly, and too much enjoying the power it gives her over men. Therein lies the tension between the woman’s desirability as a virgin and the brevity of her value as a desirable sexual object. Therefore to fully understand the rhetorical power of the *carpe diem* poem, it is necessary to determine the reasons why a young lady would choose to be, as Marvell puts it, “coy”.

Whether by promising that love (and sex) are the “ageless” pleasures of youth, or by invoking the images of old age and death as the ultimate threats to the beautiful woman, Marlowe and Marvell attempt to divert the thought of an unspoken fear associated with having sex: pregnancy.

⁴ See Anya Taylor, “Coleridge, Keats, Lamb, and Seventeenth-Century Drinking Songs”, in *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism*, ed. Lisa Low, Cambridge, 1994, 222. Taylor provides an excellent synopsis of the *carpe diem* tradition in the opening of her article, which is mainly concerned with Keats’ and Coleridge’s odes to the pleasure of drink.