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To His Coy Mistress” as *Memento Mori*: Reading Marvell after Zizek

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ABSTRACT

Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” is one of the best known and most commented on poems in the English language. According to the critical consensus, the poem is a seduction gambit in the “Carpe Diem” tradition. Interpretive debate therefore revolves around the significance of the allusions and imagery of the poem, rather than its central meaning. Moving against the current, this article challenges the critical consensus that Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” is a poem that has seduction as its main significance or implied intention. Reading the poem with attention to its ironic moments and theological references reveals that its allusions and imagery are systematically ambivalent. In the context of Marvell’s other poetry, especially “Dialogue of the Soul and the Body,” it becomes possible to show that “Coy Mistress” shares many features with these metaphysical meditations on mortality and spirituality. By making reference to psychoanalytic theory, the article then demonstrates the plausibility of a reading in which the poem aims to avoid, rather than engage, sexual desire. The poem is a monument to repression, and a reminder of mortality, not a love lyric.

KEYWORDS

Andrew Marvell, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Zizek, seduction poetry, metaphysical poets

Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (pub. 1681 but written prob. 1650-1651) is one of the most anthologized, and analyzed, poems in the English language. Explications and interpretations of the poem exist in multitudinous variety, their spectrum fanned by the ever-growing diversity of critical methods in literary studies. Commentaries exist on everything from the biblical allusions in the poem to the specific age of the presumed addressee of the poem, Maria Fairfax—fourteen, as it happens—who was Marvell's private pupil, and the daughter of the Lord General Thomas Fairfax. Yet for all their theoretical range, readings of the poem tend to display a surprising uniformity, converging on a strong consensus. The poem, according to what I shall call the standard critical position, is a "*Carpe Diem* seduction poem," along the lines of Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time" (1648): "gather ye rosebuds, while ye may"—love in haste, before the ravages of time strike. In this article, I challenge the standard position.

I want to locate the poem in a complex political theology, marked by an ambivalence about sexuality that has all of the characteristics of psychological repression. Drawing on the psychoanalytic critique of symbolic identification, conducted through the dialectical analysis of "hysterical theatre," I suggest that Marvell's "Coy Mistress" stages the desire for the impossible as an impossible desire. The performance of seduction is produced in such a way—it is produced as "despair begat upon impossibility," in Marvell's memorable definition of desire—as to guarantee its failure in advance. Accordingly, I propose that central characteristics of the poem should lead us to the conclusion that "Coy Mistress" is a *Memento Mori*. The poem is not a rose—it is a skull; an intimation of immortality, in a reminder of mortality.

The Standard Reading

The standard reading is founded on the fact that the poem cites the *Carpe Diem* tradition of Donne and Herrick, making unmistakable allusion to both poets by quoting their imagery of the running sun (Wilcher 1986: 232). Written in a rhymed iambic tetrameter that has a lyrical yet contrived quality, the core conceit is that love is the whole world for the lovers. Yet—the argument runs—although their desire is the entire spatial world (to them), they are bounded by temporality and must

therefore act now. Consistently, the poem opposes spatiality to temporality, or rather, the here and now to every elsewhere and hereafter. The occasion of the poem is a (perhaps secret) rendezvous with the young Maria (or an imagined mistress possibly in her image), upon whom feminine beauty “sits on [her] skin like morning dew”. It is clear that this approach follows an ambivalent rebuff, for the mistress’s “coyness” supposes an equivocal rejection and the poetic persona assumes her “willing soul” wants only for a “private place”. The poetic persona proposes that were it not for the realities of time and space, he would wait an eternity and cross vast distances to turn her “no” into “yes”. But the remorseless passage of time means the inexorable advance towards death: the ruination of her beauty and the desolation of his desire. Therefore, the poetic persona concludes, we should embrace right now and make the world disappear for a vigorous instant in which the lovers will be the entire world for one another. Its opening is one of the best known in English poetry (Marvell 2018: 28-29):

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.
Thou by the *Indian Ganges* side
Should'st 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.

The first stanza amplifies the “but world enough and time” of the wonderful opening with a description of how things would be, were it not for the urgency of matters. The temporality of the world (ages of time) and its continental geography (spaces of earth) could be the situation of their non-embrace and yet the poetic persona’s love for her would endure, at least long enough to arrive at the final part of her gorgeous body, the heart. The whole world and eternal ages unfold the amplitude of his willingness to court her through her endless refusals. In the second stanza, there is an inversion of the metaphor—the spatialisation of eternity as an endless desert and the temporalisation of seclusion as the moment of a missed embrace in the enclosure of a tomb—that lends urgency to the argument. But it is unquestionably time, rather than separation, that most insistently threatens this love—for her beauty and her youth are closely bound, and his romantic idealization of her is intimately connected to a frank confession of sexual lust.

But at my back I alwaies hear
Time’s wingèd Charriot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lye
Desarts of vast Eternity.
Thy Beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound
My ecchoing Song: then Worms shall try
That long preserv’d Virginitie:
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 the final stanza, the extravagance of the conceit is redeemed through a scarcely veiled metaphor for sexual intercourse, where the lovers “roll all our strength and all / Our sweetness up into one ball, / And tear our pleasures with rough strife”. The “one ball” is both the physical union of the lovers in the sexual act and the whole world rolling swiftly in advance of the sun, forcing the sun to run in

order to keep up in the sky—sexual ecstasy as the dilation of time and the prolongation of life’s transient joy.

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 am’rous birds of prey,
Rather at once our Time devour,
Than languish in his slow-chapt pow’r.
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.

Thus, the argument of the poem progresses in a quasi-syllogistic form. It begins by anticipating an objection: she will again refuse, on grounds of the inappropriateness of the time and the place. Its hyperbolic acknowledgement of the justice of her refusal serves as a *reductio*-style argument. If the poet and his beloved had infinite space and eternal time then her ambiguous refusal (“coyness”) would not be what it is, an offense against nature, because he could wait an eternity and cross the world for her. Then there is a rebuttal of the objection. Waiting for perfect conditions means an infinite desert in the future of death eternal, whereas her beauty (and thus his desire) is transient. Unconditional love would be infinite and eternal, but only in the embrace of the grave. After this clarification of its terms, the poem then restates its argument. It is better to act now, “while thy willing soul transpires / At every pore with instant fires,” in the vigorously sexual form of “rough strife,” than to wait for the jaws of time to grind youthful passion to sand.

Thus far, the poem is a brilliant recasting of Robert Herrick’s scandalously naturalistic and frankly sexual “To the Virgins,” apparently in the service of the idea behind the lines, “gather ye rosebuds ... and while ye may, go

marry". The implied meaning is that this is not a declaration of love, but rather the restatement of a seduction gambit, already once ambivalently refused on grounds of the danger of discovery. Its key assumption is that there is no deficit of will on the young lady's part, merely a set of conventional norms regulating propriety, perhaps together with some background reservations to do with mortality. "Coy Mistress" echoes many of Herrick's refrains and even adapts the motif of the running sun, making the poetic allusion unmistakable.

But before going further it is important to note two small differences from Herrick that will turn out to be highly significant. The first is that the grounds for urgency are not the positively stated and joyfully erotic "that age is best which is the first, / When youth and blood are warmer," but the negatively framed and almost macabre notion that "worms shall try / That long preserved virginity, / And your quaint honour turn to dust, / And into ashes all my lust". The implication is that it is her youth *alone*, as something irretrievably transient, which is the factor of arousal. The second is that Herrick's poem takes place in a green field under the blue skies, whereas "Mistress" happens under a burning sun that impends a vast desert. He and she inhabit the entire world and vast eternity, but then this contracts into here and now, returning into the "ball" that is both plaything (toying, sport as sexual play in seventeenth-century slang) and the great globe of a new planet. The idea is that for the lovers their love is the whole world, which implies a liberation from cultural constraints, if not from fleshy desires and natural mortality. But it also implies the permanent lack of a fully secret location, the "private place," which implies that sexual consummation must happen at risk of being public, or not at all.

The sense of inevitable exposure is not the only subtle reservation that the poem expresses. Some of the material is intentionally mocking of the poetic "blazon" of the medieval religion of love, so that, for instance, the iteration of the beauty of the lady's form descends into an itemization of parts that ridicules through exaggeration. Indeed, the final disclosure of her heart in the last age is brutally decoded in the final stanza as an organ residing somewhat lower down, as the poem modulates into unsublimated passion with its "rough strife". Furthermore, the poem is generously larded with biblical allusions, from the "rubies" that a good woman (i.e., a chaste one) is worth, or a desirable one gathers, in the opening stanza (Christian 1981), through to the iron gates of life, which recall Matthew 7:13-14 (D'Avanzo

1978). The total effect of the network of citations and allusions, hyperbole and simile, is of a measured artificiality that is out of step with the raw passion that the final stanza declares.

You might say that the poetic form only just contains the sexual passion of the closing lines, were it not that the emotional ambiance generated by the poem is exactly the opposite of erotic. A. D. Hope captured this amusingly in his poetic reply, "His Coy Mistress to Mister Marvell": all this talk about worms and graves, rough play and torn gates, seems calculated to dowse arousal rather than to lubricate acceptance of a seduction gambit (Hope 1978). The urgency achieved by the poetic persona is derived not directly, from irresistible attraction, but rather from an impossible effort to "make the sun stand still," to defy time. The ghastly image of the lovers' embrace in the grave is the imagery of desperation and desecration, not of delirious passion and sexual transportation. The disturbing idea of birds of prey tearing one another in pleasure is scarcely conducive to erotic tenderness, and, finally, and most obviously, the ambivalent and unerotic vaginal imagery of the iron gates of life—these modulate the poem from romantic idealization through desublimated sexuality towards something akin to fierce despair or desolate lust, rather than the eternalisation of the beloved or the consummation of a great love. Indeed, the ambiguous ending—time cannot be arrested, yet ecstasy might prolong the inevitable—implies the futility of the entire object of the poem. Desire is a burning zone: time and the sun are loosely identified and its searing effects likened to grinding jaws; this effect is distressing—it shows not the morning dew of young love, but the scorching mummification of the skull, beneath the blackened skin.

Questioning the Consensus

A brief sample of the commentaries will suffice as evidence for the claim that there is a strong consensus around the standard position. For Joseph Moldenhauer, "by poetic as well as persuasive criteria, 'To His Coy Mistress' stands the unchallenged masterpiece of lyrics of seduction" (Moldenhauer 1968: 206). Jules Brody agrees: the poem is a "worldly celebration of lust," one that inverts its religious tropes into seductive parody of salvation rhetoric (Brody 1989: 79). The logicians offer their support: J. V. Cunningham (Cunningham 1954: 36-38), Jeffrey Karon

(Karon 1993) and Richard Crider (Crider 1985) all think that the syllogistic structure of the poem leaves no stone unturned in quest of her “quaint ... virginity”. The tiniest details are noticed as further evidence for the poem’s seductive intent. Steven Walker sees confirmation of the poem’s seductive intent in subtle allusions to Virgil (Walker 1979). Some propose that the Phaeton myth is key to the imagery of the running sun, while others think it comes from Donne; either way, it positions the poem in the *Carpe Diem* tradition (Ray 1993: 36-38). Mark Taylor announces that the pronoun “thou,” by 1681 an archaism, “bespeaks the lover’s extreme emotional intimacy with his mistress,” (Taylor 1994: 15) while Raychel Reiff declares that “throughout the poem, Marvell carefully chooses his pronouns to help the speaker seduce his coy lady” (Reiff 2002: 198). Mario D’Avanzo provides an early example of the consensus view in a formulation that is as admirable for its theological dexterity as it is remarkable for its frank brutality:

In his argument, the speaker would find fulfillment in vigorous sexual pleasure ‘through the iron gates of life’. An example of the use of irony and allusion in the poem, the gates can be understood when seen in relation to a biblical context. They refer to the gates through which Christ’s followers are led into ‘life’ that is immortal. In Matthew 7:13-14, Christ advises: ‘Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate and broad the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it’. Marvell has seen the broad way to destruction in the deserts of vast eternity and in the grave. He prefers the narrow way into ‘life’ and knows where to find it—through her iron gates that have been chastely closed to him for so long. The iron gates refer not only to her sexual disposition but also to the condition of life as the poet sees it. Using the Bible parodically, his argument is that sexual intensity is the righteous way that ushers us through life’s gates confining iron, because, first, it perpetuates life and is in a sense a triumph over mortality, and, secondly, in its ecstatic form, as Marvell describes it, it makes time go faster and effects a temporary eternity. It

obliterates the awareness of time in reason's self-consciousness. It is a truly supernal experience offering release and freedom. Therefore, the pleasures of 'rough strife' will be the lovers' salvation; they can substitute intensity for eternity. Transport will be their temporary eternity, in that they will make time stop as did Zeus and Alcmena. The concept is a brilliant adaptation of Christ's words (D'Avanzo 1978: 19).

Yet for all of the rhetorical certainty of these declarations that "Coy Mistress" is about the "substitution of intensity for eternity," some doubts have been expressed—even by those who champion the thesis that it is a seduction poem. Thomas Wheeler, for instance, notices that Marvell's poem "stands out [from other *Carpe Diem* poetry] because of its grim vision of the grave and its passionate urging of the lovers," but he concludes that it nonetheless "does what a typical *Carpe Diem* poem does, [although] it does so with unparalleled power" (Wheeler 1996: 90). In direct contradiction to this, at the same time that he effectively notices that the poem, as exceptional within the series of other seduction poems, and so is certainly not "typical," Wheeler also observes that it is atypical for Marvell himself (Wheeler 1996: 91). Although Nigel Smith alleges that in the relevant period, Marvell was involved in Royalist literary circles and engaged in the "love culture of the Cavalier courtiers," his linkage of the poet to the endorsement of libertinage is highly speculative (Smith 2010: 72).

What we do know with a fair degree of confidence speaks to the opposite case. Marvell served with the Lord General of the Parliamentary forces and entered parliament after the civil war, acted as a secretary for John Milton and was described by the Royalists as the "poet laureate of the dissenters," and wrote poetry whose conceits are designed to resist interpretation, not to disclose superficial meanings. Against this background, there are two basic sets of reasons why the poem might turn out to be typical of Marvell—because not a seduction poem after all. The first set is generic: "metaphysical" poetry is focused around the conceit, not just as a clever vehicle for persuasion, but also as a means for the expression of paradox. The second is religious: Marvell's poetry is highly alert to the dilemmas created by Reformation theology, particularly in its Puritan aspect, which abandons the "body" to the natural world while insisting on the transcendence of the "soul".

According to Helen Gardner, the distinguishing feature of so-called “metaphysical” poetry of the middle of the seventeenth century is the use of poetic conceits as a form of rhetorical persuasion, combined with the post-Elizabethan preference for the “strong line” that is “harsh of style”—i.e., for everyday language (Gardner 1985: 16). Donne and Marvell in particular fused this with metaphysical reflection about “the nice speculations of philosophy” on affect and meaning, perception and ideas, life and death, mortality and immortality, in a poetry that contemporaries found “hard of conceit” (Gardner 1985: 15-16). “Conceit” here means both conceptualization – hard to understand – and the metaphorical vehicle for poetic understanding that took the form of a “comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness” (Gardner 1985: 19). Two things stand out about the metaphysicals in general, and Marvell in particular: their use of ordinary occasions and common language as a point of departure for extraordinary perceptions and complex ideation; and, their interest in the “curious” (strange, interesting) conceits of philosophy as expressed through poetic simile, in a poetry of quasi-argumentative rhetorical persuasion. Although contemporaries and subsequent critics complained that these poems “set understanding on the Rack,” the difficulties spring not from the language or the images, but from the intellectual complexity of the material (Gardner 1985: Burton cited 16). Marvell was a worldly and sophisticated man living in a disenchanted and violent age. He disdained naïve immediacy for intellectual declarations of mediated expressions of faith (or its opposite), resigned expressions of desire (or its absence). He was no longer interested in the late medieval religion of love, so that “innocence” refers not to spiritual purity, but to sexual inexperience. He was too culturally experienced not to realize that even the most passionate declaration is always-already scripted by poetic convention, which he distances through hyperbolic exaggeration and wry citation, even as he seeks to come closer to the desire for sexual consummation and romantic idealisation which occasions it. The conceit is the poetic vehicle for this complex play of ambivalence and engagement, immediacy and mediation. According to Gardner, “the first impression that a conceit [in general] makes is of ingenuity rather than of justice; the metaphysical conceit aims at making us concede justness while admiring ingenuity” (Gardner 1985: 21). The reason for this is that metaphysical poetry uses the effect of surprise of a striking simile within a vivid moment as the opening for a poetic demonstration that articulates the simile into a poetic argument.

Argument and persuasion, and the use of the conceit as their instrument, are the elements or body of a metaphysical poem. Its quintessence or soul is the vivid imagining of a moment of experience or of a situation out of which the need to argue, or persuade, or define, arises. Metaphysical poetry is famous for its abrupt, personal openings in which a man speaks to his mistress, or addresses his God ... [but these openings] inspire poems which are metaphysical ... [in which for instance] lovers ponder such questions as 'can love subsist without the things that animated it?' and 'shall we meet again in another world and if so will we know each other?' (Gardner 1985: 22, 26).

The conceit that organizes "Coy Mistress" is not the winged chariot, as is sometimes supposed, but the globe of the world, that becomes the two birds of prey struggling in flight, and then the ball of the lovers entwined (Heaton 1972). That conceit is framed by the arena in which the globe is suspended, a flat expanse of time likened to a desert, scorched by the rotation of the chariot of the sun around it, that wears down the lovers by its endless repetition. For Marvell, as for Newton at about the same time, it is impossible to think the motion of a body without simultaneously imagining the frame of reference, against which it moves, as an absolute background. Space and time, for Marvell, are reciprocally presupposed, just as, for him, are body and soul, and indeed, temporality, as eternity, clearly wears a theological, in fact, an eschatological, mask, in this poem. The play of absence and presence at work here creates a suggestive framework of differences and equivalences, so that, as we shall see in a moment, temporality and spirituality line up against spatiality and materiality, along the axis defined by the master opposition of the soul and the body (respectively).

The poem is larded with biblical allusions (the Jews, the Flood, the Iron Gates) but the immortal soul is scrupulously avoided—instead, the imagery of "deserts of vast eternity" at best invokes the dreary classical afterlife. But these biblical allusions in the poem in fact announce the religious reservations that undermine any seductive intent. The key reference is the "iron gates" of Matthew 7: 13-14, already glossed for us by D'Avanzo, which allude to the "strait gate" through which only those without sin can pass. The allusion conjures immortality indirectly,

reinforcing the ambiguity of “time’s winged chariot,” which means not only “time flies – act now,” but also that temporality is vengeance and annihilation. Temporality itself is a key agent in the poem and it operates within an ironic inversion of biblical eschatology (instead of culmination of time in redemption, the suspension of time in a moment of intensity). The addressee is enjoined to find fulfillment in sexual vigorous pleasure, not spiritual redemption. This teleological conception of time adds persuasive force to the “gather ye rosebuds” motif, but it also subtly sabotages it, because even though natural time is swapped for spiritual redemption, the effect is that of a *vanitas*. The ultimate aim here is to “remember the soul”.

Here, the implicit argument is against consummation, because sexuality means the onset of death, with the implication that the glowing flesh conceals the black skull. Life is represented as a flight forwards through pleasure into bleak desolation, one insistently connected in Marvell’s “Mower” poems with the sickle that is at once the scythe of death and the act of generation (Klause 1983: 70). Indeed, the satirical exaggeration of the blazon implies that the real message is the worms and the grave—the reminder of mortality makes the instant of pleasure vanish into nothingness. This *memento mori* motif means that the ultimate implication of the poem is that decay is universal, rather than that corporeal love is triumphant. The conceit, in other words, is the vehicle for the affirmation of a dialectic, namely, that in the gyre of thinking, the absolutisation of the body turns inevitably into the absoluteness of the soul, just as intensity fades into eternity.

The Soul and the Body

“Perhaps the central problem in Marvell criticism,” Cherniak writes, “is how to reconcile the two Marvells”:

On the one hand ... the detached, fastidious, sophisticated ironist, author of ... ‘To His Coy Mistress’ ...; on the other, there is the radical Puritan, the political activist and moralist, serious, committed, and uncompromising in his political and religious beliefs, the author of ‘A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure’ (Cherniak 1977: 268).

My suggestion is that the two Marvell's are in fact one. For "Coy Mistress" is a dialectical poem that is entirely consistent with "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure," and its related poem, the "Dialogue of the Soul and the Body," as well as with the better known "The Unfortunate Lover". "Lover" and the two dialogue poems are probably also written in 1651, and they are the clue here to the use of a poetic mask in "Coy Mistress," where the voice of Pleasure-and-the-Body takes the form of a masterful seducer. The poem, in other words, is an extension of the debate between Body and the Soul, where the Body concedes: "What but a Soul could have the wit / To build me up for Sin so fit? / So architects do square and hew / Green trees that in the forest grew" (Marvell 1985a: 247). We are intended to reject the specious argument that we can swap intensity for eternity, because in the sequence of the poem, this actually fails to happen and therefore to convince. Instead of the fate of Zeus and Alcmena, who did make the sun stand still, the lovers make time (through the running sun) race forward—exactly the opposite of their intentions. And it is precisely the implicit failure of the naturalistic perspective, together with the biblical allusions, that alerts the reader that rejection of the naturalistic perspective is predicated on acceptance of the religious vision. The Body wins this part of the dialogue, only to lose to the Soul, because the body cannot triumph over time and, contra John Klause, the cycle of the dying generations is not regarded here as a substitute form of immortality (Klause 1983: 171-74).

Like "The Unfortunate Lover" and "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure," then, which I am proposing it strongly resembles, "Coy Mistress" depends on images of devouring sexuality for its erotic ambivalence. In "Unfortunate Lover," love is a tyrannous cormorant who "doth bill his [the lover's] breast," until he stands, "naked and fierce," "dressed / In his own blood" (Marvell 1985b: 244). Cormorant love joins up with the "amorous birds of prey" of "Coy Mistress," whose "rough strife" is a rending metaphor for the "beast with two backs," something alluded to in a subtler vein when the Soul complains to Pleasure in "A Dialogue" that it stays "to bait so long upon the way" to death (Marvell 1985c: 237). To "bait" is not just to stop and eat, but to pause in order to wolf something down. In "Coy Mistress," the tearing birds also announce the abrupt transition from romantic idealization to sexual passion, something that is systematically linked to other images of sexual love as a devouring passion—time's jaws, the poet fishing.

Sexuality has the capacity to “eat up” the human being, like an “ulcer” (in “Body and Soul”), to hollow them out and leave only the grinning skull. The implication is an associative link between sexuality and predation, devoration and mortality, that belies the *carpe diem, carpe florem* official motif.

From the Freudian perspective, the “primal scene” of sexual intercourse in the infantile imagination involves a violent attack, one that, because of the lack of integration of the child’s sexual drives, is figured in oral or anal terms, rather than in genital imagery (Freud 1917: 371-75). In the retroactivity characteristic of fantasy, the primal scene is figured in terms of the activity or passivity of the drive, linked particularly in the sexual fantasies of masculine subjects with images of castrating females, especially through oral assault, and particularly as birds of prey (Freud 1910: 61-62). The Freudian line is followed up by Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker, in a series of ingenious readings of Marvell as a queer poet, where they insist that for Marvell, heterosexual maturation means proximity to a devouring femininity (Hirst and Zwicker 2012: 41-73). On this reading, it is not accidental that the assumed scene of the poem’s address—a secretive tryst somewhere in the gardens of Appleton House, where the ageing tutor seeks to seduce his teenage pupil, right under the nose of her father, the Lord General—summons up imagery of the terror of discovery and the futility of urgency. In a series of ingenious readings that complicate the standard position, Derek Hirst and Steven Zwicker have argued for a queer interpretation of Marvell’s work, suggesting that the enemies who mocked “Milton the stallion, and Marvell the gelding” may have been onto something. Heterosexual erotic arousal can only happen on condition that it is figured as suspended in an alabaster image or imagined in the transgressive form of pedophilia (Hirst and Zwicker 2012: 74-102). In essence, Hirst and Zwicker suggest that the poem is a defensive camouflage constructed to protect a set of homoerotic investments, and that Marvell’s interest is in a potentially receptive disposition to seduction that is not specifically female. A strong current of homoerotic desire also passes along Marvell’s line of poetic development, one carefully concealed behind the circulation of poems such as “Coy Mistress,” which acts as a lure and decoy (Hirst and Zwicker 2012: 103-28).

The Zizekian perspective that I am advocating here reverses the Freudian conclusion, because it focuses on the constitution of desire in its

articulation, its dramatization, rather than on the supposed biological object of the sexual drives. Sexuality, in truth, is being avoided, not engorged, in Marvell's "Coy Mistress". The Danubian Iron Gates are part of this aversion, without question, for they conjure the image of woman as castration. But this evasion of sexuality needs to be connected with the possibility (or impossibility) of love. In particular, the desire figured in "Coy Mistress" needs to be linked to its *impossibility*, conveniently located in the heart of a beloved likely to resist "until the conversion of the Jews". According to Žižek:

Desire in its purity is of course 'death drive,' it occurs when the subject assumes without restraint their 'being-towards-death,' the ultimate annihilation of its symbolic identity—that is, when it endures confrontation with the Real, with the impossibility constitutive of desire. The so-called 'normal' resolution of the Oedipus Complex—the symbolic identification with the paternal metaphor; that is to say, with the agency of prohibition—is ultimately nothing but a way for the subject to avoid the impasse constitutive of desire, by transforming the inherent impossibility of its satisfaction into its prohibition: as if desire would be possible to fulfil if it were not for the prohibition impeding its free rein (Žižek 1991: 266-67).

The spectacle of desperate trysting and furtive intensity, staged by the poem as public exposure beneath the withering and pitiless gaze of eternity, articulates desire as, in the words of Marvell's "Definition of Love," "despair / Begotten upon impossibility" (Marvell 1985d: 252-53). Yet, as Michael Di Santo perceptively notes, the impossibility in question is properly speaking perverse, insofar as it is the impossibility of desire itself, and not just a desire for the impossible/prohibited: Marvell's interest in Maria Fairfax (and related figures, such as the child T. C.) is less an interest in premature sexuality, than an interest in sexual prematurity (Di Santo 2008: 174). Contra Hirst and Zwicker, who worry about "Eros and Abuse" in relation to Marvell's poem (Hirst and Zwicker 2007), the figure of the "Coy Mistress" is entirely "safe," because, through a complex dialectic, the poem aims at her *de*-sexualization, her spiritualization, not at her sexualization. Žižek's commentary on Hamlet's neurotic sabotage of his own revenge is pertinent here, for

Marvell's poem stages a similar piece of "hysterical theatre" (Žižek 1989: 191). In hysteria, an impeded traumatic kernel is converted into a somatic symptom, Žižek argues, but "in 'dramatising' his position, the subject renders manifest what remains unspoken in it, what *must* remain unspoken for this position to maintain its consistency" (Žižek 1991: 142). Hamlet in fact does everything possible to alert Claudius to his (ambivalent) intentions; just so, the poet stages the seduction gambit in a way guaranteed to dissuade the mistress from consummation. But if the soul is alluded to by its absence, what is it that "*must* remain unspoken" in "Coy Mistress"?

For there is desire at work in the poem—a desire, if you like, for desire, a desire for an impossible desire. The enigma of the poem, of course, is that it is unlikely to have ever been presented to Maria Fairfax, enjoying, rather, a pre-publication history of furtive circulation amongst a private coterie of sympathetic intellectuals. The "Coy Mistress" is instrumentalised—the scandalized critics are right about this—but this instrumentalisation is not sexual; it is a *de*-sexualising objectification, in the service of a desire for eternity, or, more accurately, for immortality. Nigel Smith's translation of Marvell's "Fragment—Upon an Eunuch: A Poet," allows the poet to gloss this idea, as follows:

Nec sterilem te crede; licet, mulieribus exul,
Falcem virginiae nequeas immittere messi,
Et nostro peccare modo. Tibi Fama perennè
Proegnabit; rapiesque novem de monte Sorores;
Et pariet modulos *Echo* repetita Nepotes.

Do not believe yourself sterile; although, an exile from women, you cannot thrust a sickle at the virgin harvest, and sin in our fashion. Fame will be continually pregnant by you and you will ravish the nine sisters from the mountain; Echo too, repeatedly assailed, will bring forth musical offspring (Smith 2003: 188).

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