

Guileful Empresses of the Heart: Miss Representations in the Poetry of Marvell and Barbauld

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“I crave your mouth, your voice, your hair.”
~ Pablo Neruda

If English poet Andrew Marvell had lived to hear Neruda’s words then he would have tipped his hat in agreement. The image of the stereotypical woman - the embodiment of grace and beauty - is embedded deep in the minds of individuals, for even Aristotle believed that “[t]he relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled” (*The Politics* 40-41). As women tried to climb their way out of this box brimming with inferiority they were mocked not only by men, but also women. In response to Mary Wollstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” (a proto-feminist work that advocated for women’s strength and intellect over weakness) “The Rights of Woman” by Anna Barbauld was written to protest against the rise of women over men. Through textual analysis of the genre, tone, and imagery of “The Rights of Woman” by Anna Barbauld and “To His Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvell, one can decipher the contrasting yet similar views these two poets have in regard to the role of women. As shown in the crude, shallow attitude the speaker in Marvell’s poem has towards his mistress, and the sarcastic manner in which the speaker in Barbauld’s poem speaks of women who she feels wish to rule men. From the woman’s perspective, love will untangle the misunderstandings between men and women. While from the man’s view, women are little more than a reprieve from the inevitability of death, and the saviors of his crumbling lust. Both poets, one male and the other female, represent women by using the standard guidelines provided by patriarchal societies in which women will never “kiss the golden scepter of . . . reign” (Barbauld 8).

Anna Barbauld’s poem “The Rights of Woman” and Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” are written in genres that correspond to the messages incorporated within each poem. “The Rights of Woman” is a poem of protest, and “To His Coy Mistress” is a lyrical poem. Barbauld’s poem begins by protesting the suffering of women under patriarchy. The line, “Woman! too long degraded, scorned, opprest;” (2) appears to bemoan the state of women whom it calls to revolt. This strophic poem contains eight stanzas, the first six are dedicated to the speaker’s protest against the oppression of women. A volta occurs in the

seventh stanza, revealing the speaker's loyalty shifting and illustrating their resistance to a world dominated by women: "But hope not, courted idol of mankind, / On this proud eminence secure to stay;" (25). The speaker suggests that ruling over men may end in women's favour, but it will never result in their freedom (20). For the speaker, attempting to unshackle oneself from patriarchal rule by twisting the handcuffs on the oppressors is not the answer; instead the answer lies in the true love between men and women (32).

At first glance, it appears that both speakers in "To His Coy Mistress" and "The Rights of Woman" are advocating for love between men and women, but as Barbauld uses the genre of protest, Marvell employs the lyrical genre to uncover another layer to the poem. A lyric, the most general of all poetic forms, conveys the idea of intense emotions. In Marvell's poem, the speaker's desire to convince his mistress to lay with him are the intense feelings around which the poem is organized. This stichic poem has three parts which, in this poem, combine to express not only the speaker's attitude towards his mistress, but also his constant fear of running out of time. The sound of his mortality ticking away elicits a helpless emotion in Marvell's speaker that leads to his fear of his lust dissipating "into ashes" (Marvell 30). The speaker's emotional distress can be sensed in the lyrical poem, but the shallow fear of his lust crumbling is not the crux of this fear. Rather the speaker's genuine fear lies in his inevitable death symbolized by "time's wingèd chariot" (22). Throughout history women have been used as objects to increase a man's pride, wealth, or political status. In keeping with this tradition, Marvell's speaker uses his mistress to mask his own fear of death; by perusing and pressuring her, by reminding her that she must hurry before her time runs out, the speaker projects his own fears onto his interlocutor. The parallel between the two chases (man and woman, death and man) portrays the way men continue to exploit women for their own needs; whether it be for money, politics, or security.

Furthermore, the connection between the women in both poems is revealed when women are told to, "Resume thy native empire o'er the breast!" (Barbauld 4). This line can be interpreted as a command for women to gain control over their emotions, or it may also be seen as an order to rule over the emotions of men. If one were to take either of these analyses into account, then one may conclude that Marvell's speaker's despair over running out of time is soothed by a woman who was demanded in "The Rights of Woman" to take control of the heart of the matter. Although this theory creates an image of a woman ruling over a man, there is an ironic twist that lies in this notion: no matter how hard women try to become stronger they are only given jurisdiction over the matters of the heart.

Andrew Marvell and Anna Barbauld use mocking tones in their poems in order to ridicule women. In "The Rights of Woman," the speaker begins by stating, "Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!" (Barbauld 1), and continues to urge women to claim the empires they rightfully deserve (13). From the first to the sixth stanzas, women are described as conquerors, however as stanza seven is revealed, the speaker adds a new colour to a woman's empire: loneliness. Women assume that ruling over men will bring them joy, but according to Barbauld's speaker, they are unaware of how "subdued" their lives will be once their passion withers away (27). Barbauld's diction which comprises of "breast," "angel," and "pureness," reemphasizes the stereotypical woman who is pristine and virtuous, and more fit to rule over the emotional aspects of life (4-5). The poem begins with women courageously ruling over men and ends with the speaker insisting that they should "abandon each ambitious thought," and merely love the men they are with (29-30). This shift sarcastically shows women that what they desire is not feasible.

Barbauld's sardonic tone mirrors the tone in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." Like Barbauld, Marvell uses diction to create a scornful tone in the poem. From Marvell's title, one can instantly grasp the speaker's mocking tone from the word "coy." By using "coy," Marvell's speaker is implying that his mistress is pretending to be shy and modest when, in reality, she is neither of these things. The mistress is depicted as a calculating woman who uses the *pretense* of modesty to appear enticing. Marvell's speaker also states that although the mistress' beauty deserves a hundred years of praise, he can hear, "Times wingèd chariot hurrying near" (22), and soon her beauty will fade away. Thus, the speaker insists that the mistress should abandon any notions of chastity, and join him while she is still beautiful with a "youthful hue" (33). The reminder of the mistress' beauty fading over time accentuates the notion that a woman's value is heavily weighed on her physical appeal, her virtue (which, if left intact, will be feasted on by worms) and her honour, that will "turn to dust" (29). The word "dust" amplifies the speaker's derisive tone and strips "virginity" of its essence, crassly turning it into an object that, like her, will soon fade away if unused. While Marvell uses a sarcastic tone to persuade his mistress to join him, Barbauld uses a mocking tone to demolish women's dream of rising up.

The imagery in "The Rights of Woman" and "To His Coy Mistress" echo the two central themes of the poems: women symbolized as divine beings of pure essence, and women portrayed as ephemeral objects used as distractions from the eminent fear of death. In "The Rights of Woman," Anna Barbauld alludes to divine concepts to characterize women as celestial and soft creatures. In the poem, the speaker calls out for women to "Go forth arrayed in panoply divine" (5), and paints the image of angelic women peacefully gathering to rule. The religious imagery in "The Rights of Woman" corresponds to the biblical reference in "To His Coy Mistress." The speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" states that he would, "Love you [his mistress] ten years before the flood, / And you should, if you please, refuse / Till the conversion of the Jews." (8-10). The flood the speaker alludes to is the story of The Great Flood, and the conversion of the Jews is used to emphasize the point that if they had more time (from the time of The Great Flood to the conversion of the Jews) he would pursue her and she could continue in her coyness, but in the speaker's reality they do not have that much time.

In addition, in "The Rights of Woman" women are described in a dainty fashion with the words "soft" and "blushes" (Barbauld 9,10). The description of women's physical characteristics in "The Rights of Woman" connects to the way the speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" claims that he would spend years admiring the mistress' physique: "Two hundred to adore each breast, / But thirty thousand to the rest;" (Marvell 15-16). Furthermore, Barbauld's speaker creates images of war and of conquest, which contrast against the "angel pureness" of the women who are trying to win the war and rule the empire (6), to highlight the impossibility of the women's dream. The speaker instructs women to "gird thyself with grace;" (9) which, once again, associates women with grace, and shows that Barbauld's speaker remains attached to the typical image of a woman. In addition, this delicate and beautiful woman is portrayed as the mistress in "To His Coy Mistress," and although these poems are written by a man and a woman, they still contain the conventional descriptions of women.

The other imagery in "To His Coy Mistress" consist of time, dust, and tide—all three of which are fleeting images and symbolize an end. Man, and woman (with her beauty) will eventually die down just like the tide. "Ashes," "dust," and "grave" are used to remind his

mistress that death is near and she should abandon her coyness before it catches up to them (Marvell 29-31). Marvell's imagery highlights his fear of death, and the manner in which he views women is echoed in the words of Barbauld's speaker. Both poets see women as soft beings whose minds are never discussed and whose beauty and "pureness" is praised.

"To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile...Any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and seductiveness" (de Beauvoir 348). A woman's role is confined by society. She is seen as a caregiver, and as a wife. Her name is attached to a man's, and her identity is recognized through his. She is regarded for her beauty and fertility rather than her intelligence and her skill. She is the empress of sentiments, but her empire lacks the strength to stand on its own. Anna Barbauld, was a woman who lived in the 18th Century and believed these notions to be true and her poem, "The Rights of Woman," portrays her reluctance in supporting women who wished to detach themselves from these stereotypes. A woman's beauty and virtue are objects of desire for men like the speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell. The genre, tone, and imagery of both poems reflect the poets' regard for women. Barbauld believes that the differences between men and women will vanish in the face of true love between the two thus, women have no need to rule over men. A female poet renews the classic image of a woman being ruled by her emotions, while a male poet uses this classically beautiful woman as a reprieve - an escape from running out of time in his life. His mistress is used as a shield to deflect him from pondering about the deeper fears of life; she is used for her body, for her face, and to satisfy his needs. Men are established as the superior sex in both poems, while females are deemed 'coy' and 'cold' when they exhibit an ounce of personality. The universal representation of women is still in the process of developing, and will continue to improve as time flies by on its chariot. But at least, presently, one can sigh in relief at the sight of men and women changing enough to allow a woman to be the sovereign of her own empire.

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