

Argumentation analysis in Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*

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Abstract*

O presente trabalho consiste em fazer uma análise do poema "To His Coy Mistress" de Andrew Marvell, mostrando as intenções e argumentações do "eu lírico" para persuadir sua amada a sucumbir a seus apelos sexuais e apreciar os prazeres da vida enquanto eles ainda são jovens. Os recursos poéticos do poema foram analisados para que fosse possível uma exposição de como a argumentação é construída. Dessa análise foi concluído que o poema de Marvell é uma união perfeita e harmoniosa entre lirismo e argumentação lógica bem fundamentada.

The main objective of this paper is to present a brief analysis concerning Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" in terms of how argumentation is dealt with to persuade the beloved to enjoy the pleasures proportionated by sexual intercourse while they are still young.

"To His Coy Mistress" belongs to the lyric genre due to the fact that it follows the patterns established in what is commonly determined a "love poem". The poem is rich in emotion and subjectivity, because the persona disguises his real intention, that is, to persuade the young woman to enjoy sensual pleasures while there is youth. The strategy used to disguise the persona's real intention is to pretend love feelings so that his beloved can succumb to his appeals.

According to Guerin (1966:53), the poem fits into the classical tradition of *carpe diem*, that is, seize the moment freely, without any preoccupation with the future. This idea of *carpe diem* is clearly present in the poem, since the speaker mentions nothing concerning any future engagement. On the contrary, his main objective is to appreciate the moment without thinking of a future pledge. This kind of thought is more frequently found in the male's mind, specially in the 16th century, when certain values, such as virginity, were stricter and more expected in marriage because of the social-religious patterns of that society. However, when the persona addresses the beloved, he is only thinking of enjoying sensual

pleasures, and the fact of persuading the addressee becomes more important than any concern with social conventions.

On reading the poem, the reader can clearly perceive that the persona's intention is to convince his mistress to relent to his appeals. To reach his main purpose, the persona introduces one of the motifs of the poem: space-time, which suggests the speaker's preoccupation with the passing of time since the waiting is unbearable, because the persona is conscious of the brevity of life and, specially, the brevity of youth. The reader can perceive this affirmation in these lines, "Had we but world enough, and time, / This coyness, Lady, were no crime". For this reason, the persona has urgency to persuade the addressee to break with moral conventions belonging to society in the late 1500s. In that time, English society was influenced by severe moral and religious patterns, therefore, the shyness mentioned in the title and in the second line would be considered no crime by the persona if time were infinite. However, her coyness is considered a crime in the poem, since time is not going to stop, youth is not going to languish and the woman's coyness would not allow her to enjoy life pleasures.

The speaker uses syllogism as a strategy of argumentation, that is, "a process of logic in which two general statements (called premise) lead to a more particular statement"¹. The poem's first stanza depicts a premise employing an unreal present: (Had we but world enough, and time.). The inversion means: If they had all the time in the world. Thus, the use of unreal present deconstructs any naive and lyrical conception of time. Since the most important information in a typical English sentence is normally at the end of the sentence, the word 'time' is emphasized and the addressee may not give too much importance to the inversion at the very beginning of the first line. Therefore, the reader must be made aware of the speaker's discourse since his strategy is basically to convince

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¹ Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995:1479.

the addressee to fulfill his needs.

The second premise surfaces in the second stanza. There is no time enough to woo as it was proposed in the first stanza from lines two to nineteen. This shift is marked by the word "but" which carries the idea of contrast. The fact is that the persona is aware that there is not much time at all and once life is gone, their opportunities to love are gone as well. The metaphor of "winged chariot hurrying near" emphasizes the passage of time and death. Also, the persona employs present and future in the second stanza in opposition to the unreal present in the first stanza. The conclusion of the persona's argumentation can be noticed in the final stanza when the persona, using the present tense, argues that they should love each other now, while they are passionate and before youth passes away.

Following the construction of the persona's syllogism, his logical argumentation makes use of many conditions employing the subjunctive mood to transmit the idea that, if facts were different, then results could be different; if facts were not so urgent, then results could be postponed. Thus, the conditional sequence can be perceived in these lines, "Had we but world enough, and time,/ This coyness, Lady, were no crime". In these lines, the maiden's coyness also reflects the social-moral behavior that a woman was expected to have in that society, in that century. However, if the young woman succumbed to the speaker's solicitation, then, his desires could be achieved. According to the first premise, the speaker employs the device called hyperbole (vast exaggeration) to call attention to the impossibility of wasting much time with courtly love (lines 2 to 19). This exaggeration is used to represent a contrary intention because he notes that in terms of form he follows courtly love. The lines, "An hundred years should go to praise / Thine eyes and thy forehead gaze; / Two hundred to adore each breast, / But thirty thousand to the rest", exemplify this exaggeration. If, on one hand, the persona uses time hyperbole, on the other hand he uses space hyperbole when the speaker mentions that he and his beloved could be separated by the distance between the Ganges River of India and the Humber River of England. In both cases, the speaker's main purpose is to provoke the lady's smile. Also, the reader can observe that the persona expresses timelessness in courtly love, starting with the Biblical Flood and the expected future conversion of the Jews, as seen in these lines, "Love you ten years before the Flood, / And you should, if you please, refuse / Till the conversion of the Jews".

Another interesting point to be observed is how the persona's intentions are expressed. His

strategies do not resort a grotesque discourse. On the contrary, the poem reveals the persona's social position: an erudite man who knows how to use words in a sophisticated and philosophical way, showing his religious and classical background, which can be easily perceived along the poem in the allusions to Greek mythology, courtly love and the Bible.

The second premise (stanza two) implies that there is not enough time. And according to Guerin (1966:110), a radical shift occurs changing the poem "from the soft sell" (a romantic way to express the poet's intention under the form of a love poem) of the first stanza to the " hard sell" (non romantic elements and a need to hurry expressed through cruder images). From lines 25 to 32, the poet reveals a dramatic effect related to naturalistic time, governed by laws of nature such as death, youth's extinction and the body's decay. For this reason, the persona wants to reaffirm that after death there is nothing more, neither beauty, nor warmth of virginity. Then, an opposition implying cold and hard is made through the expression marble vault (line 26). The word 'vault' has the literary meaning of woman's vagina and the word 'marble' carries the idea of hardness and coldness. Thus, the line has the connotation of the female genitals: "Thy beauty shall no more be found,/ Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound". Therefore, death means the end of every human sensation. The non fulfillment of the persona's intention can be compared to death. That is why he employs all the images related to time passing quickly, of not having time enough in opposition to timelessness in the first stanza. The persona uses more arguments to convince the addressee not to deny herself to him since, if she does, "worms shall try that long preserved virginity,/ And your quaint honor turn to dust.

If the first premise is conditional, the second premise is categorical in affirming that they do not have time to follow courtly love suggested in the first stanza. This way, the perception of time's evasion leads the speaker to realize a real fact: when the woman's youth passes away, the woman's desire passes away as well. Since the persona thinks that the young woman also feels sexual desire ("And while thy willing soul transpire"), the persona arrives at a logical deduction: they should fulfill their sexual intercourse before time, youth and desire languish. However, the maiden may become flushed because of embarrassment when faced by the speaker's appeals. According to Bonaparte (apud Guerin (1966:112), this last word 'fire', "in the unconscious, is a classical symbol of urethral eroticism", and " the poet conveys a sense of

desperated ecstasy". However, a woman reader may read these lines: "And while thy willing soul transpires / At every pore with instant fires," like flushes that the addressee shows in her face, reflecting her embarrassment because she is being sexually harassed.

The final stanza presents the conclusion, in which the speaker points out the necessity to fulfill his appeals while enthusiasm, desires and freshness of youth still exist. Because the final stanza is the poem's closure, the speaker clearly reinforces the invitation, and the persona uses the imperative mood, as it can be perceived in these lines: "Let us sport us while we may" and "Let us roll all our strength and all" so that they can finally appreciate each other and follow their sexual instincts.

In the lines, "Now therefore, while the youthful hue", "Now let us sport us while we may" and "And now, like amorous birds of prey", the speaker resorts to the word 'now', suggesting the persona's preoccupation with the current moment. Once more the image of time passing fast by, youth and desire going away, is emphasizing the idea of seizing the moment. Then, in the third invitation, the persona's tone starts to change, suggesting violence and aggression. This idea is reinforced by the following line, "And tear our pleasure with rough strife". This part is presented as uncivilized, wild love, without any delicacy. Besides, the use of the word 'tear' and the metaphor, "through the iron gates of life", also means aggression and anxiety to finally fulfill his sexual love. In addition, according to Guerin (1966:57), the word "thus", in the last line, emphasizes the speaker's arguments to convince the young woman of the brevity of life. And the speaker completes his conclusion saying that, as they cannot make the sun stop, since the sun's movement represents time, then, they will make the sun run, fulfilling their sensual love in accelerated rhythm.

To sum up, the two last lines present themselves as a rebellion against life's natural cycle. Because the persona is not resigned to the passing of time and the inevitability of death, then he suggests an intense experience able to fulfill his instincts. The persona does not accept successive days as it is suggested by the sun's cycle. On the contrary, he points the need of making use of time with intense passion.

To His Coy Mistress

*Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime.*

*We would sit down and think which way
To talk and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst 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.*

*But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,
And your quaint honor turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust:
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.*

*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 amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once out time devour
Than languish in his slow-chapped power.*

*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.*

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