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Marlowe, Raleigh, and Dickinson: The Fragility of Love

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Marlowe, Raleigh, and Dickinson: The Fragility of Love

Throughout time, love remains one of the most popular themes in literature. In 1599, Christopher Marlowe wrote the poem “The Passionate Shepherd to his Love.” It was considered one of the best romantic poems written by that time, and praised highly, until Sir Walter Raleigh refuted all that the poem stood for with his reply, “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd.” Centuries later, Emily Dickinson wrote “I Cannot Live with you,” a deceptively simple poem that, although it was never proclaimed a response to the two aforementioned poems, has aspects which suggest that it is a continuation, or sheds light upon, the conflict between the shepherd and the Nymph. Raleigh’s poem obviously relates to Marlowe’s, due to its nearly identical structure and conflicting ideas mirroring exactly what Marlowe passed as romantic. Dickinson’s piece does not correlate quite as easily to the other two poems—whereas Marlowe and Raleigh appear to discuss the connections between love and physical things, and how everything will come to pass, Dickinson focuses more on the psychological and moral aspect of the severe risk one takes when he or she chooses to love someone else. Even though Dickinson’s poem does not seem to be as blatantly connected as Raleigh’s is to Marlowe’s, readers may see it as a continuation of the argument between Marlowe and Raleigh, due to the recurring themes of the effects of youthfulness and aspects of fragility present in love and one’s self while in love, and the ways in which these themes affect not only a person, but that person’s physical, moral, and spiritual future.

“The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd” connects to “The passionate Shepherd to his love in almost every way possible. First, the formatting is nearly identical. Raleigh chooses to follow

the same structure as Marlowe, and also uses many of his phrases. By doing so, he accentuates the fact that he is indeed trying to continue the argument between the Nymph and the Shepherd by refuting all of Marlowe's intentions.

Marlowe's poem mainly discusses all of the wonderful experiences the goddess would partake in if she chooses to live with the shepherd. The perspective of the poem comes from the shepherd, and he appears hopeful and loving by his tone. He believes that he can win the goddess over, even though he knows he cannot offer her the expensive possessions that other men could, due to his poor lifestyle. Thus, he offers her all of the gifts of nature. These gifts, as it will relate to Raleigh's argument, albeit natural, are still material and eventually will dwindle just as any gold talisman would. In some of the lines of the poem, it even appears as the shepherd is, on some level, bribing the goddess. For example, he states: "The shepherds' swains shall dance and sing/for thy delight each May Morning" (21-22). He goes on to suggest that if the goddess might enjoy such praise, she should come live with him. By today's standards, this seems demeaning, but at the time it may have seemed a very romantic gesture. However, the goddess, in her wisdom, observes the ignorance in the shepherd's argument and refutes it.

Sir Raleigh's poem, told from the perspective of the Nymph the Shepherd loves, reveals a sophisticated yet entirely crushing argument against the seemingly romantic suggestion of Marlowe's poem. The narrator goes down the list of romantic suggestion the shepherd made one by one, showing why they are nothing more than folly. For example, in Marlowe's piece, the shepherd states the following:

And I will make thee beds or roses,
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flower, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle; (9-12)

This reads as a romantic stanza describing only one of the many troubles the shepherd will go through to make sure the goddess would be content. He relates his pleasing her to nature, which creates an illusion of being connected to the soul rather than material possessions. The shepherd speaks confidently in his promises, probably because he is from a small village and knows that nay of the girls there would be more than content with a whole bed of roses, and other various possessions consisting of various flowers. Unlike these girls, the goddess is immortal, and therefore infinitely wiser, and realizes the fleeting nature of such promises, along with their ultimate emptiness. She replies to the shepherd with this:

The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields;
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall. (9-12)

She explains to the ignorant shepherd that promises and earthly, materialistic items are not what are important over time; eventually those things will break or wither, and all that will be left is the soul. She also mentions that “a honey tongue” (11), such as the Shepherd’s when he promises the Goddess endless pleasure, is just as trivial as the objects she is offered. Therefore, the goddess proves not nearly as impressed with the Shepherd’s promises as she would be if he had promised her his entire being and all of his time and affection.

Another reason the Goddess gives the Shepherd for being unable to love him is the certainty of his death, and the uncertainty of her own. She suggests that she would not be able to handle such an occurrence, and she would also be made vulnerable to the possibility of having her love dwindle over time. She describes such an instance in the last stanza, where she states: “But could youth last and love still breed...my mind might move/to live with thee and be thy love” (21, 23-24). In these lines, the Goddess confesses that if circumstances were different, she

might perhaps love the Shepherd. But, with the specter of death and whether or not their love would prosper, the Goddess admits that she could not possibly live with and love the shepherd.

Raleigh's and Marlowe's poems read almost identical in structure and content, and at first glance, Emily Dickinson's poem "I Cannot Live with you" does not seem related to them. It appears so because of the sheer difference in formatting, tone, and content. Marlowe's poem is youthful and loving, while Raleigh's is fierce and wisely belligerent, but both are very spirited. Dickinson, on the other hand, presents her poem in a way that is not spirited, but disheartened. She appears to have little hope, and in her final line she even states that despair is her "White Sustenance" (49). Also, her poem is not a continuation of formatting, as Raleigh's is to Marlowe's. Instead of using predictable stanzas with a standard rhyming scheme, Dickinson uses unique phrasing full of dashes, with scattered rhymes.

Dickinson's poem seems to vary most from the in its overall message, yet it still can be seen as a continuation of the argument between the Goddess and the Shepherd. Unlike the Goddess, whose reasoning appears to lie more in the fact that she does not believe that a love with the Shepherd would be strong enough, Dickinson implies that a love with the Shepherd could perhaps be too strong. For example, Dickinson states:

Nor could I rise—with You—
Because Your Face
Would put out Jesus'—
That New Grace (21-24)

In these lines, Dickinson suggests that she could not possibly live with and wake up next to her lover, because she would find so much pleasure in it that she would forget entirely about her love for God. Dickinson was a religious woman, and such a folly as putting something she loved before Christ would be absolutely terrifying and would go against all of her morals. Therefore,

Dickinson admits here that though she desires more than anything else to be with her love, she cannot, for fear of what it might mean for her spiritually.

Dickinson continues her spiritual argument later in the poem when she admits that she cannot handle the possibility of either herself or her love going to hell. She states: “And were you lost, I would be—” (37). Through this, she says that even if she were completely pure of heart, she would go to hell, because that is where her lover went. This terrifies her, and is one of the reasons she cannot find it in her heart to fully abandon herself. Similarly, the Nymph in Raleigh’s poem says to the Shepherd “But could youth last and love still breed” (21). Although Raleigh does not use as many words to illustrate the point that age is a burden on the love, the theme presents itself in both his poem and Dickinson’s. Also, in Raleigh’s poem, the Goddess states that if there were “truth in every shepherd’s tongue” (2) she could perhaps love the Shepherd. In this, she implies that if she knew that her Shepherd was pure, and therefore knew that he would go to Heaven, it might be easier to love him. Like Dickinson, the Goddess admits that the idea of being with someone who may perhaps taint her morally and spiritually would be inconsolably damaging.

One of the most prominent themes in both Raleigh’s and Dickinson’s poems concerns the concept of fragility. For both authors, a major part of their argument focuses on the delicateness of various aspects of love: themselves, the other, or the love itself. The Shepherd, in his proclamation of love, does not appear to take into account the inevitability of either he or his Goddess aging. He also does not account for the objects he offers her, such as the flowers and melodious birds, eventually dying. In “A Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd,” the Nymph argues that “the flowers do fade” (9) and that early possessions offered to her “soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten, in folly ripe, in reason rotten” (15-16). She not only opposes the Shepherd’s idea

of the validity of natural and beautiful objects as tokens of love, but also circles back to the idea that tainted morals can easily ruin love. Ultimately, she is presenting and reinstating the idea that only the soul will remain intact forever, and that the fact that the Shepherd cares to base the premise of his love on materialistic thing is just setting the relationship up for breaking and withering just as the bed of roses that he offers her would. Not only that, but the Nymph is presenting an idea that states that love cannot be trusted, and creates a vulnerable erratic environment which simply is not worth it.

Dickinson represents the idea of fragility in her poem just as Raleigh does. She does so through both her assessment of self and surrounding, and her recurrent idea that love in itself is a paradoxically fragile and powerful thing that is ultimately harmful to both participating parties.

Dickinson uses the analogy of china in her poem, stating:

Our Life – His Porcelain –

Like a Cup –

Discarded of the Housewife –

Quaint – or Broke –

A newer Sevres pleases –

Old Ones crack – (7-12)

By saying this, Dickinson's narrator admits that even though she does love her significant other, their love would be like china—extremely easy to break. She says that “Old Ones crack: (12) meaning that with time, both the physical body and the strength of love diminishes, and sometimes becomes useless altogether. This is only one of the many reasons Dickinson gives for not wishing to love her significant other. Dickinson also, in discussing death while in love and what it could mean spiritually, presents a state of vulnerability concerning the morality of love

and how that can affect one's self in result. In her poem, love is portrayed as being capable of making both the self and one's future utterly exposed to disaster.

Although Dickinson's poem is not as easily connected to Marlowe's poem, it may certainly be read as a continuation of the Nymph's argument in "A Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd." Marlowe and Raleigh are very clearly arguing with each other, while Dickinson appears to be taking a more somber approach to explaining the Nymph's argument. Both Raleigh's and Dickinson's arguments take into account the unbalance in morality and quality of character after falling in love, and how easy it is to be hurt after falling in love, due to all of its aspects that make it delicate. Ultimately, this fragility makes it far too dangerous to love.