The Passionate Shepherd to His Love Study Guide

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love by Christopher Marlowe

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Introduction

Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" fits perfectly into the poetic genre of the period. Poets of the Elizabethan age used poetry as a way to express their wit and talent. It is likely that Marlowe's poem would have been passed around among his friends long before its publication in 1599 in England, six years after the poet's death. Few Elizabethan poets published their own work, especially one as young as Marlowe, and so it is fairly certain that the poem was well-known long before its publication. The composition date is thought to be about 1588, and probably it generated many responses well before its publication nearly a dozen years later. Among these responses was Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" (date unknown, but thought to be about 1592), which provides the woman's response to Marlowe's shepherd. Marlowe's poem also inspired several other notable works that were similar in tone and content, including John Donne's "The Bait" (1633), which also relies upon wit and sexuality to entertain the reader.

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is written in the pastoral tradition that originated with Theocritus in Greece during the third century b.c. The pastoral tradition is characterized by a state of contentment and of innocent and romantic love. Rural country folk are presented in an idealized natural setting, while they contemplate their perfect and peaceful world that is absent the worries and issues of crowded city life. As was common of Elizabethan poets, Marlowe plays with the traditional pastoral formula. He introduces sexuality and includes images that make the shepherd's plea seem ridiculous rather than ideal.

The speaker in "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is a shepherd, who pledges to do the impossible if only the female object of his desires will accept his pleas. The poem is static in time, with no history or clearly defined future. Only the present matters. There is never any suggestion that the poet is asking the woman for a long-term commitment; there is no offer of marriage nor does he offer a long-term future together. Instead, he asks her to come and live with him and seek pleasure in the moment. The use of "passionate" in the title suggests strong emotions, but may also refer to an ardent desire to possess the woman sexually, since there is never any declaration of love. The shepherd makes a number of elaborate promises that are generally improbable and occasionally impossible. The woman's response is never heard, and she is not present in any way except as the object of the shepherd's desire.

Prior to the composition of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," early English Renaissance poetry had been most concerned with romantic love. These poems, which included poems by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, were traditional love poems, characterized by the pleas of a rejected suitor who would find solace in the soothing atmosphere of country life. Marlowe tweaked the traditional, transforming it into a more dynamic piece. As a result, Marlowe's poem remains a long lasting and important example of the Elizabethan poet's talent. "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is included in most literature anthologies published for academic use, including the seventh edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

Author Biography

Many scholars believe that had Christopher Marlowe lived longer, he might have become a greater dramatist than William Shakespeare. Marlowe was born only a few months before Shakespeare, on February 6, 1564, to John and Catherine Marlowe of Canterbury, where the senior Marlowe was a shoemaker. Marlowe received a bachelor of arts degree from Corpus Christi College at the University of Cambridge in 1584. He then continued his studies, using a clergyman's scholarship for funding. Scholars generally agree that Marlowe probably never had any intention of joining the clergy, but he was willing to say that he might enter the clergy in order to continue with his studies. When Marlowe was finally awarded his master of arts degree in 1587, after a great deal of controversy and amid charges that he was secretly planning on becoming a Catholic priest (Catholics could not receive degrees from Cambridge during this time, and priests were widely suspected of plots to overthrow the queen), he was ranked 199 out of 231 students.

After leaving Cambridge, Marlowe moved to London, where he is reported to have had frequent problems with authorities. He was briefly jailed for murder, although later found to have acted in self-defense. He was also charged with atheism and blasphemy, and was awaiting trial for these offenses when he was killed in a brawl, supposedly over an unpaid dinner bill, on May 30, 1593, in Deptford, England. Marlowe's death, from a stab wound to his forehead, remains controversial, since some scholars argue that his death was not really the result of a dispute but was more likely an assassination.

Marlowe's first play, *The Great Tamburlaine, Part I* (c. 1587), was produced shortly after he left Cambridge, although scholars think that Marlowe probably wrote *Dido Queen of Carthage* (c. 1583—1584) even earlier. The first production of *The Great Tamburlaine, Part I* was so popular with the public that Marlowe followed it with a sequel, *The Great Tamburlaine, Part II* (c. 1587).

Marlowe was the first playwright to use blank verse in a play; previously the standard had been rhyme, which Marlowe condemns in the prologue to *The Great Tamburlaine*. Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, which was produced in 1589 or 1590, was followed by *The Massacre at Paris* circa 1590. *The Massacre at Paris* was never published, and the only known copies are based on an undated and unreliable octavo edition. *Edward II* (c. 1592) is considered to be the first great English history play, though most scholars consider *Dr. Faustus* (c. 1589) to be Marlowe's greatest work. *Dr. Faustus* was not performed until after Marlowe's death and was probably unfinished when the playwright died.

Marlowe also wrote poems during his short life, at least one of which inspired later poets to try to best him in talent and wit. "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Marlowe's most famous short poem, was not published until 1599, six years after the poet's death. It is notable for having inspired Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" (date unknown, but thought to be about 1592), as well as John Donne's "The Bait" (1633).

Plot Summary

Stanza 1: Lines 1—4

In the first stanza of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Marlowe's speaker, an unidentified shepherd, pleads with an unidentified woman that if she will come and live with him, then all pleasures will be theirs for the taking. The shepherd opens with the invitation: "Come live with me, and be my love." He is not asking her to marry him but only to live with him. The offer is simply put, and his ease in offering it implies that the woman should just as easily agree. However, since the shepherd is forced to continue with a succession of promises, the reader can assume that the shepherd's initial offer was not well received.

The shepherd promises the woman pleasures they will experience in all of the pastoral settings that nature can supply. Since he promises that the couple will experience these pleasures in a variety of locations, it appears his expectation is that the pleasures of the world are principally sexual. He is asking the woman to live with him, and for the Elizabethan poet, "Come live with me, and be my love" has the same connotations it would have for a twenty-first-century reader: the female is being invited to come and make love. "Valleys, groves, hills and fields, / Woods, or steepy mountains" are some of the places the shepherd suggests where the woman might yield to him, and where they might both find pleasure. The overt sexuality of this stanza is a departure from the traditional pastoral writings and romantic love poems of Marlowe's contemporaries, which were not so bold.

Stanza 2: Lines 5—8

The second stanza suggests a time of year for the lovers' activity, which is likely spring or summer, since they would be outdoors and the shepherd imagines it is pleasant enough to sit and watch the flocks being fed. He proposes that other shepherds will feed his flocks, since with his mistress by his side, he will now be an observer. The shepherd mentions listening to the "Melodious birds sing madrigals." The singing of birds is often suggestive of spring, since the return of singing birds signals the advent of the new season. Because the first stanza makes clear that the shepherd wants the woman to become his lover, the shift in the second stanza to sitting upon rocks□"And we will sit upon the rocks"□suggests they might partake of the second stanza's activities after they have made love.

This second stanza, if taken by itself, exemplifies the traditional pastoral theme of the restful shepherd watching his flocks, enjoying in quiet repose the countryside and all it offers. It is the idealization of the pastoral form, in which nature is benign and safe, filled with "shallow rivers" and "melodious birds." In the early pastoral tradition, the shepherd would be alone, daydreaming about the woman he loves and whom he wishes to court. But in Marlowe's poem, the introduction of sexual desire inserts the woman into the

scene; she too will witness the flocks feeding and enjoy the peacefulness of country life. The isolation of the shepherd is thus removed in Marlowe's poem.

In the final line of stanza 2, the shepherd invokes "madrigals" as accompaniment for the lounging couple. The madrigal was an Italian import to late sixteenth-century English music. In Elizabethan England, a formal, more complicated, Italian aristocratic style of song was replaced with a lighter, more romantic tone and content□the madrigal. Thus the shepherd's inclusion of the madrigal provides a promise of romantic entertainment that completes the image of gaiety and light romance the woman will enjoy if she agrees to accept the shepherd's pleas.

Stanza 3: Lines 9—12

In the third stanza, the shepherd offers the first of many promises he will keep if the woman agrees to come and live with him. He promises to make her "beds of roses." One bed is not enough; she is deserving of more than one bed, although certainly the couple would have no need for more than one bed. In addition, the shepherd promises "a thousand fragrant posies." In essence, the shepherd is promising the impossible, but he is representative of any eager lover who turns to hyperbole (gross exaggeration) to entice a beloved. In this case, the woman would be buried in "posies," or flowers, which creates an image more silly than romantic. It is worth noting that Elizabethans often composed short epigrams that were also known as "posies." These short poems were often used as tokens of love. If Marlowe's shepherd is using "posies" to refer to written texts and not a floral tribute, then barraging the woman with love poems is a romantic idea, although still an impractical one.

The shepherd is so eager for his love to join him that he even promises to dress her. He will clothe the woman in "a cap of flowers" and in a "kirtle" covered "with leaves of myrtle." The myrtle flower was a sacred flower to the goddess Venus and was considered an emblem of love. A kirtle was the outermost garment that an Elizabethan woman would wear; it was a sleeveless bodice with eyelets for ribbon that laced up the front. It would have been worn over a shirt or blouse, or even a dress, and it would have had a skirt attached to it. The kirtle would have been the dressiest part of the woman's garment, and so the shepherd's plan to decorate the woman's kirtle would have been in keeping with Elizabethan custom, since the kirtle would have customarily been adorned with some embellishment.

Stanza 4: Lines 13—16

In the fourth stanza, the shepherd continues his promises to clothe the woman. Her "gown" would be made of the "finest wool." Rather than simply shearing the sheep, which was the common procedure, the shepherd would "pull" the wool from the "pretty lambs." This image transforms the intense hard labor of shearing into a gentle "pulling" of the wool, a more graceful and romantic activity. The "slippers" he will make for the woman will be "fair lined." By the sixteenth century, women were commonly referred to

as the "fair sex," and so the use of "fair" to describe the slippers might also refer to the woman whose feet the slippers would adorn. The buckles of these slippers would be of "the purest gold," since the shepherd's mistress would deserve all the riches he could provide.

Stanza 5: Lines 17—20

By the fifth stanza, an image of the shepherd's newly adorned mistress begins to emerge. Line 17 adds a straw belt and "ivy-buds" to a costume that is adorned with "coral clasps" and "amber studs," which serve as buttons. The woman is dressed from head to foot and immersed in "posies." If the woman takes the poet's promises quite literally, she would look like a huge floral bush that glitters with gold, coral, and amber.

In the final two lines of the fifth stanza, the shepherd reiterates his plea that the woman consider his offer. He first reminds the woman that he promises her pleasures, which he hopes will convince her to agree to his wishes. The shepherd then restates the first line of the poem, inviting her to come and live with him and be his love. There is no need to repeat all the many promises of endless love, of sweet beds of roses, or of the clothing he would fashion for her. Instead, he assumes she will remember his promises and if she finds them satisfactory, she will choose to join him. The repetition of the first line makes clear how easy and simple the woman's choice would be to join the shepherd in love, but, just in case she needs more persuading, he uses the final stanza to offer a few more incentives.

Stanza 6: Lines 21—24

In the sixth and final stanza, the shepherd uses one last opportunity to seal the deal and convince the woman to give up her chastity to his entreaties. If the woman will agree to be his love, the shepherd promises his "swains" shall dance and sing. "Swain" was a common word for shepherd, and in the sixteenth century, the two words were used interchangeably to create a more favorable image of shepherds. The shepherd's life was one of hard work, and describing him as a swain, which might also refer to a gallant lover, conjures a more romantic image.

So, the idyllic nature the shepherd has thus described is further enhanced by the image of swains who will dance and sing each morning for his lover's entertainment. The time now is firmly set in May, during spring, nature's traditional mating time. The poet has included a variety of images from nature, including the setting, the bed, and the clothing, all of which remind the reader that nature is primarily focused on reproduction. If the woman will come and live with him, every day will be happy and filled with laughter, song, and dance.

In line 23, the shepherd repeats line 19 with a slight but important modification. Rather than pleasures to convince her, the emphasis is on the "delights" he has led her mind to imagine. All of his promises have been the imaginings of a hopeful lover. He has hoped to convince her mind, not her heart. The shepherd has described an imaginary world

that he hopes will persuade the woman to join him through her use of reason, if not through her heart. The final line is a repetition of the opening line, reinforcing the relative ease the woman should face in making her decision. The decision is as simple as the shepherd's monosyllabic words: "live with me, and be my love."

Themes

Nature Idealized

In "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Marlowe paints a picture of idyllic nature without any of the real dangers that might be present. There are no responsibilities in this imaginary life, as the shepherd imagines the couple will watch other "shepherds feed their flocks," while making no mention of his own flock for which he is responsible. There is also no mention of any wolves or predators that might prey upon the flock.

The shepherd then invites his mistress to experience all the pleasures the couple might enjoy in the countryside in May. That they will lie in "beds of roses" suggests the couple will make love outside and without shelter. Additionally, the "beds of roses" would probably include a significant number of thorns, which are guaranteed to reduce the shepherd's passion. In the twenty-first century, the average temperature in England in May is 59 degrees Fahrenheit, with rain at least half the days of the month, and it is likely the weather was similar during Marlowe's time, so lying outdoors without shelter might have been rather wet and cool. The nights would be cooler still than the days, especially in the "hills," the shade of the "woods," or the higher elevations of a "steepy mountain."

The shepherd also promises to supply his mistress with "A gown made of the finest wool," wool that he would "pull" from "pretty lambs." An adult sheep can weigh between 150 and 200 pounds, and even a lamb old enough to be sheared would be quite heavy. The job of using the tools of the time to shear even one lamb would have been hard work, to say nothing of "pulling" the wool with your hands.

Anther promise the shepherd makes is that "The shepherd swains shall dance and sing / For thy delight each May morning." With the need to protect the sheep from predators, the shearing of the lambs, the herding of the flock to fresh pastures, and the often unpleasant weather, shepherds would have no time for dancing and singing for the mistress's entertainment each morning. And though the shepherd is concerned to clothe his mistress in wool, he provides no thought to feeding his love. What is she to eat? The shepherd never considers food, because in his imaginary world, food is not necessary. His courtship is the fanciful musing of a lover who seeks only to fulfill his passion with no thought to the real necessities of life. Marlowe creates a pretty picture of nature, but it is far from the reality of hard work and danger that shepherds often faced.

Static Time

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is static. There is no movement of time in the piece, no past and no future. The shepherd is not suggesting a long-term arrangement when he asks the woman to "Come live with me, and be my love." There is no offer of

marriage and no suggestion that they will establish a home together. The shepherd will cover his mistress in "a thousand fragrant posies," but once picked, the flowers will begin to die. Within minutes they will begin to wilt, their stalks drooping more with each moment that passes. The same fate awaits the "belt of straw and ivy-buds," which will also disintegrate quickly after their creation. The activities that the shepherd describes are of the moment. It is some time in May, and he is not looking forward to a summer together or the fall and winter that will inevitably follow. There is only the moment in which they will be together. Eventually, however, the realities of life would intrude. The couple would need food to eat and housing in which to live, children would be born, and life would be constantly evolving. The notion of the inevitability of time passing and life changing is missing from the shepherd's plea.

Style

Argument

The argument in any work of literature is the author's principle idea. The shepherd's argument in "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" reveals the efforts of the shepherd to convince the unseen woman that she should become his mistress. The shepherd submits a number of arguments designed to be convincing, but the central argument is that all pleasure will be theirs for the taking.

Couplets and Rhyme

Couplets are two consecutive lines of poetry with the same end-rhyme. Traditionally, the couplet was a two-line stanza expressing a self-contained thought, but the form has evolved. It is no longer strictly defined as iambic pentameter, as it once was, and the lines need not be identical in stressed and unstressed syllables. Many of the individual lines in "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" are eight syllables, but several others are not, and so Marlowe is moving away from traditional poetic structure, even as he deviates from other formulas that guide content, such as those discussed in the pastoral poetry section below.

In "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Marlowe uses a simple rhyme scheme of couplets. Each pair is a different rhyme, except for lines 19 and 20 and lines 23 and 24, which repeat the rhyme of the opening lines. One problem with using couplets is that the ongoing alternating rhyme can become tiresome for the listener, especially in a lengthy poem.

Imagery

Imagery refers to the "mental pictures" created by the text. The relationships between images can suggest important meanings in a poem, and with imagery, the poet uses language and devices such as metaphor, allusion, and even alliteration to create meaning and texture. For instance, the line "I will make thee beds of rose" suggests a romantic image that is not in keeping with the reality of roses with thorns. Because the image is so strong and because most readers would associate roses with an image of love, readers probably never stop to consider how unromantic a bed made out of thorny roses would be. Effective imagery in poetry allows the reader to enter into the poem and experience it with all their senses.

Pastoral Poetry

The Greek poet Theocritus first created the pastoral poem when he wrote poems representing the life of a Sicilian shepherd. Theocritus produced a picture of quiet peace

and harmony among shepherds who lived in an idealized natural setting. His shepherds were characterized by a state of contentment and friendly competition among friends. Love for these shepherds was a romantic longing and not sexual in any way. Theocritus was then copied by the Roman poet, Virgil, whose elegies had a strong influence on early English Renaissance poets. Virgil added some darker elements, including the grief the shepherd feels at the death of another shepherd. Virgil also included suggestions of contemporary problems and created a stronger contrast between the rustic country life and the dangers of city life.

Marlowe probably studied the pastoral poets during his classical education at Cambridge, but he was not the first English poet to adopt the pastoral tradition. Edmund Spenser initiated the Elizabethan trend in 1579 with *The Shepheardes Calender*, and was quickly joined by Sir Philip Sidney and Robert Greene, who created their own pastoral works. Marlowe, however, made the pastoral his own poetic form by inserting sexuality and by exaggerating the images. Before Marlowe, the shepherd engaged in romantic, though innocent, love affairs and the pastoral was conventional, with artificial language and shepherds who spoke the courtly language of an aristocrat. Marlowe bent the rules by introducing sexuality, creating his own pastoral tradition. The tone of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" suggests a parody of the pastoral tradition. Marlowe's shepherd asks the woman to imagine an idyllic life that not only is impossible but even ridiculous in many ways. In exaggerating and creating these absurd images, Marlowe suggests that the pastoral tradition should not be taken too seriously.

Historical Context

Young Women's Lives in Sixteenth-Century England

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" presents an image of courtship that does not have much grounding in reality, but like most poetic works, it reflects some of the issues of the period in which it was created. Young women in Elizabethan England were taught they must obey their parents without question, and when they married, they were expected to obey their husbands absolutely. They were also taught that a good marriage, a well-maintained house, and the raising of children were their primary roles in life. The daughters of aristocrats were educated in how to manage a household, in gardening and needlework, and in religion. Few women were formally educated, but all young women were familiar with their role as obedient daughters or wives. The clergy used Sunday sermons to reiterate the obligation of every girl and woman to be obedient to father and husband.

There were no schools for women, who, if they were educated at all, were taught at home either by the clergy or by a tutor hired by the family. For the daughters of the wealthy, marriages were often arranged by their parents, while the lower classes sometimes could marry for love. Very often, however, young women were married for property or for political reasons. Frequently, it was a young girl's father, or if he was deceased, her brother or uncle, who determined the choice of bridegroom, and a girl's family was expected to pay a dowry. The more money or land that was available for a dowry was far more important than her appearance or her demeanor in determining how marriageable she might prove to be.

There was no minimum age at which a young girl might marry, and in the middle of the sixteenth century, girls as young as fourteen were often married. By the end of the century, however, the average age for a bride was twenty-three. Marriage agreements were sealed with a contract, not a wedding ceremony, and brides were considered married after the couple consummated the agreement (made love). Young women were expected to be chaste before marriage, so with regard to Marlowe's poem, few women would have been so impractical as to heed the shepherd's pleas.

Elizabethan Women's Apparel

Marlowe's shepherd devotes significant description to how he might dress his love if she agrees to be his mistress. Although the shepherd would dress her in a cap of flowers, a kirtle embroidered with myrtle, a gown of finest wool, and slippers with gold buckles, dressing the Elizabethan woman was a bit more complicated than the shepherd suggests. Women in sixteenth-century England dressed in a variety of styles, just as twenty-first-century women do. A woman's choice in clothing might depend on her social status, her age, where she lived, the weather, the activity planned for any given day, and her personal preference.

Most Elizabethan women wore several layers of clothing. The first garment was a simple shift, which served as an undergarment. A woman would also wear socks, although the shepherd does not plan to clothe his mistress in socks. An Elizabethan woman might wear wool socks, although, if she had the money to spend, she could choose to wear silk stockings. Her socks would rise to just above her knees. The shepherd's mistress would also need a corset, since the fashion of the day called for a flat bodice. A corset was worn over a woman's shift and was designed to suppress and support her breasts.

The Elizabethan woman also wore a hoop skirt, called a farthingale, when she dressed more formally. Since the shepherd plans on outdoor activities, the woman would also need to put on a wool petticoat under her farthingale or she would be cold. If she really wants her skirt to stick out at the hips, she could add extra padding at the waist, called a bumroll. Finally the sought-after-mistress could put on the kirtle the shepherd offers her. A kirtle is the outermost garment an Elizabethan woman would wear; it was a sleeveless bodice with eyelets for ribbon that laced up the front. It would have been worn over a shirt or blouse, or even a dress, and it would have had a skirt attached to it. The kirtle would have been the dressiest part of the woman's garment, and so the shepherd's plan to decorate the woman's kirtle would have been in keeping with Elizabethan custom, since the kirtle would have customarily been adorned with some embellishment.

The woman's final layer would be a gown that goes on top of all these other layered garments. She might choose to add ruffs for her neck and wrists, jewelry, and probably some makeup. Since many Elizabethan women also wore elaborate wigs, some time would have to be allowed for dressing and placement of the wig, after which elaborate netting might be added to the wig as decoration. If it were raining, as it often was in May, the shepherd's love might also wear a cloak to protect her.

The shepherd apparently fails to realize that the average Elizabethan woman would need help putting on all this complicated apparel each day. The length of time spent dressing and undressing would perhaps cool the shepherd's passion.

Critical Overview

Since poetry of the English Renaissance was not reviewed, the best way to understand the impact of Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is to consider its place within Marlowe's body of work, its place within the literary canon, and its influence on other poets. Translating Latin texts to English was a common pastime for Elizabethan poets, and Marlowe is credited with several translations, including *The First Book of Lucan* (c. 1582) and Ovid's *Amores* (c. 1582). Marlowe also wrote seven plays, but his published poems number far fewer. In addition to "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," he wrote a longer poem, "Hero and Leander" (unfinished at the time of his death), and two shorter poems, "Dedicatory Epistle to Mary, the Countess of Pembroke" and "Epitaph on Sir Roger Manwood." Of Marlowe's shorter poems, only "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" has received widespread study.

Anthologies of English literature such as the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* generally include only one Marlowe play, *Dr. Faustus*; his longer poem, "Hero and Leander"; and "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." More generalized literature anthologies such as *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* and *The Norton Introduction to Literature* include only "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Its inclusion in anthologies offers an important indication of the influence of this Marlowe poem, since it is often the sole representation of his work to be included.

The importance of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" might also be judged by its inclusion in a 1995 film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. In this Richard Loncraine film, Marlowe's poem is set to music and sung by a 1930s-style big-band singer. The singing of Marlowe's poem occurs near the beginning of the film and provides a backdrop to the introduction of the principle characters. As the song is being sung, characters are greeting one another and dancing as they celebrate the new king's victory over Henry VI. This setting provides a prominent role for "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," since it also sets the stage for Shakespeare's famous opening lines: "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious by this son of York." This opening soliloquy establishes Richard's dissatisfaction with his new peacetime role and makes clear that he is "subtle, false, and treacherous."

There is one other way to judge the significance of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and that is by evaluating its influence on other poets. Several poets wrote poems responding to Marlowe's poem. One of the best known of these poems is Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd." In Raleigh's poem, the speaker is the shepherd's mistress, who makes clear that time will soon wither all the posies the shepherd promised; the promised gown, cap, and kirtle will eventually rot; and the passing of time will intrude on the shepherd's promises of endless love, since youth will soon pass. Raleigh's poem was widely circulated, just as Marlowe's had been.

John Donne later continued the cycle with his own poem "The Bait," which opens with an identical line to Marlowe's poem, but which provides a fishing metaphor that suggests a fish is wise enough to resist bait, even if a lover is not. Still another example

of the influence of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is found in William Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, when Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson, recites Marlowe's poem□though it emerges a bit mangled in this recitation.

Raleigh's and Donne's responses, which set in motion a later poem by Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," when combined with Shakespeare's use and the continued appearance in anthologies and study of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," suggest Marlowe's poem has a timeless quality that renders it a classic.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Metzger has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature. She teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, where she is a lecturer in the University Honors Program. In this essay, Metzger discusses the silent voices of the women who inhabit Elizabethan seduction poems.

A quick reading of Christopher Marlowe's poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" offers a brief though descriptive argument that the shepherd hopes will convince the object of his affections to agree to come and live with him. If the reader considers merely the projection of the woman who is only seen through the shepherd's imaginings, she is reduced to little more than a caricature, ridiculously clothed in floral tributes. Of course, the shepherd cares little for this problem, since the emphasis of the poem is only on his "passionate" desire to possess the woman. The woman, who has no name and no identity, also has no voice. She exists only within the shepherd's plea. Marlowe's poem, which was derived from the Greek pastoral tradition and was inspired by a legend recounted by first-century Roman poet Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, prompted a number of responses, including an anonymous poem, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," which is usually attributed to Sir Walter Raleigh, and John Donne's poem "The Bait." Marlowe and his responders viewed their shepherd poems as an excellent opportunity to demonstrate their talent as witty and clever poets. As a result, their poems are focused almost solely on displaying the talents of the writer. The women in these poems, who are only nominally present as objects, or in Raleigh's case, seemingly as a responder, are silent voices in a courtship dialogue that excludes the very object of the courtship.

The absence of the woman's voice in early English poetry is an issue that was observed nearly a century ago by Virginia Woolf. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf tells the story of how she went to the British Museum Library in an effort to determine the different fates of men and women who had lived in England during the past several centuries. In the histories she pulled from the shelves, she found little mention of women. The brief observations she did find referred either to women's roles as whores or wives. This was not true of the women in literature, whose presence appeared to contradict their historical reality. Woolf pointed out in her text that while women seemed to have made no real mark in English history, they "have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time." This observation is especially true in the love poetry of the Elizabethan period. This poetic tradition relied upon women as the impetus for the poet's creation. Although England had a woman ruler, power for women did not filter down to other women. In fact, just the opposite was true, since women were generally more oppressed under Elizabeth I than they had been under her father's, Henry VIII's, reign. And yet while women may not have been the stimulus for political and social change, they were crucial to the poets' work. As she searched through historical accounts for stories of women's accomplishments, Woolf recognized the contrast between the images of women in fictional texts and that of women in historical texts. She concluded, "Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her [to be] a person of the utmost importance." The illusion

advanced in Elizabethan poetry that women had important roles created a false impression of women's reality. Literature posed no exception in a society that valued women only as wives and mothers. Most poets were men and only a few Elizabethan women composed poetry; women were instead the objects of poetry and drama, as they had been in centuries past.

The tradition of the wooing or invitational lyric was already well established before Marlowe took up the formula. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* offers a model with which Marlowe would have become familiar during his education at Cambridge. In Book XIII of *Metamorphoses*, the cyclops, Polyphemus, woos the sea nymph, Galatea. Polyphemus is the frightful monster who eats men and who Odysseus blinded in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. Polyphemus has moved to Sicily and fallen in love with Galatea, who does not return his affection. Galatea loves Acis as much as she hates Polyphemus. To win her love, the Cyclops first praises Galatea's beauty, and then he tells her that he has a cave that will provide shelter for them, as well as "apples weighing down their branches, grapes yellow as gold on the trailing vines, and purple grapes as well. Both these and those I am keeping for your use." The monster also promises strawberries, cherries, plums, and chestnuts, if only Galatea will agree to marry him. Polyphemus also promises a flock so great he cannot count the total; milk to drink; and pets with which to play. None of his many promises move the maiden to agree. Though his promises are more practical than those of Marlowe's shepherd, they are no more effective. The Elizabethan poets looked back to classical Greek and Roman literature for their inspiration, and a close reading of many of the great Elizabethan texts reveals a reliance on these earlier works. Although Marlowe borrows a story from Ovid, he makes crucial changes. The shepherd is no longer a frightening monster, and the reader does not learn if the woman's affections have already been promised to another lover. One of the most important aspects of Ovid's story that Marlowe does not borrow is that, in Ovid, the woman has a voice; indeed, it is she who tells the story to Scylla. Just as Marlowe ignores the woman's voice, so too do most of the responses to his poem.

Most replies to Marlowe's poem are constructed in a parallel lyrical style that mirrors the original text. Raleigh's answer to Marlowe, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," is constructed in rhyming couplets, but the simple and direct lines mirror Marlowe's style. The first line establishes that the woman does not see time as a limitless opportunity for the shepherd and his love to enjoy one another. Instead, the female speaker begins with the qualifying statement, "If all the world and love were young," which reminds the shepherd that time is not static; the world and love are no longer young, since even love inevitably grows old. The second stanza begins with the word "Time," which once again counters Marlowe's shepherd, who would claim that all the pleasure was theirs for the taking. Raleigh's speaker reminds readers that even pleasure must eventually come to an end. Rather than the optimism of Marlowe, Raleigh infuses his female speaker with a darker, more realistic tone that recognizes that "flowers do fade" and that the clothing he promises and the "beds of roses" will "Soon break, soon wither, soon [be] forgotten." In Raleigh's poem, Philomel, the nightingale, replaces the melodious birds of Marlowe's poem. Nightingales sing only in the spring during the breeding season. Their song is not infinite, nor is time. Raleigh's pragmatic female speaker ends the poem with the observation that she would willingly come and be his love, if only "could youth last"

indefinitely. Although Raleigh employs a female speaker to respond to Marlowe's shepherd, the reader does not hear the female voice. Instead the voice is that of Raleigh pretending to be a woman. The unheard woman of Marlowe's poem remains a missing witness to the shepherd's pleas.

Donne's poem "The Bait" actually repeats the first two lines of Marlowe's poem, adding only that this shepherd has "new pleasures" to experience. Where Marlowe's poem inhabits an imaginary world, Donne's speaker describes a very real world. Where Marlowe's shepherd offers enticements to convince the woman□beds of roses, posies to envelop her, and clothing to cover her□the speaker in Donne's poem invites the woman to remove her clothing and go skinny dipping in the river with him. Where Marlowe offers the artificial and idyllic world of the pastoral poem, Donne embraces the eroticism of love poetry. If she "wilt swim in that live bath," the fish "will amorously to thee swim." The sexual suggestion is much more obvious and more real than in Marlowe's poem, where the suggestion to come and live with the shepherd is subtly woven into the "pleasures prove" of the entire countryside. These are the "new" pleasures that Donne's speaker promises; his is the real world where the couple swims nude in the river. The male speaker concedes control to the woman, to whom even the fish pay homage:

Each fish, which every channel hath,

Will amorously to thee swim,

Gladder to catch thee, than thou him.

Donne's speaker even promises the woman that if she does not wish to be seen by other observers, she might darken the sun or moon, since he needs "not their light, having thee." Donne's speaker does not waste his time on pleas for the woman to come and enjoy the "valleys, groves, hills and fields" of Marlowe's shepherd, and he has no need to promise elaborate beds or clothing to entice her. The reason for the lack of promises becomes evident in the final two stanzas, in which the speaker says that the woman does not need the fancy silks that are often used to "Bewitch poor fishes' wand'ring eyes." The woman is herself "thine own bait," and the "fish that is not catched thereby, / Alas, is wiser far than I." Donne's poem challenges the notion that it is the woman who is being wooed; she is the one who is in control. Although the woman's voice is silent, her strengths are recognized; however, it is worth pointing out that her strength lies primarily in her ability to seduce the man with her nude body. This is clearly not an intellectual victory.

It would be easy to study Marlowe's poem, Raleigh's answer, and Donne's response and limit the focus of these poems to the witty exchanges of the male poets, which many scholars argue were often written to impress other male poets. Except as object or in the case of Raleigh's male-pretending-to-be-female persona, these poems are not about women, and only in the Donne poem is the woman even present. There is nothing within the poems, themselves, that might suggest a female audience. A different way to read these poems is suggested by Ilona Bell's research. In *Elizabethan Women*

and the Poetry of Courtship, Bell examines the role of courtship poetry and argues that much of this poetry was written as part of the courtship process and was intended to be a part of the courtship formula. Bell suggests, "The great Elizabethan lyric sequences typically begin by identifying the poet's mistress as the primary lyric audience." This premise contradicts many of the ideas about Elizabethan seduction poems, in particular, which, while nominally about women, were usually thought to appeal to a male readership. Bell is concerned that the female object is being displaced by twentieth-century critics who examine the Elizabethan poets' exchanges of manuscripts and see, in that friendly poetic exchange, only male authority and a female reader who has virtually disappeared from the poem.

Readers might wonder if the female object in Marlowe's poem was real. The reader of this poem only notes the absence of name or genuine identifiers, and since so much of the poem is based on improbabilities, it might seem reasonable to assume that an actual mistress is just as unlikely to exist. However, Bell cautions against envisioning the shepherd's woman as only a rhetorical device, as a "shadowy figment of male imagination." Bell suggests the male poet has an expectation that the woman will respond to his wooing and that this expectation is suggested within the poem itself. Bell points out that "many of these poems also contain traces of a private lyric dialogue between a male poet/lover and a private female reader/listener." According to Bell,

[T]he male lyric voice is inflected by the expectation of the female reader's answering response. The poet/lover is always trying to anticipate or influence her response, but he neither writes her script nor directs her performance.

Although Bell's evidence is at times quite compelling, in the case of Marlowe's often speculated homosexuality, her argument weakens. Since it is unlikely that Marlowe would have used "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" to court a woman, it is reasonable to assume that the purpose of the poem is to display both Marlowe's mastery of the pastoral tradition and his wittiness in remaking that same tradition. At the same time, the poem issues a challenge to his male readers, to whom he would have circulated the manuscript, to further improve upon the shepherd's invitation. Raleigh's and Donne's responses, therefore, are more likely to be a part of the male poet's attempt at witty repartee than any actual courtship process.

The Elizabethan poetic tradition of love poetry did not meet with universal approval. Sir Philip Sidney's lengthy prose work, *The Defense of Poesy*, is Sidney's effort to defend the work of poets to the Puritan writer Stephen Gossett, who in his *School of Abuse* argues that poetry is a waste of time, that it is composed of lies, and that it teaches sinful practices. Sidney's response to these claims argues that the role of literature in a civilized society is to educate and to inspire those who read literature to ethical and virtuous actions. In writing about lyrical poetry□especially those works he labels as poems that "come under the banner of irresistible love"□Sidney suggests these poems, "if I were a mistress would never persuade me they were in love; so coldly they apply fiery speeches." Thus Sidney refutes the argument that the readers of these poems would be swayed to believe in their reality; instead they would be entertained, which Sidney thought was an essential component for educating the mind. Readers of

Marlowe's poem would not believe the shepherd's exaggerated claim that the delights of eternal spring are available just for the taking; nor would readers believe the shepherd's offer to clothe his love in an endless layering of flowers. But readers would learn something about pastoral poetry, and they would be entertained by the poetic responses from Marlowe's contemporaries.

In reading Marlowe's poem and the responses that followed, what readers learn is that women appear in these poems not only as silent objects but also as prey for the male seducer. The image in seduction poems is that of the male seducer of a silent or absent female. Mary Anne Ferguson suggests in her introduction to the first edition of *Images of Women in Literature* that the image of women in literature "is the opposite of the all-powerful seductress," which Elizabethan men were often warned to avoid. Instead of the threatening image of woman as seductress that the clergy attacked in their church sermons, the poetry of the period transformed the image of the dangerous and seductive woman into a voiceless sex object whose primary function was the fulfillment of fantasies and as man's prey. However, this was an image that also had limitations. Ferguson argues, "It is difficult for a woman to be viewed in this single role [as sex object] for a long time." Inevitably, the realities of day-to-day life, the bearing of children, the nursing of the sick, and the duties of running a household simply intruded on the artificial image of women in any role as limiting as that of either seductress or sexual object. Marlowe seems to recognize this fact, since he makes the shepherd's desire only a transitory one. Sidney knew that there were "many things [that] may be told which cannot be showed□if they know the difference betwixt reporting and representing."

In Marlowe's poem, he is not reporting on reality; in its place he is representing an image that does not exist in Elizabethan life. Although his woman is objectified and silent, Marlowe never pretends that she is real. As a result, Marlowe fulfills one of the tenets of poetry that Sidney thought important□the obligation to "that delightful teaching which is the end of poesy." Marlowe, Raleigh, and Donne created poetry that transforms and reworks the traditional art of poetry into something new and exciting. Their readers can only benefit and learn from these poetic lessons.

At one point in Woolf's essay, she imagines what life might have been like had Shakespeare had a sister, Judith, who was his equal in genius. Woolf concludes that genius could not have been born to women, whose limited existence and opportunities began "almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom." Marlowe's poems and the best-known of the responses are all the compositions of men. With few exceptions, women in the Elizabethan poetic tradition were restricted to the role of nameless, voiceless objects. Woolf believed that the power to claim that voiceless woman as her own was the duty of twentieth-century women. Perhaps the next response to Marlowe's invitation will be that of a twenty-first-century woman poet who will once again transform the poetic tradition.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, Critical Essay on "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

A recitation of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is included in the 1995 film *Richard III*, directed by Richard Loncraine and starring Ian McKellen and Annette Bening. In an early sequence of the film, Marlowe's poem is set to music and sung in a 1930s big-band rendition. Since so many early Elizabethan lyrical poems were meant to be sung, setting Marlowe's poem to music is in keeping with its poetic origin. The film is available in VHS or DVD format.

Topics for Further Study

Marlowe's poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" is a pastoral poem. Using the information you now have about pastoral poetry, write your own pastoral poem. As Marlowe did, invoke the traditional elements, such as the rural countryside and the shepherd, but try also to create a new tradition by including an element that will make the pastoral style uniquely your own.

Research the life of a shepherd in sixteenth-century England and compare it to the life of a shepherd in the twenty-first century. Which life would you prefer and why?

Both Sir Walter Raleigh and John Donne composed replies to Marlowe's poem. Pretend you are a young Elizabethan woman; write your own response to Marlowe's poem. What reasons can you supply to either accept or decline the shepherd's offer? Remember to structure your reply in verse form.

Religious conflict between the Catholic Church and the various protestant factions created a great deal of tension and occasional danger in Elizabethan England. Research this conflict and, in a carefully written essay, explain the nature of the conflict and the ways in which this divisiveness affected the Elizabethan writers of the late sixteenth century. For instance, the popularity of pastoral poetry was enhanced by the comforting safety that an imagined countryside suggested. You might take this topic one step further and consider how safe, or dangerous, religious conflict made the countryside. However, you are not limited to just this one approach. Your research may suggest additional topics for you to consider.

Compare and Contrast

1500s: In 1582, the Gregorian calendar is introduced in Catholic countries. This calendar is designed to replace the Julian calendar, which contains a ten-day discrepancy. The new calendar provides a more consistent and unified way to manage days, weeks, months, and the passing of years, since it is based on a close approximation of the actual length of time it takes the earth to revolve around the sun.

Today: Although many countries continue to maintain different religious and cultural calendars, the Gregorian calendar has become the universal tool by which all countries note the cycle of the seasons.

1500s: The Spanish king, Phillip II, attempts to invade England in 1587, after the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. The conflict between England and Spain is largely due to the animosity of the Catholic Spanish for the Protestant English. However, the *Invincible Armada*, as the king named his fleet of ships sent to attack England, was defeated by the English in 1588. More than half of the ships in the armada were lost at sea, either in battle or due to storms.

Today: Although religious differences continue to be an excuse for war in many locations, except for intermittent strife in Ireland, Catholics and Protestants coexist in peace throughout Europe.

1500s: In 1549, the *Book of Common Prayer* becomes the centerpiece of uniform Protestant services in England. Queen Mary I returns England to the Roman Catholic religion in 1555 and many Protestants are persecuted, including more than 300 who were burned at the stake. After Mary I dies in 1558, her sister, Queen Elizabeth I, returns the country to the Protestant faith and officially sanctions the end of religious persecution. However, it is not until 1563 that the official Anglican Church is established.

Today: Even during the twenty-first century, some early restrictions that were placed on Roman Catholics are still maintained in England. For instance, no Catholic can be crowned queen or king of England.

1500s: In 1552, church parishes are required to register the poor so that official records can be maintained. This regulation is followed by a compulsory poor tax designed to make providing for the poor a local responsibility.

Today: In 1997, the Labour Party government commissions a study on child poverty in Great Britain. A six-year study completed in 2003 finds that 45 percent of British children are living in poverty and that government intervention has in fact increased the poverty rate for children. While the government expresses concern about this widespread poverty, they have not yet determined how best to solve the problem.

1500s: In 1580, the English manage to repress a Spanish-supported rebellion of the Irish. The rebellion ends when the rebels are starved to death.

Today: Starving opponents during a rebellion is considered barbaric by most standards. When the Irish Republican Army (the IRA) stages attacks in the late 1990s, the British government passes restrictive anti-terrorist legislation. The new laws, combined with a series of arrests of IRA leaders and recent elections in Ireland, have helped to control the rebellion.

1500s: Along with Marlowe, the other notable poets of the period are Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and John Donne, each of whom will emerge as significant literary figures during England's golden age of literary creativity, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

Today: More than 400 years after Marlowe's death, his poetry and that of many other Elizabethan poets remains pivotal to the study of British literature. Some of the best-known British poets of the twentieth century include W. H. Auden, William Butler Yeats, A. E. Housman, T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and Seamus Heaney.

What Do I Read Next?

Christopher Marlowe's lengthy narrative work "Hero and Leander" (c. 1593) is a mythological erotic poem that tells the story of two tragic lovers. It can be found in *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Poems*, published in 2000 by Everyman.

Sir Walter Raleigh's poem "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd" (c. 1592), which is a response to Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," can be found in *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh* (1951), as well as in numerous anthologies and on many online sites.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written about 8 a.d., is an epic that contains a story of the creation of the world and links together many early myths and legends. Filled with stories of gods, goddesses, and mere mortals, *Metamorphoses* is often described as one of the most beautifully written texts in existence. It was also a source for many writers who followed, including Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" (1681) appears in *Andrew Marvell*, published in 1990 by Oxford.

William Shakespeare's comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597) contains a mangled recitation of Marlowe's poem by a Welsh parson, Sir Hugh Evans. The Arden Third Series edition, published in 1999, contains a comprehensive selection of notes that will aid any reader not familiar with Shakespeare's texts.

Diane Ackerman's poem "A Fine, A Private Place" is a modern seduction poem. It can be found in her collection *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter* (1991). As a sequel to Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," Ackerman's poem brings the poetic tradition begun by Marlowe into the twentieth century. Ackerman's poem is available in several anthologies, including *The Bedford Introduction to Literature*.

Dr. Faustus (c. 1589) is Marlowe's best known and most frequently performed play. This play focuses on a doctor who sells his soul to the devil in an attempt to learn all the knowledge known to man.

A Dead Man in Deptford (1996), by Anthony Burgess, is a fictionalized account of Marlowe's life that emphasizes the dramatic events, including the accusations of murder and espionage that circulated while Marlowe was still alive. Burgess also explores the rumors of assassination and political intrigue that surrounded Marlowe's death.

Further Study

Cheney, Patrick, *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

This book contains essays by sixteen different scholars who comment on Marlowe's life and his texts, as well as his influence on later writers.

Clay, Christopher, *Rural Society: Landowners, Peasants, and Labourers, 1500—1750*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

This book details the social and economic history of rural England during the period from 1500 to 1750. There is information about wages and profits associated with estate management, as well as details about the lives and status of laborers.

Cole, Douglas, *Christopher Marlowe and the Renaissance of Tragedy*, Praeger, 1995.

Cole examines the major literary traditions of Marlowe's era and how he transformed them into themes fitting his own purpose.

Kuriyama, Constance Brown, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life*, Cornell University Press, 2002.

This biography of Marlowe examines Marlowe's life by placing him in a cultural context. Rather than just focus on dates and facts, the author examines the English education system and the politics and society in which Marlowe lived.

O'Hara, Diana, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England*, Manchester University Press, 2002.

This text provides a study of courtship in sixteenth-century England. Much of O'Hara's source material is taken from church records and from legal documents and wills. The book is an interesting source of information about social customs and the economics of courtship.

Picard, Liza, *Elizabeth's London: Everyday Life in Elizabethan London*, St. Martin's Press, 2004.

This text provides a picture of London life at the time when Marlowe walked the streets. There are descriptions of the buildings and gardens, the shops and palaces, the theatres and streets of the city. Picard also includes details about domestic life, the city's water supply, and diseases common to Londoners.

Riggs, David, *The World of Christopher Marlowe*, Henry Holt, 2005.

In a book that the publisher describes as a "definitive biography," Riggs examines Marlowe's life, the period in which he lived, and the mystery of how and why he was killed.

Stretton, Tim, et al, eds., *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

This text examines how women were involved in lawsuits in Elizabethan England. There is a history of women's legal rights, including information on how marriage or widowhood affected women's legal rights.

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Woolf, Virginia, "A Room of One's Own," in *A Room of One's Own and Other Essays*, Folio Society, 2000, pp. 51—56.