Critical Essay on "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd"

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In his collection of interviews, *Strong Opinions*, Vladimir Nabokov remarks, "Satire is a lesson; parody is a game." In other words, the aim of satire is to point out some fault in human nature that the artist feels needs to be remedied, while the aim (or "game") of parody is to imitate the form and style of the original work as closely as possible. Well-crafted parodies are often amusing, but when an artist combines the playful game of parody with the weighty lessons of satire, the result can be a work more intense and thought-provoking than one that only mimics or instructs. Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is one of the most forceful examples of what happens when parody (in this case, an imitation of the language used by "proposers" who offer their solutions to social ills) is combined with a "lesson" (the English are responsible for the terrible poverty in Ireland): the result is Swift's unforgettable essay. Other writers have merged satire and parody with similarly impressive results. Lawrence Sterne's *Tristam Shandy*, Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" and Nabokov's own *Pale Fire* all amuse their readers by imitating existing literary forms (for example, diaries, epics, and criticism) while simultaneously "teaching" their readers some "lesson" about human failings. All satirists must, in part, assume the role of teacher, since they speak from a position from which they can identify the shortcomings of others. The humor inherent in parody, however, makes these lessons more palatable.

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Sir Walter Raleigh's **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd"** is a work that, like the previously mentioned examples, combines the lesson of satire and the game of parody to point out the silliness of the promises being made in Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and, by extension, the promises of all young, eager lovers. The vows of the shepherd--a stock character in pastoral poetry known for his innocence--are dead-on-arrival when they reach the ears of Raleigh's nymph, who speaks from experience and with a sense of worldliness that her suitor does not anticipate and presumably cannot understand. The artistry and fun of Raleigh's poem lies in the way that it parodies Marlowe's original to, ultimately, teach the shepherd (and the reader) a lesson about the effects of time on promises made in youth.

The nymph's intention to teach the shepherd a lesson is evident in the fact that she does not refuse him outright until almost the end of the poem. Instead, she speaks of hypothetical possibilities that, if true, would lead her to accept his invitations. By withholding her refusal until the end of the poem, however, the nymph ensures that the shepherd understands, or at least considers, why she is refusing him at all. Perhaps she has encountered such passionate shepherds before and this most recent invitation to "live with me and be my love" has unleashed this didactic reply. At any rate, her lesson is a forceful one whose humor is only apparent to the reader--certainly not to the shepherd, who, one imagines, listens to the nymph's reply in stunned silence.

The nymph begins her lesson with a hypothetical premise, the first of several in the poem: "If all the world and love were young," she states, she "might" be moved to love him. The tone of the opening seems polite ("I would love you, of course, except for this one small thing") but the "if," in this case, presents an impossible situation: "all the world and love" are not "young." The planet has existed for eons, and her understanding of love has matured with time and experience. Hers is not a "young" heart, easily won by poetry. This tone of polite refusal coupled with an impossibility is the first sign that she has no intention of succumbing. Her second hypothetical situation: "if" there were "truth in every shepherd's tongue," does the same rhetorical office as the first: if shepherds taken as a type were all honest, she would be moved to love him--but she is too wise to take stock in such a naive notion. Her calling his offers of pastoral paradise "pretty pleasures" adds to the sense of sarcastic scorn covered by a thin layer of ostensible politeness.

The next two stanzas elaborate upon the nymph's first hypothetical premise about the age of the world. Unlike *carpe diem* poems in which a young woman is urged to love her suitor before, as Andrew Marvell calls it, "time's winged chariot" has run its course, the nymph's words argue that the passing of time is the reason why she will not love the shepherd. Raleigh's poem can thus be read as the counterpart, or complement, of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" or Herrick's "To the Virgins." All of the enticements offered by the shepherd will be affected for the worse by time: the flocks will move "from field to fold"; the "rocks," upon which they will presumably sit, will "grow cold"; the nightingale will become "dumb" and "the rest"--a group in which they are presumably included--will "complain

of cares to come." With the passing of time, the passion of youth must, she argues, give way to the worries inherent in old age--something that Marlowe's shepherd innocently, or conveniently, fails to mention in his appeal. "Flowers do fade" and so will their passion. Even worse, "wanton fields / To wayward winter reckoning yields": even the most lively and lusty lovers must pay the reckoning of winter, when fields and feeling grow fallow.

Marlowe's shepherd may be an innocent bumpkin (who simply has no idea that his gifts have become empty clichÃ©s) or a conniving lothario (who adopts the pose of a simpler man to seem less threatening). Marlowe never tells the reader and so both interpretations are valid. As the poem proceeds, however, the nymph seems to assume the worst about her would-be country husband. Her epigram, or witty remark, "A honey tongue, a heart of gall, / Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall" implies that the shepherd is consciously using "honeyed" words to disguise his inner "gall": what sounds sweet only covers a bitter truth. The parallel structure of these lines helps the nymph emphasize her distance in age and worldliness from those who may fall prey to such promises. A "honey tongue" is "fancy's spring" because sweet words excite the imagination; such words, however, always lead to "sorrow's fall" and disillusionment. Of course, "spring" and "fall" are words that refer not only to figurative physical actions but to the seasons as well: just as in springtime, when new life (and love) is in bloom, fall always arrives to undo the fruits of nature and promises made in the spring of youth.

The content of the nymph's attack on the shepherd is obviously severe; what makes it even more biting is her parody of the shepherd's style. Marlowe's poem is written in iambic tetrameter, a light and singsong meter (associated with simple, honest speakers) used to complement the images of the pleasant pastoral life that will be the nymph's, should she accept the shepherd's offer. Likewise, Raleigh's poem is written in iambic tetrameter, as if the nymph is mimicking the "honey tongue" of the shepherd. As Marlowe's poem features several alliterative phrases (words that begin with the same sound or type of sound, again to reflect the "honey tongue"), Raleigh's abounds in them. The nymph of Raleigh's poem speaks of "pretty pleasures," how "rivers rage and rocks grow cold," how many will "complain of cares to come," how "flowers fade" and "wanton fields" fall to "wayward winter," and how the shepherd's promises are "ripe" in one way yet "rotten" in another. The difference is that Marlowe's shepherd uses alliteration to please the nymph's ear and, by extension, her heart, while Raleigh's nymph uses them to mock the very notion that she can be taken in by poetry, however pleasant it may sound. More importantly, the nymph parodies the very quality of the shepherd's presumed love by listing all the things promised to her ("Thy gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses," etc.); she implies that such easily "withered" and "forgotten" things are, in essence, a joke. These unsubstantial trifles are, as Polonius in *Hamlet* calls them, "springes to catch woodcocks"--little traps used to catch unsuspecting birds. This bird, however, has been through the forest of love and found it to be a rough place; things weightier than "ivy buds" and "amber studs" are needed if she is to consider his offer and if love is to endure.

By the last stanza, the nymph's tone and dismissal of the shepherd is unmistakable, yet she reverts to the tone of "polite indignation" found in the opening lines and again offers a hypothetical situation in which she would reciprocate the shepherd's passion. But "could youth last and love still breed, / Had joys no date nor age no need," then she would consider his offer. As before, she offers imaginary impossibilities to suggest the real impossibility of her giving in to his offers: youth does not last, love does not always grow, the joys of life do end, and old age is a time of tremendous need. Her final couplet, therefore, features a perfectly reasonable tone that both completes the game of parody (by imitating the shepherd's final couplet) and the lesson of satire (anyone who assumes that an intelligent woman can be easily moved with material things is a fool). Marlowe, alas, never composed "The Shepherd's Reply to the Nymph," so readers can only assume that after hearing her speak, the shepherd walked back to his fields, scratching his head and wondering what he said that could have sparked such a reply--or that he sought out another nymph less experienced and more easily swayed by promises of pastoral pleasures.