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

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Most of what has been written about Sir Walter Raleigh focuses, for good reason, on his fascinating life as a suitor of Queen Elizabeth I, an adventurer and a scoundrel, a slayer of indigenous peoples and, overall, as an opportunist who several times slipped out of the clutches of defeat to redefine his own fortune. He founded colonies, named the territory of Virginia, led an expedition to the fabled City of Gold, and spent thirteen years in the Tower of London, where he wrote a million-word-long history of the world. Of course, he is an important historic figure. Little, though, is written about his poetry. Raleigh was a talented writer in a time when gentlemen generally wrote poetry; his work is generally considered adept, but none too remarkable.

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Of the few poems of Raleigh's that are even mentioned today, it is **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd"** that is most often reprinted. The poem is almost always printed with its companion piece, Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Readers might find it a bitter piece of irony that Raleigh as a poet is best remembered for what is in effect a novelty piece, an experiment in team writing. If you consider him mainly as an explorer though, it is amazing that any sample of his verse should have stayed in print consistently throughout these past four hundred years.

Neither Marlowe nor Raleigh built his reputation primarily on poetry. Marlowe is, and was then, best known for the writing he did for the stage. Among Elizabethan playwrights, he is considered second only to Shakespeare himself, which is no light feat considering that no playwright in all of history exceeds Shakespeare's reputation. Today, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* is constantly revived, while his *Dr. Faustus* is likely to run in most major cities in any given month. Raleigh is, as mentioned, remembered as an explorer, but he also has more legendary anecdotes told about him than most figures of the times. The story of him taking off his cloak and throwing it over a puddle that the queen was about to step in is probably untrue, but it stands today as an unforgettable example of the gallantry of a bygone era. The legend that Raleigh was the individual who brought American tobacco to Europe, and turned the plant into a commercial product, is certainly false, but generations have associated Sir Walter Raleigh with tobacco to such an extent that a popular brand of cigarettes bore his name and likeness, a strange distinction that no other poet can claim.

In life, they were friends, but their different career paths make Marlowe and Raleigh an interesting pair to be linked through time by their poems. The secret to the longevity of these two works seems to be not in the skill of the poets, which, even if combined, would not add up to the skill of many poets who have ended up forgotten ten years after their deaths. Instead, the secret is in the subject matter that these two poems cover so thoroughly. It would be a mistake to think that these are poems about love, even though that is what most schoolroom discussions probably make of them. They are only about love in the most general sense. More specifically, Marlowe's "Shepherd" poem is about the idealism that either causes or is caused by love, while Raleigh's **"Nymph"** addresses the sorrow of harsh reality. Together, these poems give readers a brief but thorough tour of all that is best and worst of the pastoral tradition in poetry.

In their book about Raleigh entitled *Shepherd of the Ocean*, J. H. Adamson and H. F. Folland discuss the interest that the poet and Queen Elizabeth took together in "the new vogue of pastoralism." Poems from ancient Greece, recently discovered at that time, stirred up interest in the pastoral convention, which

> describes life through an image of the idealized existence of literate and artistic shepherds in a lovely landscape of timeless spring, [and] is the playful wish-fulfillment of a sophisticated and complex culture, an imaginative vision of something like an unspoiled Eden, a Golden Age of simple purity and beauty.

Over the centuries, the pastoral convention has arisen regularly in complex societies looking for the quiet serenity of rolling fields,

gentle sheep, and honest shepherds who were as close to nature as humans can get. The Elizabethans amused themselves with this sort of idealism; the romantics made it their lives; the moderns were nostalgic, as if they had just missed it. To this day, farmers enjoy idealized associations with soil, sunshine, and seeds, while popular culture tends to forget the cold reality of their lives involving machinery, chemicals, and contracts.

The shepherd that Marlowe presented sprang directly from the tradition of the ancient Greeks, with shallow rivers and singing birds presenting a perfect setting for the noble, optimistic lover who was a popular figure at the time. Half of the poem is about the clothes the shepherd promises to make out of flowers and wool, gold and coral: the appeal these gifts held for the nymph would presumably not be the thrill of having clothes made by a shepherd but wearing things so freshly part of nature. The shepherd does not spend much time proclaiming the intensity of his love for the nymph, instead letting nature make his emotional appeal for him. If anything, that appeal is felt more strongly today. Since Marlowe's time, the world has only gotten more crowded, polluted, and impersonal, as cities have grown to hold larger populations than the entire continent had then. Now, like never before, the rolling hills that Marlowe's shepherd offered trigger a longing for love.

It was not exactly genius that gave Sir Walter Raleigh his insight that the pastoral vision was founded on wishful thinking. The purity and innate wisdom and dignity and all that Adamson and Folland described so well can be mesmerizing to readers when they let themselves become immersed in a pastoral poem, but the same conventions become easy to mock once the reader is out from under the poet's spell. Raleigh's genius was that he wrote his response so immediately, and that he mirrored Marlowe's writing so closely. He provides the yin to Marlowe's yang (opposite principles), the night to Marlowe's day: together, these two poems add up to a whole that says much more about human hopes and fears than the sum of its parts.

Marlowe's shepherd seems sincere in his claims of love, even though the nymph in Raleigh's poem makes a point of mentioning that shepherds are sometimes untrue. A lesser poem might have made more of the fact that lovers can lie to get what they want, using the very strength of the shepherd's claims as evidence that he is trying too hard, that he is hiding his real agenda. The problem with this is that it would mean raising doubts about the nature of love itself, making all lovers subject to suspicion. When the nymph passes so quickly over this possibility of dishonesty, Raleigh can address pastoralism itself without having to bring all lovers into question.

Rather than assault the basic trust that love relies on, the nymph's reply takes on the pastoral tradition. The weakness with this idealized vision is that it focuses on the good things in the world, ignoring the rest. The wrong way to go about countering this idealism would be to argue that there are bad things, too: such an argument would go on to infinity, with good point matching bad. Instead, Raleigh has the nymph take a philosophical approach to pastoralism. She cannot prove that the bad aspects of the life that the shepherd has proposed would be more common or powerful than the good ones, but she can prove that all of the wonders of nature that the shepherd has offered her will eventually go bad.

Time is the key to the nymph's reply. It is time that turns ripeness into rot: not because the universe is bad or love is an illusion, but simply because it is not the nature of things to stay the same. The nymph offers every possible concession to the shepherd's argument. She accepts his sincerity, she admits that the pastoral life is lovely, and she even agrees that she would be glad to live with him in such a beautiful place. Her objection is that it would eventually have to quit being the beautiful place that he has described. There is no arguing against the fact that time changes things.

Between the two poems, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd,"** a whole range of human beliefs is covered. The shepherd is right to stand in awe of the magnificent world that surrounds him, and readers cannot help but feel empathy for his powerful love, which drives him to promise his service and devotion. But the nymph has a good point, too, in showing that the circumstances that the shepherd offers her are bound to change. Each person should be able to understand and agree with each of these views, although, deep down, each person probably leans toward one more than the other. With these two poems, Raleigh and Marlowe created a sort of personality test that helps people understand their own basic beliefs. It is a feat that some poets strive to achieve for a lifetime.

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