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

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Sir Walter Raleigh's poem, **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd,"** is one of the most celebrated companion poems in all of English literature as it responds to and challenges Christopher Marlowe's poem, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Raleigh's poem engages the earlier poem in a dialogue that challenges the validity of the Elizabethan romantics' preoccupation for the pastoral, or the idyllic, simple life. Raleigh points toward a more complex and realistic understanding of life that is subject to darkness and the inevitable progression of time. Raleigh uses the conventions of Marlowe's poem to mock the idealized picture of nature for which Marlowe argues. By subverting the content of Marlowe's poem, Raleigh follows the prescriptions for a companion poem, which critic Steven May, in his article, "Companion Poems in the Raleigh Canon," describes as "one poem that may answer another, usually in a contradictory fashion," or as "two or more poems that may begin with similar themes and wording what appear to be exercises in literary collaboration." Following May's definition, Raleigh accomplishes both of these tasks as his nymph contradicts Marlowe's shepherd using pastoral conventions and direct allusions to Marlowe's poem to do so. Raleigh is not alone in his use of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Other poets to use Marlowe's lines either through direct quotation, or allusion, include: John Donne, Robert Herrick, C. Day Lewis, and even Shakespeare in his "Merry Wives of Windsor." Raleigh's effort is perhaps the most famous, and was almost as popular as Marlowe's poem in the sixteenth century. Raleigh pays tribute to the loveliness of "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" as he constructs a parallel vision more prone to questions concerning the validity and possibility of the shepherd's idyllic portrait.

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Raleigh and Marlowe wrote at the height of the Renaissance, which came to England in the sixteenth century under the rule of Queen Elizabeth. The era was marked by an urgent sense of the meaning of the word Renaissance, or "rebirth," as artists worked with and through one another to discover new artistic forms and make old forms new. The companion poem is a fine example of the ways in which artists, as May suggests, were working in dialogue with one another to create deep, lasting impressions with their audiences. Raleigh worked in dialogue with many of his Elizabethan romantic contemporaries including Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and Christopher Marlowe. Critic C. F. Tucker Brooke, in his article "Sir Walter Raleigh as Poet and Philosopher," claims that Raleigh "shares Sidney's courtly brilliance and chivalry, Spenser's political imagination, and Marlowe's luminous independence of mind. He is more like each of the three than any of them was like another." Such a variety of literary skills coupled with his political and practical talents made Raleigh a truly Renaissance, or "complete," "well-rounded" man. Raleigh brings his diverse talents to **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd"** as he uses the pastoral lyric to reveal a darker future than was generally explored using the form.

Throughout **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd,"** Raleigh employs allusion, or direct literary reference, to Marlowe's poem. The singsong, "To live with thee and be thy love," is taken directly from Marlowe's poem. Instead of a wistful dreaming, with it, Raleigh employs more pessimism and caution. Where Marlowe sings of loveliness and inflated possibility, Raleigh claims implausibility. Raleigh's "pretty pleasures" in the third line of the poem refer to the ornaments of the pastoral lyric form and the pretty surface of Marlowe's idealized natural world. The "pretty pleasures" are not enough for Raleigh because they do not last. In the poem, he suggests the futility and meaninglessness of ornaments and unattainable musings.

The use of the pastoral form dates to the third century b.c., and was, even then, a conventional poem celebrating the simplicity and peace of a shepherd's life in an idealized natural setting. The word "pastoral" comes from the Latin, "pastor" for "shepherd," thus the preponderance of shepherd characters in the examples of the form. The word "idyl," is used synonymously with "pastoral," and is connected to the romanticized notion of the shepherd's "idyllic" life roaming through perfected nature. The form worked for the Elizabethan romantic whose goal was, as Brooke explains, to "expand the world in which men live--the world of the senses and the world of the spirit." Marlowe's poem does this through idealization of the natural world. Raleigh addresses such an expansion of mind and ideas by questioning the idyl. In the sixteenth century, "idyl" would also be used to describe the life of the high-ranking gentry, who led idle lives and were exempt from the physical work of the shepherd, but whose role suggested a similar romanticized and idealized state. It is this romanticized notion of life as a gentleman and courtier that Raleigh deems unrealistic in the face of changing times.

Marlowe and Raleigh's dialogue pits the simple pastoral life against the influence of a more complex existence where dark shadows reside alongside the bright meadows of the shepherd's home. Pastorals, including Marlowe's, favor the simple. Raleigh uses the form to expose the rudimentary and short-sightedness of the simple. Where Marlowe escapes from the court and society and flees to nature, Raleigh argues that such escapism, such simplicity is unattainable. In Marlowe's opening if/then statement, there is a sense of certain romance and possibility. Raleigh's opening if /then statement is more cautious, uncertain. He seems to suggest that if such an idealized life were possible, he would embrace the romantic, but his "if" is much more uncertain. His uncertainty stems from questioning the truth the shepherd tells. Is there "truth in every shepherd's tongue?" the nymph seems to ask. Is there any truth, or any possibility of such a simple life? The nymph and Raleigh are not at all certain. Where Marlowe's "melodious birds sing madrigals, " Raleigh's nightingale, his "Philomel," ceases singing and becomes "dumb," solidifying the implausibility of the romantic. Where Marlowe sees only the positive future, Raleigh sees and understands a future fraught with difficulty as much as with ease.

Raleigh's second stanza introduces the element of time that so permeates and clouds his romantic visions. Time "drives flocks from field to fold" and turns "the rest" to the cares and burdens of the future. Joyce Horner, in "The Large Landscape: A Study of Certain Images in Raleigh," discusses Raleigh's tendency to expose the trappings of the ideal through a look at the power and fluctuations of time. Often, Horner notes, Raleigh's work addresses "the erasing, effacing power of time, the vanity of human effort." Raleigh's contemporary, Spencer, called Raleigh the "Shepherd of the Ocean," as he tackled the vastness, the "ocean," of the historical and human landscape. Raleigh's poetic voice is not content in the clean, conventional, and idealistic pastoral lyric unless it is exposing and subverting its conventions in an attempt to discuss the larger picture of human history. Where Marlowe's imagery offers a contained and tamed nature, Raleigh acknowledges "wanton," or rebellious fields and "wayward Winter." Here, the poet does not control the image of nature. Nature is ruler. Time progresses through the seasons and carries humanity with it. In this stanza, we cannot trust a "honey tongue" because it may hide "a heart of gall." Idyllic portraits, Raleigh suggests, are not to be trusted. To trust in the image and the ideal is to miss meaning. Horner notes in Raleigh's lyrics, "the small, enclosed world of the pastoral keeps cracking," and where "life-giving streams overflow," Raleigh also recognizes that "they have the power to drown." That life exists next to death, for Raleigh, is the point. That the romantic must exist next to the realistic is a fact with which the poet, the courtier, and the shepherd ultimately must contend.

In the fourth stanza of **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd,"** the trifles of language, the masks of idealism, which deal with nothing but self-delusion are "In folly ripe, in reason rotten." Raleigh does more than suggest the pastoral lyric's lack of real power. For Raleigh, challenging the delusion is what creates meaning, and he is looking beyond the conventions of the form, the folly and fun, to address the greater human story, which is one of struggle and "Winter" as much as it is one of romance in "May." The shepherd's "belt of straw and ivy buds," his "coral clasps and amber studs" become the frivolous ornaments of the pastoral lyric, the elements of superficial living. For Raleigh, the trifles of language and convention, these elements and visions of a shallow life, cannot move him to believe in the romantic. The need for a deeper love is implied, a relationship with society and lover that has the ability to transcend the beautiful ideal by questioning its validity and living fully in the darkness as much as the light. But, Raleigh needs the ideal to fully see and write the contradiction. Raleigh's nymph is as wrapped up in the thought of the ideal as Marlowe's shepherd, if not more so. For the nymph, the romantic ideal is the ultimate prize, made even more beautiful for its illusiveness and the yearning it creates with its distance and impossibility. If it were possible to harbor a constant joy, if youth was endless and love boundless, then perhaps, Raleigh suggests, he would be able to live and love the shepherd's passionate vision. But, only if . . . therefore, never.

The ideal cannot exist without the contradiction of that ideal, and herein lay the strength of this companion poem. In the sixteenth century, audiences seemed to recognize, as Brooke notes, "The forces of Elizabethan romanticism are seen in him [Raleigh] not fused, but in divergence, not in harmony, but in conflict. Raleigh's imagination destroyed nearly as much as it created." Together Raleigh's destruction and Marlowe's creation present a whole picture. Raleigh's vision balances Marlowe's and allows for the questioning that becomes the basis for a fully realized experience. In **"The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd,"** Raleigh harbors a yearning for the ideal that would make it possible to live and love as the shepherd, a yearning that is not quite belief, but a yearning that can be in itself a kind of rebirth. Raleigh's questions and dark predictions stem from this yearning, creating a deep impression and invitation to the reader to consider the many complex implications of what it means "To live with thee and be thy love."

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