



*Elegy XIX: To His
Mistress Going to Bed*

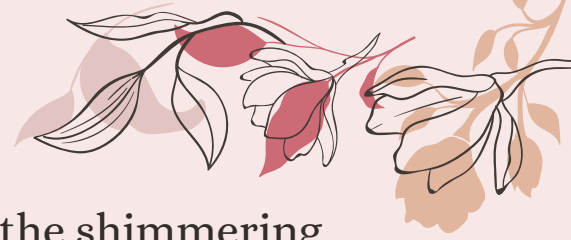
John Donne - Pre-1900/Unseen Poetry

Pre-reading context + information



- The **elegy** is a type of **lyric poem**. It's **usually a formal lament for someone's death**. It can also be a serious poem produced to express the speaker's melancholic thoughts or reflections.
- ***Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed*** mocks the solemn Petrarchan poems of the day which frequently focused on the despair and heartache brought about by unattainable love.
- As an elegy is a form of poetic reflection, we must consider the possibility that the thoughts expressed form part of the speaker's inner monologue as he observes his lover prepare for bed.
- Because of its energetic, bawdy (rude) wit and its explicit portrayal of sexual desire, it wasn't printed until 1654, and didn't appear in Donne's poems until 1669.
- In this poem, the context startles and surprises - the speaker addresses the (possibly reluctant) lover from the bed which he hopes to share with her.

Analysis



- In this poem, the speaker's sexual conquest is matched to the shimmering wonder of the New World.
- The poem almost enacts a 'striptease' or an undressing.
- Gender relations provide a frame - he is asking her to remove the clothes that define her, and throughout the poem, her clothes speak louder than she does.
- **Line 1 - "Come madam, come"** - the poem opens with a repeated imperative as the speaker begins to cajole the woman into bed. He is restless and frustrated as he urges her to join him.
- There is evidence that this exchange is a form of word play between two intellectual equals, as the speaker's choice of metaphors seem deliberately outrageous.
- **Line 2 - "Until I labour, I in labour lie"** - his duty, or 'labour' is to consummate their love physically. He then employs a pun on the word 'labour' to compare his un-sated desire to the pain of childbirth.

Analysis



- The hyperbolic nature of such a comparison (in line 2) serves to flatter rather than offend the mistress, as the battle of wills continues.
- **Line 3:** “*The foe oft times having the foe in sight*” - The speaker takes pleasure in trying to shock his lover. Now that they are “foes” he can be frank about his desires.
- **Line 4:** “*Is tired with standing, though he never fight*” - the lewd pun of the “standing” foe expresses his need for physical intimacy rather than intellectual teasing, as he draws attention to his own erection.
- **Line 5:** “*Off with that girdle*” - the colloquial tone of this command creates the impression of a domineering and demanding lover. However, this is contradicted by the hyperbolic description of the garment as “*heaven’s zone, glistening.*”
- **Line 6:** “*But a far fairer world encompassing*” - he describes the mistress’s body here, and that it is ‘**far fairer**’ than the pretty girdle she is wearing.
- She is everything to the speaker, as this comparison recalls the belief in the microcosm (perfect balance & harmony of the lovers reflects the beauty of heaven and earth.)

Analysis



- **Line 7:** “*Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear*” - the impatient tone returns. The reference to the ‘spangled breastplate’ is dismissive of female fashions, although the speaker is grateful that it protects her from “*th’eyes of buy fools,*”(line 8) highlighting his capacity for possessive jealousy.
- The choice of the word “**breastplate**” conveys the attitude that love is private and the mistress must protect herself before entering the battlefield of the public sphere. *It is also a reference to the Aegis of Athena from Greek mythology - a symbol of chastity.*
- **Line 9:** “*Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime*” - The speaker returns to the use of the imperative as he bids her to ‘unlace. Once again, the forceful tone is tempered by the speaker’s joy in loving his mistress. His sensory appreciation of her converts the sound of her laces to a ‘harmonious chime.’
- **Line 11:** “*Off with that happy busk, which I envy*” - he personifies her bustier as “happy” and envies it for its closeness to her body and ability to maintain its state, an innuendo which reintroduces the pun based on things that “stand.”

Analysis



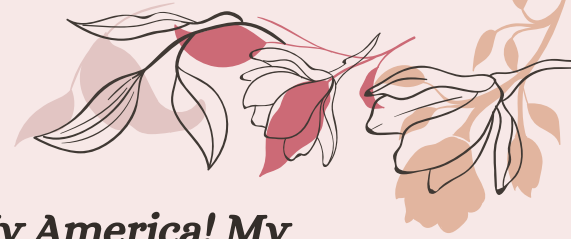
- **Line 13-14:** “*Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals / as when flowery meads th’ hills shadow steals*” - His belief that physical love is a natural thing is reflected in his comparison of her “*beauteous state*” to “*flowery meads (fields)*” freed from morning shadow.
- **Line 15-16:** “*Off with that wiry Coronet and shew / the hairy Diadem which on you doth grow*” - There is a sense here that he grows impatient with the romantic imagery of courtly love that he has employed to woo her, as he makes a lewd comparison between her jewelled headpiece and the body hair revealed in her nakedness.
- Again there is a sense that the speaker feels Nature has provided women with ample adornment, as he dismisses her clothes/manufactured embellishments.
- **Line 17-18:** “*Now off with those shoes, and then safely tread / In this love’s hallowed temple, in this soft bed.*” - This further command to remove her shoes leads the speaker to reflect upon his belief in the sacred nature of physical love.

Analysis



- He declares the bed **“love’s hallowed temple”** and shows (somewhat incorrect) religious knowledge in his allusion to **“Mohammed’s paradise”** - an image that he daringly subverts by comparing the woman in her white robes to the heavenly host.
- **Line 22-24: “Though ill spirits walk in white... these our flesh upright”**: He moves from the ghostly to the concrete. He knows she is not an evil spirit because she has made his flesh, rather than his hair, stand **“upright”**.
- He has combined theology and superstition to elevate the physical, sexual act they will perform.
- It isn’t clear to the reader whether this is pure blasphemy, or a deeply held belief in the sanctity of their love.
- **Line 25-26: “License my roving hands, and let them go, Before, behind, between, above, below”** - The speaker seems to have persuaded his lover to join him. The woman is not without control in the situation, as he seeks her permission.
- He conveys his excitement as a lover, as well as the desire to have complete knowledge of her.

Analysis



- This desire is made explicit in **line 27** when he calls her **“My America! My new-found land.”** - This conceit suggests the microcosm of their physical union is superior to the excitement of the New World explorers of Elizabeth’s court.
- She is his empire, his **“mine of precious stones” (line 28)**. His rejection of state and glory elevates their love, although the image to a modern reader does present the mistress as a resource and possession to be exploited.
- **Line 29: “How blest am I in this discovering thee!”** - he feels blessed in his union with her, and wants to give himself completely to her, as he believes **“to enter into these bonds is to be free” (line 30)**.
- The apparent contradictions of his thoughts suggest the tumult of emotions of the lover.
- **Line 31: Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be”** - His desire for possession does emerge as his hand sets his “seal” on her.

Analysis



- **Line 32-39: “Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee”** - Now that the mistress seems willing to fulfil his desires, he turns his thoughts elsewhere.
- In an apostrophe to “full nakedness” he reveals his thoughts on the superficial nature of women, who use clothes and jewels **“like books’ gay covering” (line 38)** to attract materialistic fools.
- This cynical attack finally tests the patience of his mistress. The speaker quickly recovers, and offers the alternative comparison of women to **“mystic books” (line 40)** who reveal themselves with a dignified grace.
- Confident in his persuasive techniques, the speaker delivers his final shocking instructions, asking the mistress to **“show thyself” (line 43)** as she would to a midwife.
- He asserts that she will not have committed a sin, as **“There is no penance due to innocence.” (line 45)**.

Analysis



- Ambiguity remains at this point, as the “innocence” could be read in a number of ways. It could be a direct reference to chastity. The speaker may also be suggesting that the sacred nature of physical love makes their act innocent, or he could be implying she is innocent in the act as it was his arts of persuasion that created the situation.

Form and Structure

- The rhyming couplets present the lover’s confidence and security in both his arguments and his love.
- Rhetorical devices are used throughout to structure the argument, whilst the frequent use of the imperative mode indicates that the speaker feels himself in control of the situation.