

The characters speaking to us from Browning's "My last duchess"<sup>1</sup> and Marvell's "To his coy mistress"<sup>2</sup> are at base level two men having trouble with women. The difference in circumstance and their approach provide a contrast between Marvell's free spirited enemy of time and Browning's small minded, ignoble Duke.

The Duke of "My last duchess" has been placed by the editors of the Oxford Anthology of English Literature as Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrar, believed responsible for the poisoning of his young wife. He has been described as "completely egotistical and repulsive"<sup>3</sup> and is certainly an unlovable character, unable to allow the presence of a companion who does not give him the full attention and respect he believes he deserves by birth, but which does not inspire his guileless wife.

The man's monologue is set in the form of heroic couplets, a grand setting for a nobleman with a long family history, but instead of an epic worthy of the family and the form, he delivers this fragment of an obviously much longer spiel in which he and his possessions are his topic. He speaks almost as a salesman, in normal speech, with pauses as he thinks on his feet, asides as he takes his "customers" into his confidence, and the sting as he asks for money in the final lines. This dissonance between content and form reflects the lack of real nobility in the Duke's comments.

...Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek...  
...she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
...as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybodies gift.

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<sup>1</sup> Browning, R. "My Last Duchess" in Kermode, F., Hollander, J. Bloom, H., Price, M., Trapp, J.B., and Trilling, L. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Marvell, A. "To His Coy Mistress" Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Barber, C. *Poetry in English*, London: Macmillan Press, 1983.

He is jealous of any outside interests of his wife, showing his insecurity as the holder of a “nine-hundred-years-old name” feeling he must possess her entirely, as he does with his art treasures, or prove unworthy of his family. The single word given to “nine-hundred-years-old name” emphasises the importance the Duke gives to family pride.

He is a man who through always having things his own way, people always smile for him for example, now cannot communicate effectively, and so has become isolated. His laughable examples of lessons to his wife would be sure to cause offence in all but the most indulgent, but rather than conclude his suggestions are unreasonable, decides it must be just the way he says it, and beneath his station to correct one who cannot give him the attention he feels he deserves.

Even had you skill  
In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, ‘Just this  
Or that disgusts me...

-E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose  
Never to stoop.

Browning has softened slightly the character by allowing some regret at her passing; “all smiles stopped” including his own, but this is all. He is returned to his more pressing concerns by paraphrasing his original praise of the painting and continues his negotiations for his latest possession, the next Duchess, and dowry.

Browning’s Duke then, is an insecure isolated man, easily threatened in his position and more comfortable with his possessions. The unlucky Duchess is a victim of his insecurity because, as something he can’t wholly possess, she is unacceptable threat.

Perhaps Marvell could have helped the Duke as one with “skill of speech.” This skill is not used as Alfonso II would have, to correct crimes against courtesy, but to convince his coy mistress of the crime of her coyness and the punishment that awaits her at the hands of time.

The lover of “To his coy mistress” is an advocate of seizing the moment to temporarily cheat time. He sets out a three part argument to convince his mistress of his position, commencing with a nonsense verse, an eloquent list of absurdities aimed at her coyness, then a vicious few lines paint the penalty of her crime, and finally a breathless finale, an appeal to her “willing soul” which is most evocative of his character.

Marvell’s lover treats time as his enemy. In each stanza time is given a new uncomplimentary role. In the first it props up the empty praises, and becomes the tool used to extend irony to the absurd, as a “hundred years” becomes two, the thousands, then an age. The second stanza finds time treated as a “winged chariot” hurrying him along to his harrowing vision of eternity. Time finally becomes for him a monster which must be destroyed to prevent it sucking life out of him.

Rather at once our time devour  
Than languish in his slow-chapt power

The lover’s direct appeal to his mistress in the final stanza, through its pace and images, gives us a glimpse of his character stripped bare of irony. After the almost uninterrupted slow pace of the first two stanzas, the increased tempo symbolises his arousal and rising passions. This is emphasised by his description of his mistress as having a “willing soul” and being “at every pore with instant fires.”

He uses the image of flight to fuel his appeal to take risks and defy time. The “amorous birds of prey” are said to plummet as they mate in mid-air, and the element of risk in their passion is the way they “devour” time. Again, the sexual metaphor is bound up with flight, in the image of the cannonball, giving their passions the strength to put aside daily matters; and also a hint of the uncontrollable nature of the forces once unleashed.

Let us roll up our strength and all  
Our sweetness up into one ball,  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife  
Through the iron gates of life;

The final lines are a damper after he has in fact or imagination conquered her, the tearing of their pleasures being the culmination of his passions, and his willingness to admit the ultimate futility of his fight with time. He cannot make time stand still, just make “him run” with the sun. The failure of his passion to stop time takes us back to his second stanza, as his lust will still turn to ashes, the only variable seeming to be whether he or the worms try her “long preserved virginity.”

His lack of a solution to the problem of time is very likely why he uses the final two lines of the other stanzas as well to prevent his argument being too complete, to, as it were, give the poor girl some chance. The ironic tone of the first stanza is disrupted by its close: two lines of apparent sincerity. This could be taken for sarcasm, except the device is repeated in the second stanza. After painting a withering vision of barrenness and death he continues:

The grave’s a fine and private place  
But none, I think, do there embrace.

With this sing-song piece of doggerel he returns to the joking style of the first stanza, and fractures the marble vault he has built for her virginity.

Marvell’s lover is a figure that tilts at the enormity of time, and who can only find a temporary solution, to live for the moment, to risk, and to embrace the world of the senses and passions, and perhaps his coy mistress.

These two great characters of poetic imagination are in some respects opposites, Marvell’s lover embodying the very things the Browning’s small-minded Duke can’t handle, risk and perhaps love; while making an enemy of time, the Duke’s friend and protector through his nine hundred year old family name. By talking to, or about, women, they show us what they are like, and leave me at least wondering, having contrasted the men, what they would have made of each other’s partners.

## Bibliography

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