

## The Wisdom of Carpe Diem in Classical and Metaphysical Poetry: a Comparative Study of Catullus and Marvell's Love Lyrics

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### Abstract

*The Latin aphorism in the title of this paper comes from one of Horace's poems. Rather than focusing on the need for courting couples to appreciate the fleeting nature of time, as Catullus and Marvell do in their poems to be discussed here, Horace seeks to caution humanity as a whole to always use the time they have profitably when he writes:*

*dum loquimur, fugerit invida aetas* As we speak, cruel time is fleeing  
**Carpe diem**, *quam minimum credula postero*: **Seize the day**, believing as little as possible in the morrow.

*Near the end of this paper, I go the way of Horace in suggesting that indeed, the wisdom of carpe diem can be generalized from the domain of courtship and used to inform our use of opportunities and time in all spheres of our lives. Both Catullus and Marvell's poems were inspired by what they saw as a constraining, conservative, social mores governing the behavior of women in matters of courtship. Each poet therefore constructed his text as an argument designed to persuade the object of his love to free herself from what such a society expected of her. In doing so, the poets employed comparable but different poetic tropes, such as metaphor, hyperbole, and simile. My discussion is crucially an argument for the efficacy of a combined linguistic and literary criticism paradigm in unraveling meaning from poetry and from all other texts by which we communicate both as creators and receivers of information through language.*

### 1.0 Introduction

Horace's advice to his readers, "carpe diem", itself a metaphor, urges them to make maximum use of the time available to them, without concern for the future, because "Tomorrow will look after itself", as the English say. Our knowledge and awareness of the transience of time, and of humanity's mortality, is as old as the hills. This is to state the obvious, that which is so obvious that all natural human languages have sayings, namely proverbs, similes, metaphors, and so on, which people use to remind themselves of this immutable fact of their lives. Consider the following selection, beginning with aphorisms from the language of the Roman Empire:

- Carpe diem: Seize the day.
- Tempus fugit: Time flies.
- Ars longa vita brevis: Art lasts long; life is short.

This last one, composed by Seneca, is clearly the inspiration of one of Horace's most well known odes. In it he celebrates the eternity of the totality of his works, in contrast to his own time-bound existence here on earth. Referring to his poetry, he wrote:

*I have built a monument more durable than bronze  
Which neither the weak North wind nor the torrential rain,  
Nor the innumerable years' stampede  
Nor fleeting time can tatter to the earth. ....  
Not all of me will die. A part is strong  
Enough to flout Queen Death into rebirth  
Of people's praise long afterward. (Emphasis added).*

[I was visiting the University of Malawi in the early 1980s as External Examiner when I attended a concert at a venue to whose entrance the Latin version of the first line in this poem was prominently etched: Exegi monumentum aere perennius. My host explained that the Hall had been donated to the University by His Excellency, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, “using funds from his own pocket”].

In their reference to time’s remorseless devouring of human life’s longevity, the third and fourth lines above foreshadow those from the second stanza of Andrew Marvell’s *To His Coy Mistress*:

But at my back I always hear  
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.

In Horace’s poem there is reference to “... the innumerable years’ stampede”, while in Marvell’s it is to “Time’s winged chariot hurrying near”. Both the “innumerable years” in their stampede, and the “...winged chariot hurrying near”, create audible sound in the reader’s ears. Yet in real life people do not “hear” time approaching and passing. Horace and Marvell are both exploiting hyperbole in order to foreground and thereby imprint their urgent message on the reader’s mind. The monument that is Horace’s oeuvre in the poem above can be compared to statues, such as that in Shelley’s *Ozymandias*, which the desert winds and torrential rains have reduced to rubble. This is in sharp contrast to the life Horace envisages for his poetic works. He has come to accept that “art lasts long/life is short”, in Seneca’s words. Horace goes so far as to see his work as a part of his physical body:

Not all of me will die.  
A part is strong enough to flout Queen Death into rebirth  
Of people’s praise long afterward.

The poet is inviting his readers to accept, as he has done, human life’s time- boundedness, in contrast to that of his poetic works. And he does so with a triumphal flourish: his works will not merely *outlast* ordinary death, but they will “*flout Queen Death ...*”. He also boasts that not even “the weak North wind or (the weak) torrential rain ...” can destroy his works. These elements are “weak” only in comparison to the durability which the poet envisages for his works. Yet this expectation of the continued adulation of him by his readers after he is gone seems to have put Horace into a somewhat fatalistic mindset. These lines can be read as a “Please do not forget me!” appeal. Composing poetry of high quality is Horace’s own way of heeding the wisdom of *Carpe diem*. He sought to ensure such high quality by heeding his own advice to would-be poets. He wrote, in his *Ars Poetica*:

You can always destroy what you never published;  
The word sent forth can never be recalled.

The English have inherited this way of dealing with mortality and created, over time, many aphorisms on the theme of *Carpe diem*:

- Make hay while the sun shines.
- Time and tide wait for no man.

I first came across this second one when I went to boarding school. It was prominently placed at the entrance to our dining hall, rather like Dante’s “Abandon hope all that enter here” at the entrance to Hell. The school authorities meant to impress on us the need for us both to arrive on time for our meals and also to work conscientiously as students. But the humorous among us corrupted the words “Time and tide” to the Shona “Timwe tidye”: “That we may drink and eat”! This was in fact their tongue-in-cheek mockery of some of the inedible fare that was offered to us as food.

Wilfred Best’s (1990) *The Students’ Companion* lists 15 other English sayings on this theme. One of them comes very close to the lines in Catullus and Marvell’s poems in its reference to time:

- The morning sun never lasts the day.

This one is obviously relatable to the line in Catullus’ poem *Lesbia* in its reference to the sun rising and relentlessly coursing across the sky in a set time:

Soles occidere et redire possunt: Suns may set and yet rise again, and to Marvell’s:

But at my back I always hear  
Time’s winged chariot drawing near ...

The Shona have a proverb, “Chinono chinengwe/bere rinodya richifamba”: “The leopard is cautiously slow/the

hyena eats while on the move.” Coincidentally anticipating my concerns in this paper, Hamutineyi and Planger, in their seminal *Tsumo/Shumo: Shona Proverbial Lore and Wisdom* (1987: 15), say of this proverb, “This proverb may be applied to a hesitant suitor. If he wants to court a girl he must not waste time, or some other fellow will get her first. *Carpe diem!*” Then they note that the Shona proverb has been used by five Shona novelists to indicate that the misery of the tragic characters in their stories was due to their ignoring the wisdom conveyed by the aphorism “*Carpe diem*”. Further, one of the former freedom fighters whom I interviewed while researching for my book *What’s in a Name?* (1983) in 1980 had the nom de guerre “Muswerakuenda Mukuwashawezuva”: “The one who spends the whole day on the move/(Because he is) The son-in-law of the (watching) sun”.

The first part of his name points to a self-conscious individual’s character, a strong and hard-working man determined to meet deadlines in accomplishing whatever goals are set for him; while the surname highlights his social status, a responsible son-in-law who respects and strives to impress his father-in-law. Otherwise he will not be given another wife. The “son-in-law of the sun” metaphor says he is conscious of the fact that time is of the essence. Lastly on this theme, the Shona also say “Shindi yakashaya muswe nokutumira”: “The rock rabbit lost the chance to get a tail by sending a representative (to collect one for him from the Creator)”. This one comes from a Shona creation myth which has it that, at the beginning of things, all animals were invited by their Maker to come and get a tail. Instead of seizing the chance, Rock Rabbit sent another animal to go and claim a tail on his behalf. But the Maker would have none of that, and He took no late applications. That is why the rock rabbit has no tail, so says the myth.

## 2.0 *Carpe diem* in matters of courtship

While all the sayings above are used to caution against wasting the time that one has for making a success of one’s life, this paper focuses on poetry composed on the theme *carpe diem* in matters of courtship. One of the most enduring of such poems was composed in about 53 BC by the Roman poet, Gaius Valerius Catullus. As its title, it carries the name of the woman whom he was courting, *Lesbia*. In this paper I shall examine the similarities and differences between Catullus’s *Lesbia* and another, equally famous, poem written by the English metaphysical poet, Andrew Marvell. He composed the poem *To His Coy Mistress* in the 1650s, almost two millennia after Catullus’s poem. Yet there is no argument in the critical canon that Marvell, and others of his metaphysical contemporaries who wrote on the same theme, were indebted to Catullus’s poem. Indeed, in his essay “Andrew Marvell” ([http://world.std.com/~raparker/exploring/books/andrew\\_marvell.html](http://world.std.com/~raparker/exploring/books/andrew_marvell.html)), T. S. Eliot writes that “... Marvell’s best verse is the product of European, that is to say Latin, culture.” This continuity or connectedness between succeeding generations of poets in their thematic concerns and styles is the focus of Eliot’s other seminal essay, “Tradition and Individual Talent” (Adams and Searle, 2005: 806 – 810). He wrote,

*... if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, “tradition” should positively be discouraged. ... Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical presence compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.*

That is why Marvell and those other English poets of his generation continue to exercise the minds of literary critics and students of literature, and deservedly so. This is because their poetry, far from being unimaginative reproductions of the earlier poem, namely Catullus’s *Lesbia*, is original in the sense of it responding and giving a new, English voice to an eternal theme, but this time in response to their own prevailing cultural milieu. Courtship, leading to marriage and parenthood, was sanctioned by the Creator in the Garden of Eden, never mind humanity’s subsequent transgressions and the consequences attendant upon them.

## 2.1 Gaius Valerius Catullus’s *Lesbia*

1	Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus	Let us live, my Lesbia, and love.
2	Rumoresque senum severiorum	As for all the rumors of (those) stern old men,
3	Omnes unius aestimemus assis!	Let us value them at a penny's worth.
4	Soles occidere et redire possunt;	Suns may set and yet rise again, but
5	Nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux,	For us, when once the brief light has set,
6	Nox est perpetua una dormienda. -----	The night which falls is one interminable darkness. -----
7	Da me basia mille, deinde centum,	Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred.
8	Dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,	Then, another thousand, and a second hundred.
9	Deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum; -----	Then, yet another thousand, and yet another hundred. -----
10	Dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,	Then, when we have counted many thousands,
11	Conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,	Let us shake the abacus thus, so that even we may lose count,
12	Aut ne quis malus invidere posit	<i>Nor should any evil person be able to envy us</i>
13	Cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.	<i>When they come to know the numerousness of our kisses.</i>

This poem is only one of twenty-five that Catullus devoted to Lesbia. The speaker in Catullus's poem conveys a sense of urgency about the matter at hand. The object of his love is apparently slow, unwise enough not to appreciate the transience of human life. And so, after a brief explanation of the difference between the sun, which sets and rises again, and human life which, once gone, never returns, he urges her [to] "seize the day" when he orders Lesbia to "Give me ..., (Give me ...), (Give me ...) ...". There is impatience and a sense of near panic in this poem. The words "Give me ..." are used once, at the beginning of line 7. Then they are ellipped from the next five cognate clauses, where only the number of kisses is mentioned. The same applies to the word for "kisses" itself. It is used only in line 7 and resurfaces as the last word of the poem at line 13. In the intervening part of the poem only the number of kisses is mentioned: "a thousand [...], then a hundred [...], then another thousand [...], then yet another hundred [...]". In this instance the speaker comes across as one striving to maintain decorum and to avoid panicking or embarrassing his Lesbia by bombarding her ears with the suggestive word 'kisses'. The poet has resorted to ellipsis as a cohesive tie for binding his text together.

Ellipsis is a cohesive device which requires readers and listeners to retain the omitted words in their memory if they are going to make sense of subsequent parts of an unfolding text. It serves to eliminate that unnecessary repetition which would otherwise numb the reader's appetite for more on the theme. The blanks left by the ellipped words cannot be interpreted unless the reader has recourse to their previous mention. And, as in this poem, such omissions must be as close as possible to the first mention of the words concerned in order to facilitate the flow of the message. By using this tie in this poem, the speaker metaphorically seeks to sweep Lesbia off her feet by his avalanche of demands for kisses in their thousands and hundreds. On a first reading of the poem, it seems curious that the suitor demands first "a thousand kisses, and then a hundred". Yet, although this is an instance of hyperbole, it can be read as the suitor's striving to remain firmly anchored on the practical. In real life the first few kisses exchanged by lovers are more enthusiastic than subsequent ones, before the cycle resumes, if they have the time.

I recently came across a "scientific" definition of love in the British newspaper, *The International Express*. It read, "Scientifically, love has been defined as 'the cognitive-affective state characterized by intrusive and obsessive fantasizing concerning reciprocity of amoral feeling by the object of the amorce'" (William Hartston: 20/02/2013). The suitor in Catullus's poem certainly comes across as someone close to "obsessive fantasizing" in his quest for "reciprocity of amoral feeling" from his lover. By contrast, as we shall see momentarily, the speaker in Marvell's poem, though equally intense, is more subdued, more philosophical, while remaining respectful of his "interlocutor". The word "interlocutor" must be placed in quotation marks for one good reason: in both poems it is only the suitor who speaks. He attributes shyness to the woman who, throughout each poem, does not utter even one word. Catullus's woman has a name, but not Marvell's. This impersonalizes and thereby generalizes the issue. It makes the reader wonder whether, in their attribution of silence to their women, both poets are in fact also addressing and challenging the constraining, conservative social milieu into which women in general are acculturated in their respective societies. Each poet might just as well have been arguing with a statuesque figure symbolizing a value system now at odds with modernity.

A further contrast between these poems is that, whereas Catullus's speaker resorts to only one, mundane simile, and to one, playful hyperbole, Marvell's suitor, by deploying several metaphors and hyperboles, engages his at an intellectual level, the assumption being that she is knowledgeable enough to interpret his similes, metaphors, and hyperboles.

## 2.2 The structure of Catullus's 'argument'

I regard Catullus's poem as an argument because in it he presents two personae that apparently have different views on courtship. The speaker, Catullus himself, argues that the prevailing social values are oppressive and lack wisdom in their insistence on a woman's virtue remaining intact until marriage. The object of his love, Lesbia, is convention-bound and thus reluctant to oblige. Her other concern is also that, according to some accounts, she was already married, to a Senator. And so Catullus employs the following strategies to persuade Lesbia to be pragmatic in her interpretation of conventional wisdom. His argument is anchored on a contrastive simile between the regularity, cyclicity, and perpetuity of natural occurrences on the one hand, and the temporariness of human life, on the other. This is the strategy which he uses in order to persuade the object of his love to seize the moment. He begins his argument by extending a polite and romantic invitation to Lesbia to cooperate in an act of mutual benefit:

Let us live, my dear Lesbia, and love.  
Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus.

The speaker admits that there is a hurdle, in the form of "... the rumors of those stern old men", a reference to the senator-husband's colleagues. But, he argues, together, we can clear that hurdle (lines 1 – 3). The reason for his invitation is that time is not on their side because, unlike inanimate nature, whose life is cyclical, they have one short life followed by an interminable darkness, that is, death (lines 4 – 6). So powerful is the line which conveys Catullus's view of death as irreversibly terminating human life that it has deservedly been quoted by many post-Classical period writers. According to Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catullus\\_5](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catullus_5)), the line "Nox est perpetua una dormienda" is a recurring theme in Anthony Burgess's novel, *The Kingdom of the Wicked*. It is also quoted in Virginia Woolf's novel *The Years* in the chapter "The Present Day" and, the words "Nox Dormienda" are the title of a novel by Kelli Stanley. Further, the portion of the poem from "Soles occidere ..." to "Da me basia mille", which includes the above line, is used in Aldous Huxley's novel, *Island*. All this is because that line resonates with humanity's sense of helplessness before the immutable fact of death's slow but sure approach. There are seven plosive consonants in it, which for me seem to imitate the sound made by a hammer driving nails into a coffin. Once Catullus's speaker is himself convinced that he has convinced his Lesbia of the unwisdom of procrastination, he demands a countless number of kisses and exhorts her to reciprocate his advances.

At this point he is certain that he has put his argument across. In terms of its structure as an argument however, the poem does not have the word normally used when a debater has proved his case. But, in the structure of the poem, there is room for the word "ergo", "therefore". The line in question would read, after the disadvantages of procrastination have been made apparent, "**Therefore**, give me as many kisses as will quench my thirst for your love", with that word linking what follows to the "evidence" which precedes it. The demand "Give me ..." contrasts with the opening line, in which the suitor invites Lesbia with "Let us ...". It suggests to me that the suitor's emotions have been rising in a crescendo to the point where he can wait no longer. This request-cum-demand contrasts sharply with Marvell's courtly "**Let us** roll all our strength and all/Our sweetness up into one ball/And [**let us**] *tear* our pleasures with rough strife/Thorough the iron gates of life ...". I have said that Marvell's words are courtly and polite. Yet the point has to be made that here, near the end of his poem, Marvell employs words which, in their metaphoricity, playfully dehumanize the suitor himself. "Tear[ing]" the "one ball", which is a compound of "all our strength" and "all our sweetness ...", and doing so "with rough strife", is the way carnivorous animals devour their prey. Yet, again, lest we forget, the grunting noises that some lovers often make are clearly reminiscent of the animal in them. The last six lines of the poem are a celebration of triumph over the original hurdle, now cleared because Lesbia, in the mind of her suitor, who is now possessed by "an intrusive and obsessive fantasizing concerning reciprocity of [his]amoral feeling by the object of [his] amorance", has seen sense in her suitor's argument. Not only must they themselves have so many kisses that they lose count of them, but the peeping Toms must not be driven to jealousy "... when they come to know the numerousness of our kisses." This places emphasis on the need for secrecy, given the fact of Lesbia being a married woman.

Note the tight cohesion achieved through the elliptical use of “Give me [OBJECT]”, employed only in line 7, and then followed by FIVE instances of “Give me ...”, from which the object is omitted because it is recoverable from line 7. This serves to give the message a sense of urgency in an abandoned frenzy of celebrating love with an abundance of kisses by a couple now aware of the real meaning of the transience of life. Further, in line 2, I have placed the word “those” in brackets. This is because there is no evidence for it in the Latin original. It is the Wikipedia translator’s effort to incorporate the historical background to the poem, about which anon.

### 2.3 The Poetic Structure of *Lesbia*.

This poem is a lyric. In this type of poetry ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/catallus\\_5](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/catallus_5)), “the line is not to be divided into feet, but is itself the unit to be scanned. It has a fixed number of syllables. One of the most common forms is the one called the hendecasyllabic, which is Catullus’s favorite line. It consists of eleven syllables with the following pattern:

--- Ⓢ □ □ Ⓢ - Ⓢ - Ⓢ ---

rumoresque senum severiorum: as for the rumors of (those) stern old men  
omnes unius aestimemus assis: let us value them at a mere penny!”

The reference to (those) old and senile rumor mongers has to do with the gossip which was doing the rounds among Roman senators, as I have indicated earlier. There were allegations to the effect that Catullus was in an illicit relationship with the wife one of their colleagues. Her name may have given her away, Clodia **Pulchra** Tercia. The middle name is from the Latin adjective “pulcher”, meaning “beautiful”, and from which we get the English word “pulchritude”. “Pulcher” is here inflected to indicate the feminine gender. Her brother’s middle name was “Pulcher”, the masculine form. It is believed that she is the woman Lesbia in Catullus’s other poems. By some accounts, she was ten years older than Catullus (<http://www.hoocher.com/gaiusvaleriuscatallus.htm>). The truthfulness of the rumors was strengthened by the fact that Catullus composed several poems on the same theme addressed to other women, a fact which made him come across as a womanizer.

The wikipedia critic points out that, structurally, “there is chiasmus in the poem *Lesbia*, as in these lines”:

rumoresque	senum	severiorum	omnes
A	B	B	A

Further, he states that in the line below, “the poetic effect of positioning ‘lux’ – ‘light’, right next to ‘nox’ – ‘night’, is to emphasize the poet’s two comparisons. Symbolically, the ‘perpetual night’ represents death, while the ‘brief light’ represents life. ... There is another chiasmus here too”:

brevis	lux	nox	perpetua
A	B	B	A

The last three lines of the poem read thus:

11. conturbabimus **illa**, nesciamus,
12. aut ne *quis* malus invidere posit
13. cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.

My free verse translation of them would be as follows:

11. Let us shake the abacus **in that way**, so that we may lose count
12. Nor should *the jealous peeping Tom* envy us
13. When he discovers the numerousness of our kisses.

The word “quis” in line 12 literally means “whoever”, which I have rendered as “the jealous peeping Tom” in order to capture Catullus’s reference to “those stern old men” whose “rumors” he and Lesbia must “value at a penny’s worth”. The poet uses this reference in order to create a sense of siege, a siege which he and his Lesbia must heroically defy in pursuit of their happiness. The phrase “in that way”, “illa”, in the line “Let us shake the abacus in that way”, is in anaphoric co-reference with the preceding six utterances of “Give me ...”. In other words, exchanging those countless kisses is the way to consummating their love. “Illa” here is called a presupposing expression. “In that way”, a deictive phrase, must have something to which it points and directs the reader, namely the number of kisses. The Wikipedia critic points out that “The abacus is a frame with beads that slide along parallel rods, used for teaching numbers to children, and (in some countries) for counting”. It enables one to make accurate calculations.

But, in the matter of kisses demanded by the suitor here, exactitude is irrelevant, and so the metaphorical abacus must itself be confused by shaking it, “so that we may lose count”. This is the equivalent of turning tradition upside down. As I have suggested above, in *Lesbia*, Catullus comes across as intensely emotional and sensual. Only three lines are devoted to the fleeting nature of time, while the rest, precisely ten, serve to exhort Lesbia to join him in ignoring public opinion and engaging in giving physical expression to their love. This is why critics, such as Carne-Cross (1967), have drawn attention to the “... direct shock of poetic intensity” that readers experience when they come to ‘As for us, once the brief light has set, we sleep through an eternal night’”. The poet conveys a sense of urgency by, immediately after this line and presumably while Lesbia is still coming to terms with his “warning”, unleashing a veritable cascade of verbal assaults on her. That is also why Carne-Cross states further that Catullus “... wrote from that unified sensibility which was possible before the fatal dissociation; setting up no privileged areas of subject matter, he seemed to possess what Eliot called *a mechanism of sensibility that could devour any kind of experience* and make poetry out of anything.” There are other Catullus poems on the theme *carpe diem*, such as *In Memoriam* (Thompson and Craddock, 1962:18), which he composed in mourning for his brother:

1	Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus	By ways remote and distant waters sped,
2	Advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias	Brother, to thy sad grave-side I am come,
3	Ut te postremo donarem munere mortis	That I may give the last gifts to the dead,
4	<b>Et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.</b>	<b>And vainly parley with thine ashes dumb:</b>
5	<b>Quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum</b>	<b>Since she who now bestows and now denies</b>
6	<b>Heu miser indigne frater adepte mihi</b>	<b>Hath ta'en thee, hapless brother, from mine eyes.</b>
7	Nunc tamen interea haec prisco quae more parentum	But lo! these gifts, the heirlooms of past years,
8	Tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,	Are made sad things to grace thy coffin shell;
9	Accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu	Take them, all drenched with a brother's tears,
10	Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.	And, brother, for all time, hail and fare well!

In paying homage to his departed brother, Catullus must be rueing over lost opportunities for fraternal mutual support. The first line refers to the many journeys which Catullus undertook, during one of which his brother died. He comes to pay belated homage to his brother:

By ways remote and distant waters sped  
 ... to thy sad grave-side I am come  
 That I may give the last gifts to the dead  
 .....  
 Since she who now bestows and now denies  
 Hath ta'en thee, hapless brother, from mine eyes

Then there is another one, *Despair* (Thompson and Craddock, 1962:19):

Odi et amo: quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.	I hate and love, why do I do that, perhaps you ask?
Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.	I know not, but I feel it, and I am in torment.

### 3.0 Metaphysical Poetry

According to Helen Gardner (1966: 15), “... the term ‘metaphysical’ was used with disapprobation, and was applied to poets long after their deaths.” She quotes Dryden writing on Donne that “He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softness of love.” However, Gardner (1966: 15-16) points out that it is ironical that the definition of metaphysical poetry comes from Robert Burton’s criticism of it in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). In that book Burton praises his own “loose style”, with its “neat composition, strong lines, hyperboles, allegories”, as opposed to the writing of the metaphysical poets, which he said was “characterized by affectation of big words, fustian phrases, jingling terms, strong lines that, like Acastes arrows, caught fire as they flew.” Other critics of this poetry were demanding “More matter and less word”. Metaphysical poetry caused difficulty of interpretation, yet therein lay the reason why its advocates found their pride. Gardner quotes Anthony Bacon’s (1591) slogan as the most eloquent defence of metaphysical poetry: “Difficilia quae pulchra; the second reading will please thee more than the first, and the third than the second.”

Another commentator sharing Bacon's views was Chapman (1595) who, in his preface to *Ovid's Banquet of the Sense*, wrote, "That poetry should be as perval as oratory and plainness her special ornament, were the plain way to barbarism." Their argument was that poetry "should be close-packed and dense with meaning, something to be 'chewed and digested'". Metaphysical poetry generally, and Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" in particular, displays the poets' "fondness for conceits". Gardner (1966: 19) defines a conceit as

*... a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness. All comparisons point to the likeness of things which are unlike: one becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being acutely aware of unlikeness. We remain aware of the incongruity of the terms being compared.*

On this view of comparison, consider the notions of homologation and heterogeneity as defining features of metaphor and simile. Whaler (1933) was studying the Miltonic simile when he proposed that some similes compel us to see likeness between terms that are patently unlike. And he characterized them as being of the heterogeneous type. Whereas others enable us to perceive likeness between terms that are close to each other in their characteristics, the homologous type. He wrote:

*... suppose that A and S (the simile) share a number of apposite points of correspondence, but at the same time to S are given points of detail that cannot possibly be homologized. Suppose that with all these points of detail S presents a picture interesting in itself, or likely to relieve a scene of passion by momentary glimpses into a contrasting life of peace, or likely to suspend the story ever so little just where suspense is needed most: the poet does well then to escape the exactions of homology. Logic can yield to art: in such a digression good taste will admit irrelevant detail.*

The details which seem merely decorative but which are pleasing in themselves for providing relief from scenes of strife and enervating passion are of the heterogeneous type. We see them regularly deployed by both Catullus and Marvell, particularly by the latter. Metaphysical poets employed the conceit for specific purposes, to buttress an argument and to persuade. In both Catullus's poem and Marvell's, the argument is between a suitor conscious of the fleeting nature of time, on the one hand, and a tradition-bound lover who is apparently reluctant to reciprocate the former's advances, on the other. Each suitor seeks to persuade his lover by employing similes and metaphors of both the homologous and heterogeneous type.

### 3.1 The structure of Marvell's 'argument'.

The way Marvell structured his poem is partly comparable to what is called a **SWOT analysis**, which serves to assess the chances of a business project succeeding. The poem outlines the strengths and opportunities which the lovers have, and the weaknesses arising from the scarcity of time available to them. The first stanza outlines the strengths which those with "world enough, and time" have. They exploit the pleasures of taking their time courting, and doing so wherever they please, together or even when separated by distance, each in their location pondering on whether "to be or not to be" in love. This poem has 46 lines divided into 3 stanzas.

#### 3.1.1 Strengths and opportunities.

Had we but world enough, and time,  
 This coyness, Lady, were no crime.  
 We would *sit down and think* which way  
 To walk and pass our long love's day.  
 Thou by the Indian Ganges' side  
 Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide  
 Of Humber would complain. I would  
 Love you ten years before the Flood,  
 And you should, if you please, refuse  
 Till the conversion of the Jews.  
 My vegetable love should grow  
 Vaster than empires, and more slow;  
 An hundred years *should go* to praise  
 Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;  
 Two hundred [...] to adore each breast,  
 But thirty thousand [...] to the rest;  
 An age at least [...] to every part,



And the last age should show thy heart.  
 For, Lady, you deserve this state,  
 Nor would I love at lower rate.

This stanza begins and is predicated on a hyperbolic conditional clause: the speaker and his lover would take all the time in the world to court, but only IF things were different. They would “sit down and think”. The speaker is cerebral, capable of analyzing the circumstances in which he and his lover find themselves. Not only that: he credits his lover with the same mental capacity because he uses the first person plural pronoun “we”. Granted, Catullus’s speaker does use the same pronoun. But he is inviting and urging his lover not to “sit down and think”, but to join him in a “let us live and love” orgy by demanding innumerable kisses. Because Marvell’s speaker credits his lover with the capacity for thought, he can assume that she knows geography and the history of religion. Further, he credits her with a knowledge of their culture’s myths and history when he says “My vegetable Love should grow/Vaster than Empires, and more slow”. According to Gardner (1966: 251), the myth was about “the vegetable soul”, which “... had only two powers: growth and reproduction.” The hyperbole works precisely because she knows all this, as well as how far the Ganges is from the Humber, and she also knows that to convert the Jews to Christianity is a pipe dream. This strengthens the suitor’s argument that time is of the essence. These images are what must have persuaded T. S. Eliot (1932) to observe, in his essay on Marvell, that “... the seventeenth century separated two qualities, wit and magniloquence. ... Both are conscious and cultivated, and the mind which cultivates one may cultivate the other.”

Just as the suitor in Catullus’s poem enumerates the number of kisses his lover should give him in “magniloquent” terms, so does Marvell’s the number of years he is prepared to wait before his lover accepts his proposal. Both poets feign exactitude by adopting a pseudoscientific stance in arguing their cases while negotiating the modalities of romance. But the first amount of time that Marvell’s protagonist is willing to sacrifice is an eternity, “Till the conversion of the Jews”. After that he parallels Catullus’s suitor. Where the latter uses the words “Give me ...” only once and leaves them to be retrieved by the reader from their first and only mention in order to make sense of the subsequent lines, Marvell’s does the same with the verb phrase “should go to ...”. The effect of this ellipsis is the same in both poems: it is employed to unleash a deluge of emotional effusions. Consider the following:

Catullus:

Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,  
 Then [...], then [...]  
 And yet another [...]

Marvell:

An hundred years should go to ...  
 Two hundred [...]  
 But thirty thousand [...]  
 An age at least [...]

### 3.1.2 Weaknesses

The second stanza urges the addressee to wake up to the unpleasant reality of human mortality. And it begins with a contrastive conjunction, in order to foreground what the lovers would be able to do, if only they “had world enough, and time”, on the one hand, and what they must reckon with, “time’s winged chariot hurrying near”, on the other:

But at my back I always hear  
 Time’s winged chariot hurrying near;  
 And yonder all before us lie  
 Deserts of vast eternity.  
 Thy beauty shall no more be found,  
 Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound  
 My echoing song: then worms shall try  
 That long preserved virginity,  
**And** { ... } your quaint honor [ ... ] turn to dust,  
**And** { ... } into ashes all my lust [ ... ] turn:  
The grave is a fine and private place,

But none, I think, do there embrace.

Note the punctuation mark at “turn” in “And into ashes my lust ... .”. We use the colon as a bridge between two adjacent parts of a text: the first introduces a theme that needs or makes the reader expect an elaboration, while the second provides such elaboration. Marvell’s speaker is saying, in the text after the colon, “What I mean by ‘... into ashes all my lust turn’ is this: you, the object of my love/lust, will die and be buried, which will turn the burning ambers of my love for you into ashes.” The lexical and phrasal choices in this stanza all conspire to drive home the wisdom of *carpe diem*. Time is traveling on a chariot, but not the one commonly known to all and sundry. This one is not drawn by horses. It has wings for wheels, and so it is “hurrying near”, flying non-stop and so fast from behind the speaker and his lover that its approach is audible but not visible. In front, in their future, what is evident is a panoramic stretch of lifelessness. His argument is, “Beauty does not thrive there.” Instead, his loved one’s coffin will be securely deposited in a catacomb with walls of indestructible marble, a place which is impenetrable to the melody of his love songs for her. This is the inevitable destiny of her “quaint honor”, that is, the destiny of her tradition-sanctioned virginity which she has coyly but unwisely preserved for so long that it will have lost its value.

Because this poem is anchored on the theme of the fleeting nature of time, Marvell employs time adverbial clauses to persuade his lover. These come just after he has carved the image of the uncompromising vault, beginning at, “Nor, in thy marble vault ...”, and ending at, “My echoing song:”. The first clause begins with “then”, that is, when she is now entombed in the vault. It is followed by two others, but from which “then” has been ellipted, as if to suggest that it would be disruptive to the enumeration of the consequences of the woman’s dilly dallying:

... then worms shall try  
That long preserved virginity,  
And {then} your quaint honor turn to dust,  
And {then} into dust all my lust turn:

Herein lies Marvell’s originality in his imitation of Catullus. These lines have such forcefulness that their message verges on what could be seen as callousness. First, the second line above can be expanded to read dismissively as “... That long preserved virginity [of yours]”. Is the speaker losing his patience with the woman’s coyness? This reading points to the speaker as being dismissive and insensitive. Secondly, the woman’s compliance with tradition is described as “quaint”, that is, “unfashionable”. By contrast, the speaker’s concern is for “all my lust” not to turn “into dust”.

### 3.1.4 Quod erat demonstrandum: the solution.

Now *therefore*, while the youthful hue  
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,  
And while thy willing soul transpires  
At every pore with instant fires,  
Now let us sport us while we may,  
And now, like amorous birds of prey,  
Rather [let us] at once our time devour  
Than languish in his slow-chapt power.  
Let us roll all our strength and all  
Our sweetness up into one ball,  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife  
Thorough the iron gates of life;  
**Thus**, though we cannot make our sun  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

A strikingly frightening image of time is conveyed in the lines

And now, like amorous birds of prey,  
Rather [let us] at once our time devour  
Than *languish in his slow-chapt power*.

Time is personified as a cannibalistic being whose jaws move slowly and relentlessly as it consumes us. However, the urgency of the voice in Marvell's poem may seem to some as having been somewhat attenuated by the very same poetic devices that serve to recommend his poem to readers as a classic of amorous verse which urges would-be lovers in the prime of life to engage in abundant and abandoned self-indulgence. Such readers may ask, "If the overarching concern of the poem is 'carpe diem', where does the suitor get the time to digress from the core business at hand to wander, even to urge his intended lover to wander, alone, as far as the River Ganges, in India, while he, burning with love and longing to consummate it with her, remains '... by the tide/Of Humber ...', in Yorkshire, 'complain[ing]'?" When they ask such a question, they are well on their way to appreciating the serviceability of hyperbole and the other tropes employed in this poem.

### 3.0 Conclusion

The influence of Catullus on Marvell comes from a number of historical facts.

The first is that Thomas Campion, a 17<sup>th</sup> century composer, poet and physician, produced a rhyming translation of Catullus's *Lesbia* in 1601. Secondly, Campion's translation was soon followed by Sir Walter Raleigh's inclusion of lines 4 to 6 of *Lesbia* in his book *The History of the World*, which he wrote while serving time as a prisoner in the Tower of London:

Soles occidere et redire possunt,	Suns may set and rise again, but
Nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux,	For us, once the brief light has set,
Nox est perpetua una dormmienda.	The night which falls is an interminable darkness.

As a graduate of Cambridge University, Marvell would have been acquainted with these developments in the English literary canon. Raleigh had come a long way before he faced the executioner, beginning with a cozy working relationship with Elizabeth 1, who later came to distrust him, to a charged one with James 1, who had Raleigh executed, after confining him twice in the Bloody Tower. One John Aubrey, quoted by Paul Johnson (2008: 101), described Raleigh as "a tall, handsome and bold man, proud, damnably proud." Johnson adds that Raleigh's boldness saw him "also involved in all kinds of skullduggery and the worst rackets of the time – dealing in the confiscated lands of Catholics, for instance, and [in] various monopolies". That he quoted the lines above from Catullus's carpe diem poem while imprisoned in the Tower is significant: he was at a low ebb in his fortunes and regretting lost opportunities for conducting himself less defiantly. Yet Johnson (2008: 104) reports that Raleigh "insisted on the executioner showing him the axe, ran his thumb along the blade and said: 'This is a sharp medicine but it is a physician for all diseases'". This time round he was displaying the hubris and showmanship which had brought him to grief in the first place. Given the presence in all human languages of aphorisms that acknowledge the wisdom of carpe diem, Raleigh's behavior in the face of imminent doom speaks volumes about human beings. Post-lapsarian humans get into trouble like automatons programmed to fashion their own demise. This is how the Shona put it: Kwadzinorohwa matumburira/ndiko kwadzinomhanyira: Where they (hares) are beaten in the belly (killed)/that is where they flock again.

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