

Carpe Diem in the Poetry of Spenser, Herrick and Marvell.

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Introduction

The Latin phrase 'carpe diem', dating back to an ancient Roman poet, Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace, 65–8 B.C.), who employed the motto in his *Odes* (23–13 B.C.E.), became a recurring traditional motif, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth century English poets. It is generally translated as 'seize the day' (Hirsch, 41) in English. The Latin 'carpe' is the imperative mood of the verb 'carpo' which has the meaning of 'pluck' or 'harvest' flowers and fruits, and 'prune' trees, therefore it is often used synonymously with the phrase 'carpe florem'. Comparing human life to a flower, specifically a rose to female beauty, this harvest metaphor, expressing the evanescence of human life, becomes prominent. 'Carpe diem' added its sensuous and sensual meaning to itself. The Latin 'diem' is the accusative case of the noun 'dies' and indicates the concept of time. Horace was probably the first person to put 'diem' as the accusative of 'carpo'. One could imagine what an unusual way of saying 'carpe diem' this was in those days.

This paper examines 'carpe diem' poetry written by sixteenth and seventeenth century-English poets, such as Edmund Spenser (1552–1599), Robert Herrick (1591–1674) and Andrew Marvell (1621–1678), comparing it with the ideas of Horace in his *Odes*.

‘To His Coy Mistress’ by Marvell

Marvell’s poem ‘To His Coy Mistress’ is a love poem that celebrates youthful beauty and the pleasures of the senses. While the speaker of the poem imagines that he could spend his ‘long Loves Day’ taking thousands of years to achieve his cherished desire to get the woman he loves, he, obsessed with a fear of mortality, is swayed by misgivings that his love would not be accepted by his mistress before he died. Death must come to him and her; this is inevitable. All they could do was enjoy the pleasures of life together. The speaker urges his mistress to relish it with him. There are two kinds of contrasting love in this poem: one is the luxury of love in immortal life, and the other is perturbatious love under pressure of mortality. The following is the first part of the poem:

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 Loves Day.
 Thou by the Indian Ganges side
 Should'st 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. (Marvell, 81)

In lines one and two, the speaker imagines a world of unrestricted pleasure, supposing he had plenty of time and space. He then describes his mistress finding precious rubies on the banks of the Ganges. He also describes himself spending two hundred years admiring a single part of

her body. Exotic India is contrasted with the familiar, River Humber which is in Marvell's home county of East Yorkshire in England. It is 'the only personal touch in a thoroughly impersonal poem,' as Graham Parry points out, 'the time-span allotted to their love engages with the apocalyptic speculations so strong in the 1640s and 1650s, which Marvell had a serious respect for' (Parry, 225).

If the speaker and his lover could live longer than the proper length of their lives, it would allow them to delay the consummation of their love indefinitely. Even 'before the Flood,' of Noah, 'Till the Conversion of the Jews', on the premise of the Last Judgement, which is on the Christian last day of the world, his mistress can refuse his courtship for such a long period. There, the drama of the poet's time, which is threatened by death, is set against the vast scenario of world history.

In the second part, the speaker, noticing the passage of time, becomes anxious about the realisation of his sexual desire as follows:

But at my back I always hear
 Time's wingèd 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 honour turn to dust,
 And into ashes all my lust:
 The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do there embrace. (Marvell, 81-83)

'Time's wingèd chariot' chases the speaker from behind and 'Deserts of vast eternity' spread out in front of them. Unlike the eternal paradise of beautiful dream-like youthful beauty described in the first part, the speaker's feeling of the menace of death is clearly shown in the second part. Thus, there are two contrasting images of death, as an eternal paradise, and a vast eternal desert.

Although the speaker uses biblical metaphors in the poem, his point of view on death is not religious but secular, because he is not afraid of going to hell, and being punished for his sinfulness. Rather, the speaker is threatened by death because the possibility of being able to enjoy his pleasure with his love would suddenly stop due to the arrival of death. The speaker's inquiry to his mistress in line one of the first part, 'Had we but World enough, and Time', is a rhetorical question of what would we be like were it not for this.

The speaker's hope for consummation of their love in the first part, and his despair of this coming to naught in the grave, would both be dreadful if it were not for love. Love is proposed as the only value that can counteract time, and love only changes its character from destructive to regenerative, 'an idea that is already prefigured by the contrast between the Flood (destructive time) and the conversion of the Jews (regenerative time)' (Parry, 226), in the first part of the poem.

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 at once our time devour
 Than languish in his slow-chapt power. (Marvell, 83, emphasis mine)

The speaker addresses his central concern to his mistress in the final part, saying 'now let us sport while we may', which is his invitation of erotic sport to his lover. It is Marvell's *carpe diem*. The speaker says let us 'devour' time. Conventionally, time, personified as Father Time or old man time, symbolises the god of death in the world of art and literature over the centuries. Ovid once expressed time as the devourer of all things in his *Metamorphoses*; however, the speaker here compares the lovers to 'amorous birds of prey' as devourers of time. This devourer metaphor is also found in the second part, in the words, 'worms shall try / That long preserv'd virginity'. The speaker's expression of his courtship is sometimes grotesque, rather than erotic. Marvell is a prominent metaphysical poet and his *carpe diem* is full of eroticism, but with metaphysical conceits.

Marvell was born a clergyman's son and is known as a Cavalier poet. His poem 'To His Coy Mistress' was probably written in the early 1650s, during a period of significant political disturbance that threw English society into turmoil. In the 1640s, the nation had endured a bloody civil war. This was provoked by religious and political tensions, especially between radical Puritans and conservative Anglicans. It became an armed conflict between parliamentarians and supporters of the royalists and culminated with the execution for treason of King Charles I in 1649.

Oliver Cromwell, the leading general on the parliamentary side, was elected to the Short and Long Parliaments, and had control of the government for most of the 1650s, when Marvell engaged actively with these events, and his own writings as well. However, his poem 'To His Coy Mistress' seems to disregard his political interests. He uses seemingly

political terms such as 'empire' or 'power', but these are not associated with the actual political situation. We can easily imagine that he lived each day cheek by jowl with death. However, he appears to withdraw from these situations. As Michael Bryson points out, 'the idea of death becomes life's and love's greatest ally in the battle against the demands of authority, convention, and law'(2). Thus, Marvell's *carpe diem* is not likely to be based on his own political experience.

Gather the Rose—Spenser's 'Rose Song' and Herrick's 'To the Virgins'

Edmund Spenser's long epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, is considered a central poem of the Elizabethan period and one of the greatest poems in the English language. It is a classic chivalric allegorical poem, modelled on the Arthurian legend, whose central figure, Gloriana, the fairy queen, symbolised the glory of Queen Elizabeth I, and the glorification of England at that time.

The second book of *The Faerie Queene* contains the legend of Sir Guyon or of Temperance in the final Canto of the book, at the very end of which, the 75th-76th stanzas is called 'the Rose Song'. It was originally paraphrased from an Italian poet, Tasso (1493-1569), and has the invocation to 'carpe diem' or 'carpe florem' which serves as 'a seduction song'(Wells, 8). The knight, Guyon, is tested for his temperance through a sea voyage involving many dangers and temptations, and finally reaching Acrasia's island he finds the Bower of Bliss where the enchantress Acrasia lures her victims. When Guyon enters the garden, he hears someone singing a lovely song:

The whiles some one did chaunt this louely lay;
 Ah see, who so faire thing doest faine to see,

In springing flowre the image of thy day;
 Ah see the Virgin Rose, how sweetly shee
 Doth first peepe forth with bashful modestee,
 That fairer seemes, the lesse ye see her may;
 Lo see soone after, how more bold and free
 Her bared bosome she doth broad display;
 Loe see soone after, how she fades, and falles away. (Spenser, 338)

As the speaker of the poem says in line one, 'some one did chaunt this louely lay', that is, 'someone chanted a lovely song', an unseen singer sings this 'rose-song' which tries to seduce Guyon. 'Virgin Rose' is personified, expressing a woman's youthful beauty. In the early stage, it appears modest and bashful, but later, it becomes 'more bold and free', then it falls quickly, finally the fully opened rose is compared to a woman with 'bared bosome'. Anaphora occurs in line seven and nine, 'Lo(e)see soone after', emphasising a matter of great urgency, linking to the *carpe florem* message.

However, the Bower of Bliss, where Guyon is now, must be in an eternal spring. In the previous stanza, the speaker of the poem describes the Bower as 'lovely,' 'stedfast', 'milde', 'moderate', and 'sweet'(Book II, xi. 51). As Wendy Beth Hyman points out, 'stedfast state', 'produces no decay, no death, only perpetual ripeness'(201). There is a languid eroticism in Acrasia and her minions seeming to be in no hurry at all.

Despite the stagnation of time, the poet introduces a notion of time into the next stanza.

So passeth, in the passing of a day,
 Of mortal life the leafe, the bud, the flowre,

Ne more doth flourish after first decay,
 That earst was sought to decke both bed and bowre,
 Of many a Ladie, and many a Paramowre:
 Gather therefore the Rose, whilest yet is prime,
 For soone comes age, that will her pride deflowre:
 Gather the Rose of loue, whilest yet is time,
 Whilest louing thou mayst loued be with equall crime. (Spenser,
 338)

This juxtaposes human life with that of florum, once it withers, it can never bloom again, and the unseen singer makes a recommendation to *carpe diem*: 'Gather therefore the Rose, whilest yet is prime', and again 'Gather the Rose of loue, whilest yet is time'. The gathering or 'plucking of the rose is a natural symbol for the loss of virginity' (Bruser, 628). Thus, *carpe diem*, is an enchanted message to Guyon to take action in a blissful illusion, and provoke consciousness of mutability, flowers' fading along with the passing of time, even though it is contextually meaningless.

There is another *carpe diem* which Robert Herrick begins with similar phrasing:

Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may,
 Old Time is still a flying:
 And this same flower that smiles today,
 To morrow will be dying. (Herrick, 117)

This is the first stanza of Herrick's *carpe diem* poem, titled 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time'. While Spenser addresses the Rose Song to the Knight Guyon, Herrick addresses this poem to young women,

as the title shows. Identifying gathering rosebuds with loss of virginity, the speaker's *carpe florem* message sounds like it is threatening maidens. 'Old time' again is a personified time, as a god of death, flying around overseeing them ready to pluck them first, that is, the speaker's *carpe diem* message is supported by the fear of death. 'That age is best which is the first, / When youth and blood are warmer' in the third stanza, emphasises their prime season to avail themselves of physical pleasure. The final stanza expresses another *carpe diem* message:

Then be not coy, but use your time;
 And while ye may, go marry:
 For having lost but once your prime,
 You may for every tarry. (Herrick, 118)

'While ye may, go marry' in line two, seems to have the opposite image of celebrating the joys of youth, because marriage is the formal union, as recognised by law. As Sarah Gilead mentions, in a Christian context, 'go marry' is a reminder of the Christian consecration of generational life' (144), this *carpe diem* message deprives of a similar Christian sacramental strategy for abolishing the ravages of time. However, considering the poet himself was an English cleric, marriage was the only socially approved way of channelling sexuality in the seventeenth century.

Carpe Diem in Horace's Ode

Horace was the originator of the Greek aphorism, *carpe diem*. He was born in the south of Italy in 65 BC. He declared himself a free born person; however, his father is said to have been a war slave taken captive by Romans during the Social War. Horace probably mentioned 'the

poorness of the father and how he endured lots of hardships so that his son could prosper and be a successful person' (Comcar, 381). After the death of his beloved father who also loved him, Horace left Italy for Greece to enrol in the Academy founded by Plato. Now, the 19-year-old Horace had spent a different life from the affluent people around him in this high-level institute. It might be said that his different life 'impressed him with the idea of seizing the day' (Comcar, 381), and later led him to write the phrase 'carpe diem' in his Odes.

According to Nisbet and Hubbard, the ode 'contains several reminiscences of Epicurus' and 'carpe diem is perhaps Epicurean in expression as well as in spirit,' (135) because 'Epicurus's distrust of divination may therefore be relevant to the opening lines' (Ibid). When Horace was registered at the Academy, Epicureanism was the predominant school of thought. The following is an English translation of his *Odes*, I. XI in which Horace used the term 'carpe diem'.

Don't you ask, Leuconoe—the gods do not wish it to be known—
 what end they have given to me or to you, and don't meddle with
 Babylonian calculations. How much better to accept whatever
 comes,
 whether Jupiter gives us other winters or whether this is our last
 now wearying the Tyrrhenian Sea on the pumice stones.
 opposing it. Be wise, strain the wine and cut back long hope
 into a small space. While we speak, envious time will have
 flown past. Harvest the day and leave as little as possible for
 tomorrow. (West, 50–51)¹

The speaker of the poem begins with two injunctions, against

asking about the future. Babylonian calculations mean astrology, which 'originated in Babylonia and was 'regarded as the most scientific method of telling the future'(Nisbet and Hubbard, 138). It is worth noting that this poem is addressed to a woman named 'Leuconoe'. The speaker starts by telling her not to ask, 'this is because she has been asking'(West, 50). It is not clear to the reader what the relationship between the speaker and Leuconoe is; however, she is surely worried about her own future, his future, or her future with him, therefore, 'Leuconoe consults astrologers not only in her own but on Horace's behalf'(Nisbet and Hubbard, 135), in this case, on the speaker's behalf. In line six, the speaker persuades her to 'be[ing] wise' and 'strain the wine'. In those days, the dregs remained at the bottom of the wine container, therefore 'the ancients removed the sediment from wine by pouring it through either a strainer of mental or rush or a linen bag'(Nisbet and Hubbard, 140). Maria S. Marsilio pointed out that the tasks the speaker 'gives her in the commands in lines six to eight imply her slave status as a symposium'(118). The symposium is a drinking party with a convivial discussion, especially as held in ancient Greece after a banquet. Though her social status is not obvious, the significant point is that the speaker is talking to Leuconoe, and drinking wine with her.

The speaker says, 'While we speak, envious time will have / flown past'. Time is personified here again, and the reason time is envious of them and 'attempts to rob them of the enjoyments of life and they may not have the future to enjoy these pleasures'(Marsilio, 121). Then, 'carpe diem' is 'the poet's final words of advice to Leuconoe'(Levin, 317), that is, 'Harvest the day', or 'seize the day' when the speaker is having a conversation with Leuconoe, and wants to share with her the pleasures of the present.

Nisbet and Hubbard mention that 'Horace indulges in none of the lush elaborations of erotic epigram'(Nisbet and Hubbard, 142), while some

critics suggest their erotically involved relationship (see Lee, 119; Marsilio, 120). Nevertheless, *carpe diem's* 'diem' (=the day) is the time the speaker spends with her, that is, his remarks are made in a romantic situation 'in a drinking poem' (Nisbet and Hubbard, 135).

Conclusions

The *Carpe Diem* motif has been passed down from Horace to various literary writers with many different backgrounds. Horace's *carpe diem* advises not to try to know about the future, because of the brevity of life, and it is a message addressed to Leuconoe, who might love the speaker of the poem. Herrick and Marvell's *carpe diem* are also addressed to women; the former to young maidens, and the latter to the speaker's mistress. In Spenser, it is in a seduction song for Guyon.

Bruser mentions that the essential element of all injunctions to '*carpe diem*', or seize the day is the realisation of the brevity of life and a corresponding urgency which is not originally in Horace (Bruser, 626). This 'urgency' is the temptation in Spenser's *Rose Song* by bringing the concept of Time into eternal spring in the Bower of Bliss, and as for Herrick and Marvell, their *carpe diem* are both in submission to the conditions Time imposes, urging those they address to seize Time, which is based on the speakers' fear of mortality.

In 'To His Coy Mistress', Marvell does not mention any political situations in which he is involved. Rather, he seems to have withdrawn from these disturbances. His poem describes the world of love and sexuality, whose pleasure is to be released from real social and political thoughts or to escape from Time's existence. This urgency is not in Horace's original. *Carpe diem* in the seventeenth century English poetry mentioned in this paper is the motto for people obsessed by mutability, to

seize their days.

Note:

¹ The original text of Horace's *Odes*. 1.11;

Tv ne quaesieris, scire nefas, quem mihi, quem tibi
finem di dederint, Leuconoe, nec Babylonios
temptaris numeros. ut melius, quidquid erit, pati,
seu pluris hiemes seu tribuit Iuppiter ultimam,
quae nunc oppositis debilitat pumicibus mare
Tyrrhenum: sapias, vina liques, et spatio brevi
spem longam reseces. dum loquimur, fugerit invida
aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credura postero. (West, 50)

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