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### Begging the Extreme in “Mediocrity in Love Rejected”

#### An Analysis of Carew’s Use of Form

Aristotelian philosophy teaches that virtue sits in the mean between two vices. These vices stem from an extreme excess of, or a lack of, a particular trait. In this philosophy, one should aim for the mean, avoiding the two extremes so as to follow a path that is virtuous and centered. Even if not related to Aristotelian ethics, it would seem safest or wisest to stick to the middle of the road in many situations, especially if the extremes on either side resemble barren tundra or chaotic storms. However, in Thomas Carew’s “Mediocrity in Love Rejected,” the speaker of the poem demands a different relationship with the extreme. In this poem addressing a lover who is “temperate” (4) in her affections towards him, the speaker insists upon a more decisive relationship. Carew’s poem argues that the mean between the two extremes of love and hatred is more painful to endure than either of the alternatives. Carew emphasizes this claim by leaning into duplicity throughout the entirety of the sonnet, mirroring the necessary decision between two choices with no middle ground.

This “double” nature of the poem is clear first within its form. Rather than adhering to the traditional English sonnet stanza breaks and rhyme scheme, Carew composes this sonnet into two sestets followed by a couplet. With the traditional three quatrains (also followed by a couplet), there is necessarily a “middle” stanza. However, Carew’s speaker is insisting that his lover must choose between love and hatred without settling in the temperate middle. The

decision to split the sonnet into two stanzas, therefore, reflects the nature of his request. This doubling is also echoed in the rhyme scheme. The first four lines follow an ABAB pattern:

Give me more love, or more *disdain*;

The torrid, or the frozen *zone*

Bring qual ease unto my *pain*;

The temperate affords me *none*: ... (1-4, emphasis added)

The beginning of the second stanza follows suit (DEDE):

Give me a storm; if it be *love*,

Like Danae in that golden *shower*,

I swim in pleasure; if it *prove*

Disdain, that torrent will *devour*... (7-10, emphasis added)

This rhyme scheme divides the first four lines of each sestet into two parts: the first two lines, followed by the second two lines. The couplets at the end of the sestets, lines 5-6 and 11-12, are also naturally “coupled,” pairing two lines by tying them together with rhyme. The final couplet at the end of the sonnet similarly reinforces the two choices offered by the poem. Carew even writes in iambic tetrameter rather than iambic pentameter, giving every line four feet which he often divides into two halves with a caesura:

Give me more love, // or more disdain;

The torrid, // or the frozen zone

.....

Then crown my joys, // or cure my pain;

Give me more love, // or more disdain. (1-2, 13-14, caesura markings added)

The tetrameter, rhyme scheme, and stanza structure all support the content of the poem because they provide a two-sided balance within its form. As the speaker's words rock back and forth between feet and rhyming lines, they urge the lover to mirror the action by choosing which side to stand upon rather than remaining on the fence.

The diction used throughout the poem also supports the speaker's message. Carew uses vivid imagery of extreme opposites throughout the poem, juxtaposing metaphors in order to reveal the similarities between love and hatred. For example, when the speaker states, "Give me love, or more disdain; / The torrid, or the frozen zone / Bring equal ease unto my pain" (1-3), he draws to attention the similar qualities of what appear to be opposites. He also likens them by claiming that either would be "sweeter than a calm estate" (6). Because of the parallel structure, "love" is linked with "torrid" and "hate" is linked with "disdain." Just as both torrid heat and frozen terrain, though opposites, can ease the speaker's pain, love and hatred can do the same despite their obvious differences. In another juxtaposition of metaphors, the speaker next requests one of two types of storms:

Give me a storm; if it be love,  
     Like Danae in that golden shower,  
 I swim in pleasure; if it prove  
     Disdain, that torrent will devour  
 My vulture-hopes; ... (7-11)

He links both storms to heaven and implies that the middle ground is hell ("...he's possessed / Of heaven that's but from hell released" [11-12]). Again, this juxtaposition symbolizes that even though love and hatred may seem like opposites, such as a shower compared to a torrent, they are similar in that they both are like heaven when compared to the hell of mediocrity.

This juxtaposition between severe opposites is also evident when comparing the stanzas to one another in their entirety. The first stanza focuses on metaphors that describe desolate and still areas that are both known to starve their visitors of life due to their lack of resources. After the first stanza, there is a distinct volta where the speaker switches to the opposite setting: “Give me a storm” (7). Unlike the barren landscape imagery used in the first stanza, this metaphor provides the opposite extreme: a storm that is itself a source of life (“Like Danae in that golden shower” [8] conceiving a child with Zeus) or a gluttonous consumption of life (“...that torrent will devour” [10]). The enjambment of lines 9-12 supports this image of the chaos of a storm, as if like a storm, the phrases cannot be contained by end-stops, such as used in the first stanza. The first and second stanzas bring forward two drastically different images: one barren and desolate and the other chaotic and related to life. The balance between these metaphoric stanzas supports the message of this sonnet; there are only two options supported by the speaker, and taking the middle ground between the extremes is not one of them.

Carew finishes his sonnet with one final couplet that contains, like many of Shakespeare’s English sonnets, perhaps the most important and concise argument of the poem: “Then crown my joys, or cure my pain; / Give me more love, or more disdain” (13-14). This repeated command brings urgency to the lover’s decision between love and hate. Supported by the rest of the poem, it begs for relief from the torment of mediocracy and leans into the lover’s only two options. Choosing the mean between two extremes is no longer merely uncomfortable or disappointing; it is truly a stalemate that has been completely rejected.

Work Cited

Carew, Thomas. ““Mediocrity in Love Rejected.”” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Margaret W. Ferguson et al., 6th ed., W. W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 2018, pp. 407–408.