

## The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

### Analysis

"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" was composed sometime in Marlowe's early years, (between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three) around the same time he translated Ovid's *Amores*. This is to say, Marlowe wrote this poem before he went to London to become a playwright. Thornton suggests that Marlowe's poetic and dramatic career follows an "Ovidian career model" (xiv), with his amatory poems belonging to his youth, followed later by epic poems (such as *Hero and Leander*) and *Lucan's First Book*). The energy and fanciful nature of youth is evident in "Passionate Shepherd", which has been called "an extended invitation to rustic retirement" (xv). It is headlong in its rush of sentiment, though, upon examination, it reveals itself to be a particularly well-balanced piece of poetry. This poem is justly famous: though it may not be immediately identifiable as Marlowe's (it is often mistakenly thought to be a sonnet of Shakespeare, though that is incorrect in both authorship and poetic form) it has a place in most anthologies of love-poetry. It may well be the most widely recognized piece that Marlowe ever wrote, despite the popularity of certain of his plays.

The meter, though seemingly regular, gives a great deal of meaning and music to this poem. In line 10 the iambic pattern, so far unbroken, reverses to trochaic (stressed, unstressed). The line is innocuous "And a thousand fragrant posies" – there is no special meaning in this line that requires a complete reversal of the meter. But it is a completely complementary line to the one above it (which contains an almost perfect match of nine iambic syllables), and creates movement and motion in the poem. This kind of temporary shift of meter makes the poem lighter to read, and, while preserving regularity, lessens any sing-song quality that might occur if too many regular lines appear in sequence. This skillful change is one of the reasons this poem is so often read aloud. It is musical and regular to the ear, but it is never rigid or predictable.

Line endings, too, can create variety within regularity, and also call attention to the subject matter of the lines. The only stanza which contains the line ending termed "feminine" (that is, an additional unstressed syllable following the final stressed syllable – while it may not have been called "feminine" in Marlowe's day, the softer consonant at the end of a disyllabic word such as those in this stanza definitely can convey femininity) is the third. "There **will I make** thee **beds** of **roses**" This is done by using disyllabic words at the end of the line. The second syllable of most two-syllable words is usually an unstressed one. These lines all end with particularly feminine objects, too – roses, posies, kirtle (a woman's garment), and myrtle. It should be noted that every other line-terminating word in the entire poem is a monosyllabic one, with the lone exception of line 22, in which the "masculine" stressed ending is forced by the hyphenated construction "**May-morn ing**". Marlowe chose his words with very great care.

Scansion of poetry is never exact; while lines 1 and 20 are often read as iambic, the beginning (especially line 20) can easily be read as a spondee (two long syllables – **Come live** with me **and be** my love/ rather than **Come live** with **me** and **be** my **love**/). A skillful and expressive reader might read this repeated line thusly, upon its second occurrence. The different stress would add pleading to the tone of the line (the emphases on the verbs "come live" and "and be") and bespeak a slight desperation on the part of the Shepherd. If read the opposite way from the first line (spondaic rather than iambic) the meaning of the line changes just enough to create a development of emotion. This is no mean feat in

a poem only twenty-four lines in length. (Note that there is disputed stanza (second from the last) "Thy silver dishes for thy meat" which appears in some older editions – the latest critical editions do not include it.)

At first glance "The Passionate Shepherd To His Love" can seem to be a nice piece of pastoral frippery. Considering that it was written, probably, in Marlowe's late adolescence, and if read as a superficial exercise in the practice of a very old form of poetry, it can seem to be light and insubstantial. But any studied analysis of the poem reveals its depth; the poem can be read as containing irony (as written by an urbane man who longed for the city rather than the country, and thus constructed impossible rustic scenarios), serious and heartfelt emotion, a slight political commentary, a gentle sadness, and a transcendent love of nature. Good poetry is often many things to different readers, and Marlowe was able to create, within a codified (and one might say ossified) form of poetry a piece of clever and flexible Elizabethan verse. The Shepherd may not have been real, but the emotions and effects created by this poem have their own reality.