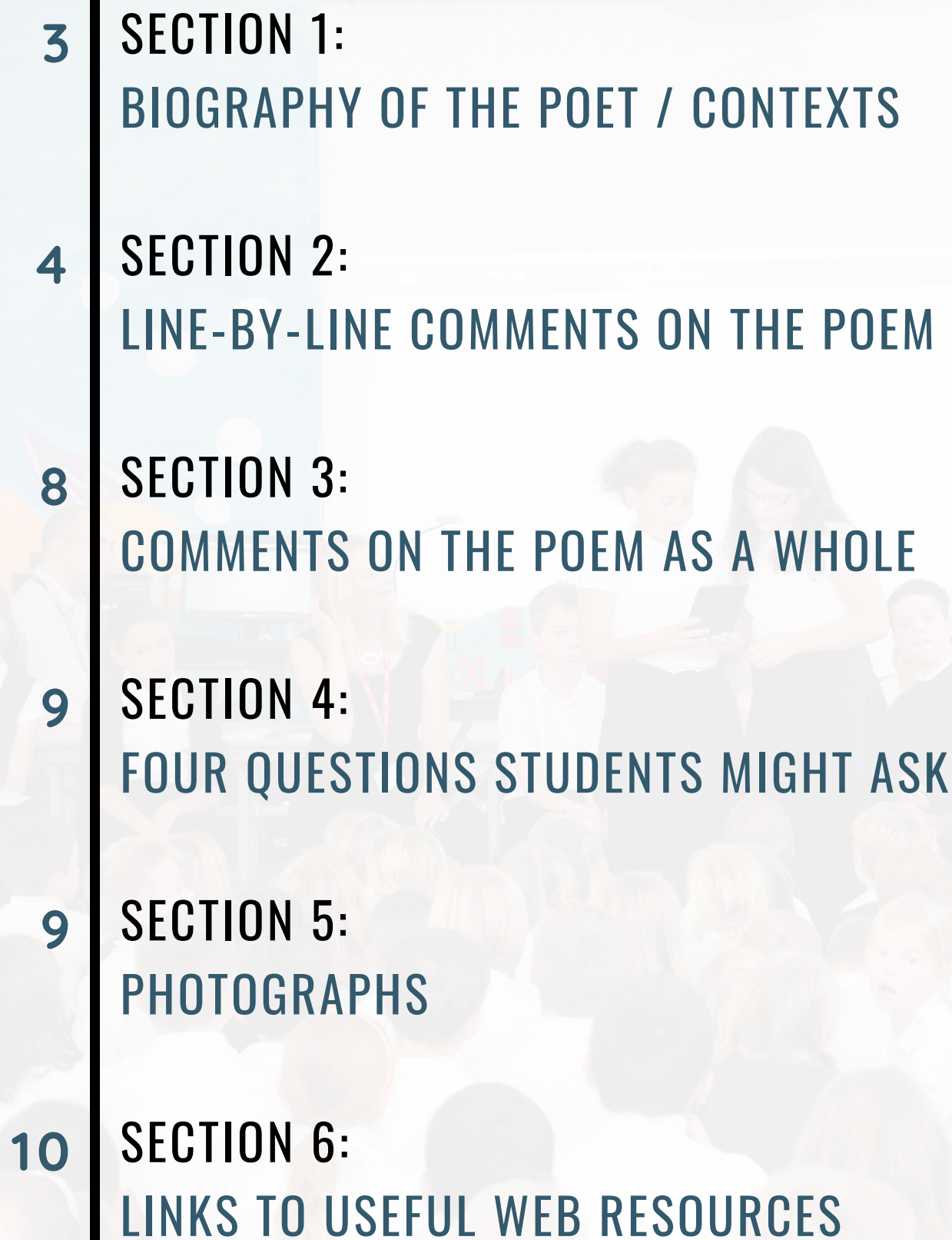


Deryn Rees- Jones

'From His Coy Mistress'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Deryn Rees-Jones was born in Liverpool in 1968. She was brought up in the English city, but always retained what critic Alice Entwhistle describes as a ‘keen but edgy sense of connection with her father’s native Wales’ (1). Spending significant periods of her childhood in Eglwysbach, North Wales, she later went on to read English at the University of Bangor. After completing a literature PhD at Birkbeck College, University of London, Rees-Jones returned to work at the University of Liverpool in 2002, where she is now Professor of Poetry. Her first collection *The Memory Tray* (1994) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and was followed by *Signs Round a Dead Body* (1998), *Quiver* (2004), and *Burying the Wren* (2012). Her Selected Poems, titled *What it’s Like to be Alive*, were published by Seren in 2016. Rees-Jones also works as a literary critic; her critical account of modern and contemporary women poets, *Consorting with Angels*, appeared in 2005. Collaborations with artists are important to her creative practice, and she recently worked with artist Charlotte Hodes on the book and poem-film, *And You, Helen* (2014), about the life of memoirist Helen Thomas, wife of the poet Edward Thomas. The shifting patterns of desire and dynamic uncertainty that characterise Rees-Jones’s poetry might be connected to her relation to Wales; she once told poet Gillian Clarke that the colourful Welsh phrase books that so fascinated her as a child ‘stood for a part of me I couldn’t get to know, but which I wanted all the same’ (2).

(Further biographical details are available in the Library of Wales anthology *Poetry 1900–2000*, ed. Meic Stephens, p. 824).

(1) Alice Entwhistle, *Poetry, Geography, Gender: Women Rewriting Contemporary Wales* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2013), p. 36.

(2) Gillian Clarke, ‘The power of absence: Gillian Clarke in conversation with Deryn Rees-Jones’, *Planet*, 144 (2001), 56.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'From His Coy Mistress' offers a female-centred riposte to a canonical, male-authored poem, 'To His Coy Mistress', by Andrew Marvell (1621-1678). Marvell was one of the group now known as the Metaphysical poets, whose works are marked by ingenious conceits (improbably extended metaphors), wit, and a concern with both philosophical subjects and the body. 'To His Coy Mistress' dramatises the plea of a male speaker to a female addressee, urging her to consummate their love affair. Using all the arts of wit and persuasion at the poet's disposal, the speaker pushes what was then a conventional plea to new, imaginative and metaphorical heights. The gender imbalance inherent to Marvell's poem – and the tradition from which it stems – is that while the implicitly male speaker is passionate and prolix, his female addressee remains chaste and silent: we never hear her point of view. Indeed, the creativity of his poetic speech is perhaps occasioned by – necessitated by – her silence. Writing back from the point of view of the 'Coy Mistress', Deryn Rees-Jones uses a historical guise in order to insert her own voice and, in a related sense, female desire, back into English-language literary tradition, in an encounter that is cerebral, spiritual and erotic at the same time.

Form.

Marvell's poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, in which an imagined speaker addresses a silent listener (usually not the reader). It is important to note that with this form, the poet traditionally speaks with a theatrically assumed voice, not her/his own. 'From His Coy Mistress' pays testimony to the dramatic monologue, particularly when the speaker invokes and addresses the desired '**you**' in the third stanza. In her book *Consorting with Angels*, Rees-Jones stresses 'the importance of the dramatic monologue to the woman poet's textual self-making' (3). Here, she can be seen to shape a space and an identity for the woman poet, her body and desires, precisely by putting on *another voice*: as Rees-Jones writes, 'the monologue seeks to embody the speaker while also saying that the presence of this body is not the poet's.' (4) Yet, while Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' frequently uses the first person plural, 'we', to persuasive effect, Rees-Jones's poem far more often uses 'I' – and never 'we'. This suggests that her poem is more about an encounter between difference, a crossing and mixing of 'I' and 'you', rather than an idealised 'we'. But this strategic use of the first person singular also places the text within a more self-reflective, lyrical idiom, which serves as a vehicle for exploring how desire and passion work both to construct, and to unsettle (and ultimately transform) the self. The final two lines isolate an ecstatic moment of opening out and proximity, where the speaker sings along with the sensual world. Rees-Jones eschews Marvell's neatly rhyming couplets for a looser form, in which rhyme and sound correspondences link the different stanzas, and often incongruous ideas, together.

(3) Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Highsgreen, Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2005), p. 13.

(4) Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels*, p. 14.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 1-4.

'To His Coy Mistress' famously opens with the statement 'Had we but world enough and time', and '**From His Coy Mistress**' similarly opens with a reference to time, albeit with a very different sense and effect: '**Some days I think**'. While the temporal span summoned by Marvell's speaker is immediately vast and expansive, allowing the lovers to pass 'our long love's day / ... by the Indian Ganges' side' or 'the tide / Of Humber', Rees-Jones's speaker identifies a more diminutive, everyday kind of temporality. The first stanza continues to go against the grain of Marvell's poem; where his speaker urges his object of desire to throw caution and morality to the wind and join him in sexual delight, here, the speaker seems to seek to retreat from this sexual experience into a more solitary and contemplative space.

From a historical perspective, the speaker's declaration that '**I think I will become a nun, / book in a convent miles away**' could be read as a reference to the relatively limited number of options available to women in Marvell's seventeenth century, at least when it came to desire; broadly put, either they risked social ostracism by engaging freely in sexual activity, or they relinquished themselves to marriage and endless childbirth, or they retreated from sexual relations entirely, via the religious life. In this sense, the voice appears to be ventriloquizing a historical persona, the imaginary seventeenth-century beloved of Marvell's speaker. However, there are clues that the speaker might be more contemporary than that. Comedic effect is provided, not only by her use of hyperbole (for instance, she compares men, and presumably sex, to a kind of drug or poison that she must '**purge**' from her body), but also by the poem's rather odd mixing of the old with the contemporary: the speaker imagines '**book[ing] in**' to a convent as though it were a rehabilitation clinic, or a hotel. Further, she plans to '**cut off [her] hair**' (the traditional emblem of female sensuality), but nuns were (and are) only expected to cover their hair with a veil or wimple. These 'mistakes' or anachronisms call attention to the fact this is a modern, contemporary voice, self-consciously *trying* on the identity of a seventeenth-century woman longing to be a nun – longing as this modern voice does for an identity which is more autonomous, not subject to the power of '**men**'. The alliteration of sharp consonant sounds in '**convent**' and '**cut**' conjures a sense of decisiveness and scission – even if this resoluteness to break off from '**men**' and the world of sensual pleasure is more imaginary than actual. '**Cut**'; '**purge**'; although presented as a way of escaping the dominance of desire, this language of purification appears to direct a kind of violence inwards, towards the speaker's own body.

Lines 5-9.

The poem's shift to the conditional tense underlines its status as an imaginary, even utopian exploration of creative possibilities: the poem's 'I' and 'you', rather like the lovers in Marvell's poem, are shown to exist in a suspended, conditional space. The declaration '**I'd kneel and pray and chant a lot, / lie in a narrow bed**' conveys, perhaps, a longing for creative autonomy, for a separate space in which the speaker can '**[devise] titles of unwritten books**'.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 5-9 (continued).

There is an emphasis on books and writing (or not writing) in this stanza, and given Rees-Jones's expertise in twentieth-century women writers, the shadow of Virginia Woolf's famous feminist treatise, *A Room of One's Own*, can be detected here. Yet what it is the speaker *really* wants remains ambiguous in this fantasy. She herself seems ambivalent: although she imagines throwing herself with enthusiasm into life as a nun (**'I'd kneel and pray and chant a lot'**), she also sees herself as secretly inventing ideas for titles that would appear decidedly inappropriate to the ascetic life: **A Semiotics of Flirtation** and **Love: Some Concepts of the Verb 'To Sin'**. Although these books (which wittily send up the seriousness of academic language) might point to writing as a means of harnessing the disordering effects of desire, they also point to Rees-Jones's sense of the centrality and inescapability of fantasy, the double life. Writing is no escape from the body, but the door through which the desire enters to disrupt life again.

Lines 10-13.

Here, the speaker pulls back on the sense of uncertainty and vacillation of the previous stanzas, with the statement **'One thing's for sure'**. It would seem that desire – **'wanting you'** – gives her access to a kind of truth from which to build her identity. This suggestion, however, is thrown into doubt again by the following line, in the declaration **'I'm not the woman that I think I am'**. There's a witty re-writing of philosophical tradition in this line, which echoes René Descartes's famous formulation, 'I think therefore I am'. While Descartes presented the rational, thinking self as the basis for reality and identity, the perspective of this poem could be summarised as 'I feel therefore I (am not what I) am'. Thought is always, this poem implies, entangled in the body and its desires; the one sure thing in an unstable world is also the most uncertain. That line 12 (**'I cannot eat or sleep at all'**) is shorter than the rest in the stanza conveys a sense of restraint, disembodiment – even death. In this sense, it echoes line 6, **'lie in a narrow bed'**, which is similarly shorter than those that surround it. Interestingly, however, while line 6 was connected to the rites of the nun, line 12 is connected to physical desire, as suggested by the speaker's meditation on **'your lovely mouth'**. In this way, a subtle connection is posed between religious spirituality and sexuality that finds full fruition at the end of the poem.

Lines 14-17.

The enjambment that links lines 13 and 14 introduces a new sense of fluidity of thought and feeling, previously contained and impeded by the carefully end-stopped lines – as if the speaker's carefully defended sense of self were now flowing out into her environment. Yet this environment is, we can note, an imaginative, poetic landscape, made up of **'the eerie moonlight and the Northern seas'**. The moonlight (traditionally associated with femininity and transformation) and 'Northern seas' evoke a cold, starkly beautiful vision, suggestive of spirituality.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 14-17 (continued).

This imagery points to the speaker's longing for travel and a sense of elsewhere; like Wales, this spiritual and imaginative landscape is a liminal place, on the periphery. Here, it is identified with desire and creativity. The speaker shuffles in this stanza between what might be called 'eccentricity' (being on the margins), and centrality, as suggested in the image of her body as a temple, a centre of meaning and worship. In an extended metaphor that is suggestive both of permanence and impermanence, the speaker imagines the lover rediscovering her body '**a hundred years from now**', as though it were a lost civilisation. Whereas time at the beginning of the poem was diminutive, here it is stretched, elongated, immense: desire extends it, just as it transforms the speaker's '**narrow bed**' into a '**temple**'. In fact, the long temporalities of the final part of this poem stand in contrast to the urgency and quickness of Marvell's text: here, the lovers have time.

Lines 18-19.

These final two lines, separated off from the rest of the poem by a space and thus accentuated, offer an ecstatic song of praise to the body's life: '**burn incense in, and dance and sing, /oh, yes and weeping, worship in.**' In contrast to the relative restraint of the first two stanzas, the seemingly involuntary exclamation 'oh, yes' conjures a sense of overflowing emotion. The worship of the body involves both joy and its opposite, pain ('**weeping**'), but both are rolled up in an overriding sense of celebration.

The final lines offer, as they often do in Metaphysical poetry, a kind of paradoxical resolution. The image of the body as ruined temple is ambiguous: it speaks of the self as fractured and fragmented - even destroyed - by desire, a suggestion that is perhaps supported by the 'broken' appearance of the last two lines. But the lovers' ritual celebration of that body is also given the power to revive and renew. These lines emphasise the world of the senses, including smell ('**incense**') and sound ('**sing**'). There is a sense of exchange between inside and outside in the figurative depiction of the lovers' embrace: 'incense' is evocative of '**incense**', the outside world becoming inner, but it is also linked through assonance to '**sing**', a verb that carries the idea of air/sound leaving the inner cavities of the chest and becoming part of the outside world.

Similarly, clever phonic echoes and assonantal patterns bind together different, sometimes contradictory ideas explored over the poem. '**Sing**' harks back to a title of one of the speaker's imaginary books, '**To Sin**', thereby reconfiguring bodily shame as celebration, and frustrated literary creativity as fulsome creative expression. '**Worship**' points back, through 'ship', to the '**Northern seas**', presenting desire (like poetry) as a journey of discovery that is transformative to self and other. On one level, the roles ascribed to the lovers, with the female speaker as temple and her lover as archaeologist/adventurer would seem to replay the gender norms found in poems like Marvell's. But the absence of pronouns in these lines suggest that the separate identities of the lovers are submerged and altered (altared?) in their shared celebration of the speaker's body.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'**From his Coy Mistress**' comes from Deryn Rees-Jones's second collection of poetry, *Signs Round a Dead Body* (1998). The name of this collection might seem to signal a preoccupation with loss and/or poetic language as a series of mysterious signs or clues – themes that frequently resurface in Rees-Jones's work (5). But in fact this book is perhaps more centrally concerned with the life of the body and with making the body live, in all of its contradictions and vibrancy, through the medium of poetry. It also offers an extended meditation on erotic love, charged with personal feeling yet laced with irony, and – in fitting with Rees-Jones's scholarly interests – explores the construction of gender identity in and through poetry. 'From his Coy Mistress' exemplifies many of these concerns.

This poem, then, can be seen as 'writing back' to a male-authored tradition of love poetry that worshiped women as a muse without really allowing space for the expression of their own desires.

At the beginning, the speaker parodies and ultimately undermines the whole idea of female 'coyness' by 'overdoing it', turning coyness into a forceful dramatic art in itself (just as Marvell's speaker 'overdoes' the role of ardent male lover, to great effect). And as the poem progresses and the speaker gradually reflects on, and embraces, her imaginative and sensual longings, she becomes anything but 'coy' – expressing instead a mutual physical desire that is equated (through the incense) with prayer and creativity.

Through its references to Marvell's poem, 'From his Coy Mistress' can be seen as a consciously intertextual piece of writing – that is, it crafts its meaning in relation to another text. Rees-Jones has herself noted in relation to other women poets that their 'use of intertextuality, while not necessarily always parodic, can almost always be read in terms of its potential for subversion.' (6) The subversive potential of this poem lies in its tendency to open up new perspectives on past and present. Rather than rejecting a male-authored tradition completely, it transforms the love-language of the Metaphysical poets from within, to give new voice to women's creativity.

(5) Her book *Quiver* (2004), for instance, reworks the poetic murder-mystery genre pioneered by Rees-Jones's friend, poet Gwyneth Lewis. See Lewis's *Y Llofrudd Iaith* (1999) and the English version, 'The Language Murderer', in *Keeping Mum* (2003).

(6) Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels*, p. 17.

FIVE QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

Who is speaking in this poem? Whom is s/he speaking to? What sort of person does the speaker seem to be?

How does the speaker portray the life of a nun? Is s/he positive or negative about it?

How is the speaker's lover depicted? What is the effect of this?

Is this poem a happy or a sad one, in your opinion? What evidence can you find to back up either interpretation?

SECTION 5

(links active September 2018)

All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS

An image of Deryn Rees-Jones by Jemimah Kuhfeld

[//bit.ly/2QT8yYj](https://bit.ly/2QT8yYj)

An image of the author on the website of publisher Bloodaxe

<http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/content/categories/l/5576f0471b650.jpg>

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

The Poetry Archive website includes a short but informative biography, a recording of Rees-Jones reading her poem 'Persephone', and other downloadable audio files of the poet:

<https://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/deryn-rees-jones>

The website for the Leverhulme Trust project on contemporary Welsh poetry in English, 'Devolved Voices', offers a bibliography and video interview with the poet:

<https://wordpress.aber.ac.uk/devolved-voices/media/interview-deryn-rees-jones/>



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