

2010

"A Young Voice, a Statue, and Marvell's 'The Nymph Complaining'

Matthew Harkins

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mharkins@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/english_pubs

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harkins, Matthew. "A Young Voice, A Statue, And Marvell's 'The Nymph Complaining'." *Cambridge Quarterly* 39.3 (2010): 201-216. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 9 Dec. 2013.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

A Young Voice, a Statue, and Marvell's "The Nymph Complaining"

To undertake a project, as the word's derivation indicates, means to cast an idea out ahead of oneself so that it gains autonomy and is fulfilled not only by the efforts of its originator but, indeed, independently of him as well.

-Czeslaw Milosz¹

I

The experimental nature of "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn" came from a growing interest in, and disputes about, the nature of youth in mid-seventeenth century England—a pressing cultural issue of Marvell's historical moment and one to which his poems repeatedly turned. I want to begin with a previously unnoticed relation between Marvell's poem and a poem by a Cambridge contemporary, Thomas Philipott: "*On a Nymph pourtrayed in stone, that powred forth two spouts of water from her eyes into a Garden.*"² Whether Marvell wrote in response to Philipott's work in manuscript or after publication, or as part of a shared competition or exercise, is unknown, but the simple fact that both poems describe how a nymph in a garden turns into a weeping statue opens new ways of thinking about "The Nymph Complaining."³ The Nymph's idiosyncratic speech and strangely shifting story are what make the poem so difficult to interpret; these very factors are in calculated juxtaposition to the Nymph's fixed, iconic representation as the statue. This essay argues that Marvell's compositional approach is meant to allow the Nymph's voice to gesture beyond the limits of the poet's authorial control; the motive for this experiment rests in Marvell's historically-contingent interest

in figures of youth, and the dangers posed by cultural and artistic appropriations of the young.

As the same conceit governs both poems—an account of how a real nymph might have turned into a statue with spouting eyes—the basic idea of this metamorphosis becomes less crucial for understanding Marvell’s poem. The different topics and tactics used to reach this metamorphosis, however, become critical, offering insight into the separate interests of both poets:

*On a Nymph pourtrayed in stone, that powred forth
two spouts of water from her eyes
into a Garden.*

Think that this Statue which now courts your view,
Was once a virgin of that glorious hue,
Set out and furnish'd with such charming grace,
Each durst affirme she had an Angells face;
But as those Mineralls, which the teeming Earth,
Combining with the Sun, improves with birth,
Do through the womb o'th' Mine their veines diffuse,
That Metalls like themselves they may produce:
Ev'n so that rockie hardnesse, which was bred
Within the caverns of her heart, did spred
A drowsie numnesse thorow everie sense,
Whose chilnesse all those Organs did condense,
That gave attendance on the Braine, (the Throne

Where Life and Motion sit install'd to stone:
But 'cause before those sparkling rayes, her eyes
Powr'd forth, did make each heart love's sacrifice;
Thy spout of teares, though turn'd to stone, distill,
As if they wept for those their scorne did kill.⁴

Philipott's interest in theories of alchemy and chemical change surfaces not only in "On a Nymph pourtrayed," but also in a scientific treatise he wrote years later on the chemical properties of salt in relation to tides.⁵ The nymph of his poem reflects conventions of the cold Petrarchan lover, with "rockie hardness...bred / Within the caverns of her heart" (9-10). Her crying eyes may or may not signal regret by the poem's end; either way, the brief story told about her relies on a familiar stereotype of a cruel and cold young lover—a stereotype Philipott employed in order to develop the poem's central conceit around a scientific idea that intrigued him. Like Philipott, Marvell fashioned his story of this metamorphosis around his own interests. But the allusive complexity of "The Nymph Complaining" has proved far more difficult to contextualize than Philipott's poem.

The fundamental difference between both poems lies in Marvell's interest in the nymph's voice, which prompted him to treat the statue on a profoundly different conceptual level. This distinction explains the interpretive challenges posed by "The Nymph Complaining" and contextualizes the allegorical maneuvers that have dominated the poem's critical history. Virgilian echoes of the slain deer in book VII of the Aeneid and the presence of the newly-coined military word "troopers" lead to political and historical readings of the poem. Religious readings tend to identify the fawn as a key Christian figure (e.g. Christ, the Anglican church, or the Paraclete), and point to the

poem's tonal resonance with the Song of Songs. A third allegorical tradition seeks to locate the poem's meaning in the sexual politics surrounding the interplay among the Nymph, "Unconstant Sylvio," and the fawn.⁶ But these different readings tend to fall apart when faced with the contradictory allusiveness of the Nymph's story with its odd cast of characters, narrative eddies and shifting tones. Once one has located the allegorical significance of one character, or one part of this multifaceted poem, other parts of the poem seem either uncomfortably tangential or they make little sense.

This deliberate resistance, and invitation, to such allegorical readings creates an interpretive paradox that reflects Marvell's creative project:⁷ the poem functions as a meta-allegory, an exploration of the unconscious cultural assumptions that underpin interpretive practice; and as it involves imagining the various possibilities inherent in a statue of a young figure, the project also has its roots in Marvell's abiding interest in the young, their potentiality, and the interpretive uses to which they might be put by their elders. The mystery of how to read her relative maturity, and the allegorical flexibility of the tale she tells, both elicits a reader's interpretive assumptions and frustrates those same assumptions.

The differences between Marvell's Nymph and Philipott's are helpful. Philipott begins with the statue as an established object; the narrator then explains and interprets the history of the Nymph's transformation into this statue throughout the rest of the poem. In Marvell's poem the Nymph does her own explaining and interpreting; she tells her story in her own voice, from her own point of view, and then calls for her own transformation into a statue, according to her own specifications, at the poem's end.⁸ Rather than place the Nymph within a conventional interpretive framework, Marvell

treated his subject more seriously than his fellow poet. His poem asks what the Nymph might have to say for herself, how her voice might undermine the unthinking assumptions of those whose views of the young are carved in stone. The elusiveness, in fact, of Marvell's Nymph signals his interest in allowing her a very different sort of young voice. We need to reframe Marvell's interest in the young—evidenced in this and other poems—in the context of changing notions of youth in mid-seventeenth-century England, envisioning the poem's speaker, and the poem itself, inhabiting an odd and contested space between childhood and adulthood.

II

“Youth” in early modern England could stretch from the early teens to the late twenties.⁹ Confusion as to these exact parameters arose from conflicting ideas of when childhood should begin. Henry Swinburne acknowledged how different contexts and agendas—“the variety of the subjected Matter and Meaning of the Author”—shaped these boundaries in contemporary texts.¹⁰ Writing as an older man in the Elizabethan court, Roger Ascham fretted that seventeen to twenty-seven year olds “have commonly the reign of all license in their own hand”; roughly one hundred years later, the anonymous author of *Advice to the English Youth* trusted youth more than their elders, “for those that stand by, often see more than those who are concerned in the Action.”¹¹ Much attention centered on male youths who, as future heads of families and possible threats to the economic and political authority of their elders, became focal points for a great deal of anxiety, though female youth could trouble their elders just as much as their male

counterparts. Writers usually prescribed different treatment for young males and females, generally to prepare them for different places in mature society, but concerns about the qualities of youth commonly assumed to be shared by both genders—such as the flexible nature of the mind and soul—were part of a “universal concern” for youth regardless of their sex.¹² Depending on the perspective of the writer and the context of a discussion, male and female youth could be divided by gender or united by age.

While the boundaries and qualities of youth could be molded and remolded to suit an author’s rhetorical interests, young individuals themselves were deemed to be pliable by temperament.¹³ Throughout the early modern period Puritan and Dissenting adults began shifting away from received stereotypes of the young, and started observing young people more carefully. This new attention arose from realizing the difficulty of transmitting “unfashionable” religious ideas to a new generation; the need for more nuanced perceptions of youth helped develop ideas of a “malleable” adolescence.¹⁴ These conflicting and changing ideas of youth developed over a long period. If they had their roots in the Reformation, the religious and cultural upheaval surrounding the civil war, the Restoration, and the Exclusion crisis provided countless occasions to reconsider youth’s intrinsic qualities and potential impact on the nation. Growing numbers of conduct books and pedagogical treatises also reveal sustained concern for and about youth during the early modern period. By the mid 1640s a variety of stereotyped notions of youth held cultural currency, and so too did the impulse to set aside those notions in order to imagine how actual youths might perceive the world. For a young poet such as Marvell, this confusion about youth was rich artistic terrain. As the son of a minister, a youth who would tutor a series of young charges, and the possible focus of a Jesuit

conversion attempt (Jesuits were infamous for their “seduction” of the young), Marvell was well-positioned to explore this cultural landscape.

Marvell’s stay in Rome in 1645 provided material for “Flecknoe, an English Priest at Rome” which contrasts the separate responses of a “youthful” (25) narrator and a feckless “waxen youth” (157) to the priest’s attentions. His elegies on Lord Francis Villiers and Lord Hastings reveal him meditating on young figures in the late 1640s as well, and his 1650 “An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland” begins by comparing the fifty-one-year-old general to a “forward youth” (1). The penultimate stanza of “The Garden” celebrates the Edenic “happy garden state where man there walked without a mate,” evoking an epoch in the youth of humanity, and Adam’s own youth before marriage and later, tragic maturity. In the final stanza of “The Gallery” the narrator sets aside his other pictures to muse on the young pastoral figure at “the entrance” of his collection that “likes...[him] best” (50) and “with which...[he] first was took” (52): the “tender shepherdess” (53). Some of his other poems offer narrators with more complicated and unsettling stances towards the young. In “A Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers” a voyeuristic narrator anticipates the erotic future of a young girl, warning her, ironically, of the dangers of plucking unripe buds. The narrator of “Young Love” asks to “learn love before we may” (20) with a “little infant” (1), shuffling images of seeming innocence with those of frank sexuality; a “snowy lamb” pairs with a more erotically ambiguous “wanton kid,” and then with “the lusty bull or ram,” eager “For his morning sacrifice” (13-16). In 1651 Marvell raised the issue of sexual appropriation of young figures again; “Upon Appleton House” describes the founding of Nun Appleton as a contest in which “Young Fairfax” (258) rescues the “blooming virgin

Thwaites” (90) from the erotic and religious depredations of Catholic nuns. The poem closes with a thirty-year-old Marvell—who describes himself both as a man and as a “trifling youth” (652)—anticipating the future of the estate and Fairfax family line through his young pupil, the thirteen-year-old Maria Fairfax. While thirty was the farthest reach of what might be termed “youth” in early modern England, Marvell’s meditations on that state continued into his maturity. Sixteen years after writing “Upon Appleton House” the mature poet and parliamentarian would console Sir John Trott in a letter from August 1667 reflecting on the bonds between the young and their elders. In that very same year the Dutch invasion of the Medway prompted *The Last Instructions to a Painter*, which considers England’s troubles through the adolescent heroics of the androgynous Douglas and Charles II’s disturbing fascination with a bound, blindfolded, and gagged virgin.

While this brief treatment does little justice to the full complexity of the poems mentioned above, it does underscore how Marvell returned repeatedly, and often oddly, to figures of youth. These figures occupy different stages of development, and by testing their responses at difficult moments, he invited readers to question their own received notions of the young. “The Nymph Complaining” belongs in this context. I suggest that when Marvell read Philipott’s poem or looked at the statue that inspired it, he sought to present a young figure who would reflect her own interests more than unconsciously rehearse a mature stereotype of youth. This project puts the difficulties faced by allegorical readings of “The Nymph Complaining” in a new light. To write a poem about topics that interest the mature, to write for instance, an allegorical treatment of religion, politics, or pastoral courtship, would be to shape the Nymph to fit mature expectations.

But these expectations are precisely what Marvell complicates. The Nymph's surprising and elusive point of view finds an echo in *Advice to the Young* where Joseph Stennett claims that "in Youth...the Mind is most at leisure, and not embarrass'd with that multitude of Thoughts and Projects about the Affairs of the World, which riper Years are usually incumber'd with."¹⁵ The Nymph's words reveal a young perspective distant from mature concerns and viewpoints. They reflect the thoughts and interests Marvell imagined as consonant to her age, rather than allegorical topics—"Thoughts and Projects about the Affairs of the World"—that readers of "riper Years" too swiftly ascribe to her.

As the Nymph's speech deliberately confounds allegorical expectations, she challenges the reader's understanding of her exact age as well. Commonplace conventions about youth—those that fit the poem into narratives of innocence and experience, or the psychological progression from young naiveté to a wise and complex maturity—obscure more about the poem than they reveal, recapitulating the very stereotypes the poem is designed to perplex. The Nymph's treatment at the hands of a lover or passing soldiers is shared by more than naïve children; Unconstant Sylvios do not fool only the young, and wanton Troopers may strike anywhere. Moreover, for all we can tell, neither Sylvio nor the troopers seem shame-faced at their deeds, concerned that they have despoiled innocence. These figures walk into the Nymph's life as they please, courting her or shooting her fawn, and then going on their way. They no doubt frame their "transgressions" to suit their own mature viewpoints. The fawn, though young, is simply a deer, the Nymph a courtable young female: both may be chased legitimately for sport. Alternatively, one might see these acts as sacrifices of childlike innocence. Yet the Nymph does not; to her the Troopers sin in killing unjustly, to no purpose, while

Sylvio's falseness lies in leaving her, not in courting her. The question of whether or not the Nymph or her fawn are too young for this sort of sport hangs in the air unanswered—the poem, by design, destabilizes a reader's confidence of accurately assessing the Nymph's maturity. In a similar fashion, the Nymph's vocabulary troubles readers who insist on her naiveté; though simple “childlike” words form much of her speech, she also employs complex words such as “deodands”—an arcane legal term suggesting considerable sophistication. The poem inexorably directs attention to what Swinburne terms “Matter and Meaning”—both the mature interests of those who shape youth's parameters as they see fit, and the pliable nature of the evidence used to make such decisions. Readers develop varied understandings of the Nymph's relative maturity based largely on their preconceived notions of youth; much depends on where one's interests and sympathies lie, on how one wants to describe youth's abilities or define its boundaries.

In short, to miss the critical role the Nymph's life-stage plays in the poem is to miss the foundation of the poem's curious allegorical design. Rather than sustaining a single allegorical thread, “The Nymph Complaining” supports several distinct allegorical possibilities—gesturing in multiple interpretive directions while avoiding a fixed resolution. This allegorical flexibility takes its cue from the unsettled and unfixed youth of the Nymph. Early modern writers seeking to understand youth with new precision focused on their pliability. They were “Changeable and Unsteady,” “greene and flexible,” inhabitants of “a most unsettled age.”¹⁶ In speaking to youth, Robert Abbot explained “as a strait tree, which is loose at the root, standeth trembling and being unsettled, with a little strength is pulled this way, or that way: so it is with you who are

ready to be swayed with wind and tyde every way.”¹⁷ Few descriptions could be more apt for the poem itself. Though readers pull “The Nymph Complaining” in multiple interpretive directions, trying to fix it in suitable ways, few acknowledge the significance of the poem’s allegorical restlessness, how, by design, it refuses to sit still.¹⁸ Put simply, the malleability of the Nymph’s youth recapitulates the greater malleability of the poem as a whole.

III

What are the implications of this phenomenon? Understanding Marvell’s project requires a shift away from the interpretive preconceptions it was meant to confront. The poem breathes life into a particular, endlessly curious voice—a voice both alluring and seemingly oblique—inviting and offering sympathy, contemplation, and pleasure. But the Nymph’s voice is not meant to be Marvell’s, and the great misstep in reading “The Nymph Complaining” is to neglect the voice’s significance by considering it merely a vehicle for the poem’s “message”—its allegorical content. This misapprehension ignores perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the Nymph: she speaks to us when so many of his youth do not. Marvell’s poems teem with young figures—Mary Fairfax, Little T.C., the nymph from “Young Love,” both Archibald Douglas and the bound nymph of *The Last Instructions*—each of whom holds tremendous import for the narrator of his or her respective poem, while remaining largely, if not completely silent. If they say anything at all, we learn of their words secondhand, as when a narrator asserts that Little T.C. “names” flowers, or that Mary Fairfax “counts her beauty to converse / In all the languages as hers” (707-8). In contrast, “The Nymph Complaining” stems from the

oddest of premises: Marvell evokes a voice he does not want to control. The poem, rather, records an attempt to present as unmediated a voice of youth as possible—a voice Marvell wishes not to subordinate to any mature allegorical significance.

This premise reframes the fawn, that vexed and elusive creature that has proved so difficult to identify, leading to an almost absurdly simple notion: the fawn's symbolic meaning and its relation to the outside world (its allegorical significance) is of little importance. Whatever the fawn is, the crucial point is that the Nymph finds it precious and fascinating (feelings in fact indicative of a bond with a pet). That the intensity of the Nymph's attachment makes a reader think the fawn must be a stand-in for a lover, or a child, or Christ, tells us more about that reader's value system than the Nymph's, as does Eliot's famously dismissive remark that the death of a girl's pet is "a slight affair."¹⁹

And yet the Nymph's language gestures towards allegory for a reason; the depth of her affection for the fawn can only be stressed through analogy. If Marvell wished to convey how all-encompassing a curious love could be, what stronger comparisons might he use than erotic love, the love for a child, or love for God? The fawn is not a lover, a child, or God, but it touches the Nymph with an analogous intimacy and immediacy. Indeed, Marvell goes to great lengths to dramatize the fawn's hold on the Nymph in as many registers as possible, including those that might particularly appeal to the poet himself:

Thenceforth I set myself to play
My solitary time away
With this: and very well content,
Could so mine idle life have spent.

For it was full of sport; and light
Of foot, and heart; and did invite
Me to its game (37-43).

The fawn's resonance with courtly love poetry stands out sharply both in Sylvio's pun—"Look how your huntsman here / Hath taught a fawn to hunt his *dear*" (31-2)—and the Nymph's punning counter that Sylvio "Left me his fawn, but took his heart" (36). And yet, if the fawn seems part of a courtly poetic convention, the passage above suggests how it might have transformed into a poetic process with more personal significance. The Nymph's description of her "idle" pastime calls to mind another voice of Marvell's: that of the solitary young poet in "Upon Appleton House" with his "hooks...quills, / And angles, idle utensils" (649-50).

Once more, the poem provides a glimpse of a promising interpretive direction, suggesting that the Nymph's sport with the fawn might be an allegory for Marvell's poetic process. But while this reading proves both as tantalizing and as illusory as the poem's other leads, I would suggest that Marvell's personal interests surface in this moment nevertheless. The young Nymph's play with the fawn offers a distant echo of Marvell's repeated poetic engagement with young subjects—his representations of youth that are too numerous to be accidental, too idiosyncratic not to catch one's eye. And it is this space between the reader's eye and the Nymph's, or the Nymph's and the Troopers' on which the poet focuses attention. Meditating on the liminal cultural space between childhood and adulthood, Marvell repeatedly considered how youth's distance from, and yet proximity to, maturity gave it an uniquely charged perspective. The possibilities of this perspective haunt much of his work. Youth inhabit odd spaces in the poems,

appearing on the page at moments of deep crisis and inviting substantive reflection.

Voices and images of youth provided a particularly fruitful avenue of expression, a way of looking at the world that remained simultaneously familiar and estranging.

The great difficulty of shaping a poem around these possibilities, though, is that they can disappear at the very moment a poem tries to express them. How would an early modern poet convey the malleability, the potentiality, the unexpected perspective of a young person, within a culture all too ready to see that person as a familiar “type”?

The statue itself would make this question all the more pressing. As a fixed carving of an archetypal figure, the statue both Philipott and Marvell described would have made a perfect focal point for stereotyped conventions about youth. Philipott’s poem, for instance, employs the clever conceit of a real nymph chemically transforming into a statue, largely by adopting the ready-made convention of the cold Petrarchan lover—a convention so familiar that the reader never has to consider the nymph as a real figure. But Marvell’s poems reveal grave misgivings about the consequences of trusting overly-familiar archetypes of youth. Avoiding this trap in his own poems required extreme care; it also provided a productive tension, tempering his own abiding fascination with youth’s possibilities. As such, his interest in letting youth guide much of his contemplative and artistic work required him to afford a commensurate integrity to his young subjects. If these youth were to suggest unconventional perspectives and justify their critical role in his poetic process, Marvell might resist simply putting words into their mouths.

In “The Nymph Complaining” he confronts this difficulty directly. Intrigued by the possibilities of a young voice and the very impossibility of predicting what such a voice might say, Marvell tries to give the Nymph a measure of autonomy even from

himself—to allow her a voice of her own. Intimations of this venture surface in the Nymph’s repeated confounding of expectations. Her enthusiastic love for the fawn and seeming confusion over the ungentle, wanton, or cruel acts of others prompt many readers to find her merely unsophisticated and naïve, worthy of pity, though not respect. Her seeming misappropriation of archaic legal terms, or halting appropriation of courtly love puns, or misguided substitution of a pet’s love for either a lover, a child or Christ, suggests to some that the Nymph is toying with matters beyond her comprehension and missing the point of her experience entirely. Such dismissals, however, privilege a variety of mature viewpoints over the Nymph’s; rather than fail to understand the proper legal, religious, courtly or political registers of her words, she uses those words as she sees fit. It may be inevitable that this speech-act of the young Nymph produces critiques of the mature world encroaching on her garden, if only because her voice stands apart from this world. But such critiques are a byproduct of this voice, not the focus, as “The Nymph Complaining” interrogates allegorical practices rather than uncritically reproducing them, aiming for a voice not completely divorced from the mature world—intersecting with that world at many points—but refusing to be subsumed.

This focus becomes most evident in the poem’s closing lines. Coming as it does at the end of Marvell’s poem, the Nymph’s description of her transformation into a statue is commonly read as the poem’s defining moment—a moment of loss, death or inability that casts a shadow over everything that precedes it. Remembering though that Marvell’s poem shares the same subject and occasion as Philipott’s—a description of a particular “weeping” statue and the story of how a nymph transformed into that piece of art—reframes this conclusion. In a sense, this weeping and the Nymph’s metamorphosis

comprise a starting point for the poem's composition; Marvell's interests and creative invention are most on display when branching out from these constraints. But even within the parameters of this foregone conclusion Marvell's poem strives to express the Nymph's originality and autonomy:

First my unhappy statue shall
Be cut in marble; and withal,
Let it be weeping too: but there
Th'engraver sure his art may spare;
For I so truly thee bemoan,
That I shall weep though I be stone:
Until my tears, still dropping, wear
My breast, themselves engraving there.
There at my feet shalt thou be laid,
Of purest alabaster made:
For I would have thine image be
White as I can, though not as thee (111-122).

Marvell renders the poem's metamorphosis in such a way that the Nymph gains agency over her artistic rendering. She acknowledges her fashioning at the hands of the artist, that her "statue shall / Be cut in marble," but she herself describes the nature and the limitations of this shaping. The engraver could carve tears, but that would entail mere artistry; the tears dropping from her face will not only be genuine—they will belong to her.

In that Marvell describes an actual statue, the fact that the Nymph manages her image as a sculpture, not a poem, is fitting, as is the decision to introduce an extra participant in the rendering of her likeness. For the poem's final turn reveals the Nymph collaborating with the poet. Despite the brilliance of Marvell's presentation, at some point he must grapple with the fact that he, not the Nymph, has written the poem. Rather than ignore this reality and so let it overwhelm the poem, he deflects it with a curious ritual. The Nymph, with reservations, accepts the sculptor creating her statue; by analogy she consents to the poet shaping her voice. Marvell thus acknowledges the ventriloquism involved in speaking for the Nymph, while suggesting, nevertheless, that the Nymph's voice is not simply his own. Without her complicity the poem would be no more than dead stone bereft of her life and voice, while her tears, still dropping, shape her image long after Marvell's pen has fallen away. Even so, her fawn—that elusive figure that drives her imagination—though fashioned to her exact specifications, “Of purest alabaster made,” will never quite match its original. Despite his best efforts Marvell's poem will remain a haunting copy: “White as I can, though not as thee.” This critical reservation lends a final legitimacy to Marvell's enterprise. We have seen the unique steps he takes to invoke a young voice estranged from maturity—so estranged it has continued to confound expectations. And yet he wants to secure the approval of this voice at the same time he stresses its authenticity. By asserting that the artist will never perfectly render her fawn, the Nymph helps him accomplish a seemingly unattainable goal. If, that is, Marvell wished to frame the Nymph's voice as separate from his own, what stronger argument might he muster than allow this voice a final autonomy—to have it explain he will never quite capture that which is truly most precious to her?

The poem's odd conclusion enacts the challenge Marvell faces in "The Nymph Complaining." Youth speak in poems throughout the early modern period; pastoral itself, a tradition dating back to antiquity, implies that the voices it offers are largely those of youth. In light of this tradition, and Marvell's understanding of this tradition, the impulse to place the Nymph squarely within it seems sensible. But so too does the notion that while filling a poem with shepherds and nymphs might signify the presence of pastoral, such poems likely have little to do with voices of real youths. Pastoral poets used shepherds and nymphs for their own argumentative purposes. Puttenham explains that, for many, such figures "insinuate and glaunce at greater matters and such as perchance had not been safe to haue beene disclosed in any other sort, which may be perceiued by the Eglogues of *Virgill*, in which are treated by figure matters of greater importance then the loues of *Titirus* and *Corydon*."²⁰ This conventional early modern understanding of pastoral, that "greater matters...of greater importance" are at stake—matters the mature critical eye can understand, even if the Nymph cannot—has long obscured the unconventional focus of "The Nymph Complaining." For to rely on this pastoral convention is to forget that Marvell is no conventional pastoralist. "The Mower Against Gardens" similarly grapples with pastoral's appropriations, presenting a resistant voice speaking from within the genre. The Mower—Marvell's analogue to the young shepherds—criticizes the demands of "Luxurious man" (1). Nurturing only that which pleases him, this overly-sophisticated gardener cordons off an enclosed space for perfumes, tulip bulbs, tropical flowers—exotic fruits fashioned for his "vice" (1), and to

suit his mature tastes. The Mower condemns such gardening as intrusive, as a mature appropriation of nature that seduces and misunderstands it: “Their statues polished by some ancient hand, / May to adorn the gardens stand: / But howsoe’er the figures do excel, / The gods themselves with us do dwell” (37-40). Like poets who frame idealized youths in groomed pastoral gardens, the seductive gardeners miss the very vitality they attempt to distill. The Mower, incredulous and scornful, mocks such artistic enterprises. The Nymph however entertains an alternate possibility: that an artist properly attuned to her voice and perspective might render that voice and perspective with unprecedented accuracy. Prompted to write about a fixed, immobile statue, produced by and subject to social and artistic stereotypes about the young, Marvell might well have wondered how such restrictive conventions could be avoided. In “The Nymph Complaining” Marvell attempts to be that respectful and properly attuned artist the Nymph imagines, to offer in a fixed medium an essentially “unfixed” youth. By treating the Nymph less as a subject than as an artistic collaborator, Marvell radically reconsiders both the foundations and implications of writing pastoral.

One might argue, on the one hand, that Marvell’s project in “The Nymph Complaining” is impossible, that whatever his intentions a poet always controls the voices he presents, that he cannot help but shape such voices for his own purposes. The logic of this position is difficult to resist. But the poem’s oddly arresting conclusion suggests that Marvell chose to resist it—since, on the other hand, it is difficult to imagine how he might have tailored the poem to convey both the Nymph’s potentiality and her vocal autonomy with any more precision. This curiosity about the formal implications of constructing pastoral poetry, particularly a poem contextualizing pastoral representations

of the young in yet another art form, accounts in large part for the innovative and reflective nature of the poem. Understanding how Marvell's critical investigations of the genre develop within his historical awareness of shifting concepts of youth—concepts matching his biographical circumstances and poetic interests—gives crucial scope for approaching Marvell's unexpected representations of the young. Artistic appropriations both echo and enable broader cultural appropriations, making inquiry into the role of youth within pastoral all the more pressing.

Marvell's youths swim in strong political currents, offering glimpses from odd cultural angles; and though they tell no single tale, Marvell consistently allows them to startle us by suggesting crucial shifts of perspective. For many in early modern England, mature voices were often the only ones heard, the only ones deemed worth hearing. It is no accident that Marvell prizes young voices and stances at moments of profound social and political turmoil, that a forward youth introduces Cromwell in 1650, that Mary Fairfax walks her father's estate in the troubled summer of 1651, that young figures arouse and deny desire at the Dutch invasion of 1667. Yet it is at these moments especially when Marvell resists putting words into their mouths. If early modern pastoral tends to co-opt voices of youth, shaping them to fit the interests and preconceptions of their elders, Marvell takes extraordinary precautions to avoid the worst excesses of such appropriation. In a sense, we might see the autonomy and respect he affords the Nymph as a poet's attempt to propitiate the youths of whom he writes. Her voice, rather than satisfying familiar interpretive practices, prompts investigation into the cultural implications of these practices, the consequences of circumscribing the voices of the

young. It is this attentiveness to youth that drives the poem and the unexpectedness of Marvell's enterprise that has made it so difficult to understand.

¹ Czeslaw Milosz, *Visions from San Francisco Bay*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) p. 48.

² Nigel Smith has linked two other poems, Marvell's "The Match" and Philipott's "A Pastoral Court-ship," mentioning in passing "precise echoes" that "suggest that M. was reworking parts of Philipott's *Poems* published in 1646, making even more rigorous conceits on top of Philipott's own wit": *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (London: Longman, 2003) p. 125. All citations of Marvell's poetry are from this edition.

³ Philipott attended Clare College while Marvell studied at Trinity; both matriculated in 1633. Philipott was born five years earlier than Marvell and he received his MA in 1635/6 (L. C. Martin, introduction to *Poems*, by Thomas Philipott: iii). Echoes of Marvell can be found scattered throughout the collection. "To His Coy Mistress" shows affinities with Philipott's "On the sight of a Clock" and "The Elegie." Yet the strongest direct correlation by far between Marvell's poems and Philipott's appears in the two poems discussed in this essay.

⁴ Thomas Philipott, *Poems* (1646; reprint, edited and with an introduction by L. C. Martin, Liverpool: University Press of Liverpool, 1950).

⁵ See Anna Maria Roos, "Thomas Philipot and Chemical Theories of the Tides in Seventeenth-Century England," *Ambix*, 48/3 (2001) pp. 125-136.

⁶ For examples of political readings see: Yvonne L. Sandstroem, "Marvell's 'Nymph Complaining' as Historical Allegory," *Studies in English Literature* 30/1 (1990) pp. 93-114; and Nicholas Guild, "Marvell's 'The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Faun,'" *Modern Language Quarterly* 29/4 (1968) pp. 385-394. For readings of the religious significance of the poem see: M. C. Bradbrook and M. G. Thomas, *Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940) pp. 47-50; Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) p. 161; Geoffrey Hartman, "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn," *Essays in Criticism* 18/2 (1968) pp. 131-135; and John S. Coolidge, "The Religious Significance of Marvell's 'The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Faun,'" *Philological Quarterly* 59/1 (1980) pp. 11-23. For readings exploring sexual politics see Elaine Hoffman Baruch, "Marvell's 'Nymph': A Study of Feminine Consciousness," *Etudes Anglaises*, 31/2 (1978) pp. 152-160; Barbara Estrin, "The Nymph and the Revenge of Silence," in *On the Celebrated and Neglected Poems of Andrew Marvell*, eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1992) pp. 102-120; and Morgan Holmes, "A Garden of Her Own: Marvell's Nymph and the Order of Nature," in *Ovid and the Renaissance Body*, ed. Goran V. Stanivukovic (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) pp. 77-93.

⁷ For a recent alternate view of the poem's invitation and resistance to allegorical meaning as part of Marvell's erotic "poetics of indeterminacy and in-betweenness," see

Matthew C. Augustine, “‘Lillies Without, Roses Within’: Marvell’s Poetics of Indeterminacy and ‘The Nymph Complaining,’” *Criticism*, 50/2 (2008) p. 256.

⁸ The Nymph seems to be commissioning a memorial statue to be erected after her death, though starting with line 116—“...I shall weep though I be stone”—she describes this statue as indistinguishable from herself, suggesting her essence has been transformed into this collaborative work of art.

⁹ Steven R. Smith, “Religion and the Conception of Youth in Seventeenth-Century England,” *History of Childhood Quarterly* 2/4 (1975) p. 495; Keith Thomas, “Age and Authority in Early Modern England” in *Proceedings of the British Academy, June 16, 1976* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) p. 227; and Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) p. 11.

¹⁰ Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals or Matrimonial Contracts Wherein All the Questions Relating to that Subject are Ingeniously Debated and Resolved* (London, 1686) p. 24.

¹¹ Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster* (1570; reprint, edited by Edward Arber, Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1898) p. 108, and the anonymous *Advice to the English Youth: Relating to the Present Juncture of Affairs* (London, 1688) p. 1.

¹² Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 53 and p. 59.

¹⁴ C. John Sommerville, *The Discovery of Childhood in Puritan England* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1992) p. 34.

¹⁵ Joseph Stennet, *Advice to the Young* (London, 1695) p. 57.

¹⁶ John Shower, *Seasonable Advice to Youth* (London, 1692), 9; William Guild, quoted by Griffiths, p. 39; and Robert Abbot, *The Young Mans Warning-Piece* (London, 1657) p. 58.

¹⁷ Abbot, p. 58.

¹⁸ Only three readings to my knowledge have attempted to find an over-arching design in the poem's multiple registers. See Phoebe Spinrad, "Death, Loss, and Marvell's Nymph," *PMLA* 97/1 (1982) p. 53, Daniel Jaecle, "Marvell's Dialogized Nymph," *Studies in English Literature* 43/1 (2003) p. 138, and Augustine, pp. 255-278.

¹⁹ See, respectively: Holmes (who envisions the fawn as a site of lesbian eroticism) pp. 77-93; John J. Teunissen and Evelyn Hinz, "What is the Nymph Complaining for?" *English Literary History*, 45 (1978) pp. 410-28; Bradbrook and Thomas, pp. 47-50; and T. S. Eliot, "Andrew Marvell," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950) p. 259.

²⁰ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, 1589, reprinted in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. Gregory Smith, Vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1904) p. 40.