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A Clock and a Companion Poem to Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress'

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“A Clock and a Companion Poem to Marvell’s ‘To His Coy Mistress’”

In his notes on Andrew Marvell’s “The Match,” Nigel Smith has marked a connection between some of Marvell’s poems and those of Thomas Philipot, suggesting that Marvell “was reworking parts of Philipot’s Poems published in 1646, making even more rigorous conceits on top of Philipot’s own wit.”¹ I have recently argued elsewhere that Philipot’s “On a Nymph pourtrayed in stone, that powred forth two spouts of water from her eyes into a Garden” should be read as a companion poem to Marvell’s “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn,” as both poems tell the story of how a nymph transformed into a very particular statue.²

Here I want to point to striking similarities between Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” and Philipot’s “On the sight of a Clock.” Philipot’s poem is below:

How fruitlesse our designes would prove, if we
Should be possest with so much vanitie,
As with our fraile endeavours, to assay
To stop the winged houres in their way?
Or fondly seek to chaine up Time, and try
To make him with our wild desires comply,
Since leaden plummets hung (hang?) upon his feet,
Not clog we see, but make his pace more fleet.³

If Philipot's poem speaks of the vain desire "To stop the winged houres on their way," Marvell's speaks of "Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near" (line 220). In addition, each poem speaks of the impossibility of stopping or slowing time, but each also suggests that some course of action could actually speed it up. Philipot's narrator argues that to "fondly seek to chaine up Time, and try / To make him with our wild desires comply" would actually make Time's "pace more fleet" through the operation of leaden weights, presumably those used to regulate the clock's movement. Marvell's narrator suggests that the two potential lovers can speed up time as well: "though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run" (lines 45-6). In each poem satisfying "desires" or "pleasures" brings about this acceleration.

Recognizing that Marvell's poem, like Philipot's, may be organized around the description of a particular clock, means that there may be a new way of understanding some of the most difficult to interpret lines of "To His Coy Mistress": "Let us roll all our strength, and all / Our sweetness, up into one ball: / And tear our pleasures with rough strife, / Thorough the iron gates of life" (lines 31-43). Perhaps these lines refer to attributes of the specific clock in question. The combining (entwining) of two weights, perhaps fashioned in the image of two lovers, would speed up the clock's mechanism. The "iron gates" could refer to some sort of grillwork or decoration through which these weighted chains pass.

¹ *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (London, 2003), 125. All citations of Marvell are from this edition.

² Matthew Harkins, "A Young Voice, a Statue, and Marvell's 'The Nymph Complaining,'" *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 39.3 (September, 2010), 201-216.

³ Thomas Philipot, *Poems* (London, 1646), 2.