Article:
Nevitt, M. (2024) Milton's Sonnet XIV and the poetry of George Thomason. Electronic British Library Journal, 2023. 8. ISSN: 1478-0259

https://doi.org/10.23636/pr3v-az62

DOI: 10.23636/pr3v-az62

Milton's Sonnet XIV and the Poetry of George Thomason

Marcus Nevitt

Why did John Milton write a sonnet commemorating the death of Catharine Thomason, wife of the London bookseller and bibliophile George Thomason, in December 1646? Such commentary as there has been on Sonnet XIV has been divided on the issue. One group of literary critics, keen to recreate the mental and spiritual conditions which might have produced the heterodoxies of *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Paradise Lost*, have seen Milton's compressed elegy as an opportunity for him to work through his early attitudes towards the theological doctrine of Mortalism. As Catharine Thomason's 'works and alms and all [her] good endeavour / … Follow'd [her] up to joy and bliss for ever' we are invited to contemplate the orthodox, upward movement of a soul which has not died with its body.[1] Other commentators, aware that the sonnet is actually one of Milton's least intellectually challenging, have eschewed the intricacies of the mortalist heresy with its thnetopsychist and psychopannichist perspectives on the exact state of the soul at death, to offer an altogether simpler explanation: Milton liked and missed the subject of his poem.[2]

The Trinity manuscript of Milton's poems in part corroborates the idea of some affection between the poet and his subject since the original working title for the sonnet referred to 'Mrs Catharine Thomason my Christian friend', even though Milton misspelled her surname at the first attempt.[3] The poem imagines the role that Thomason's cardinal virtues – Faith, Love, Works, Alms and Good Endeavour – played after her death and has at its centre the speaker's confidence in one woman's goodness, the knowledge of which is both intimate and elusive: what ensures Catharine Thomason's salvation is simply 'the truth of thee'. The truth of who is actually addressed in this poem is equally evasive, however, for whilst the sonnet purports to be a moving offering 'to' a person who will never read it – and Thomason is directly and familiarly 'thy' and 'thee' throughout – the manuscript headnote signals an unbreachable distance between the living and the dead, speaker and subject, by describing the speech act in more formal, public terms in the third person: 'On the religious memory of Mrs Catherine Thomason my Christian friend deceased 16 Decem. 1646'. Although such switches between formality and familiarity were a common feature of Renaissance elegy, Milton's poem is particularly uncertain about its proximity to the woman it commemorates. This can be seen in his revisions to the headnote as he reworked the sonnet for publication; he first corrected its spelling, then deleted it entirely and did not reproduce it at all in *Poems, &c* (1673). These apparently minor alterations to Milton's description and presentation of his sonnet are crucial because aside from such details there is no other testimony of a close

[1] John Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (London, 1968), pp. 296-7. For readings of the poem which situate it in relation to doctrinal debates surrounding Mortalism see: Timothy J. Burberry, 'From Orthodoxy to Heresy: A Theological Analysis of Sonnets XIV and XVIII', *Milton Studies*, xlv (2006), pp. 1-20; A. E. B. Coldiron, 'Milton *in parvo*: Mortalism and Genre Transformation in Sonnet 14', *Milton Quarterly*, xxviii (1994), pp. 1-10.

[2] *The Sonnets of Milton*, ed. John S. Smart (Glasgow, 1921), pp. 79-80; *Milton's Sonnets*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (New York, 1966), p. 135.

[3] John Milton, *Poems Reproduced in Facsimile from the Manuscript in Trinity College, Cambridge with a Transcript* (Ilkley, 1972), p. 44.

friendship between the greatest poet of the period and the wife of its most important book collector. Whilst there is evidence from George Thomason's will that his wife had amassed a substantial library by the time of her death, there are no references to Milton ever having used it and his sonnet, quiet at every turn as John Leonard points out, is stubbornly silent on the subject of Catharine Thomason's reading habits and bibliophilia.[4] None of this has prevented contemporary critics from transmuting the lead of historical possibility into the gold of biographical fact. Milton scholars routinely use the Thomason elegy as proof that Milton sought the company of 'bookish women' or that its subject was someone 'whose company [Milton] found stimulating' or even that 'she was one of the few women whom Milton wholeheartedly admired'.[5] One important assessment best reveals the slender basis for such assumptions: 'Milton's sonnet on the death of Catharine Thomason (1646) suggests a personal and probably long-standing relationship'.[6] In other words, Milton was prompted to write the Thomason elegy because of an enduring friendship with an individual, the sole proof of which is the poem itself. This article explores some of the potential gaps created by such circular logic and seeks to put George Thomason and his habits of collecting poetry there. In what follows I argue that the elegy is informed by Milton's knowledge of George Thomason as a hoarder, reader, and transcriber of contemporary verse; not only did he amass the most important collection of printed poetry in English in the seventeenth century, but he commissioned poetry by friends and was a well-placed member of scribal communities who circulated the latest verse in manuscript.

I

Even though occasional genres such as elegy did not necessarily demand intimate acquaintance between writer and subject – and Miltonists have long been comfortable with the possibility that 'Lycidas' is an imaginative idealization of a distant college relationship with Edward King – there are compelling reasons to believe that the friendship driving the Thomason elegy was at least partly that between poet and bereaved husband. Perhaps predictably, given the meagre nature of the historical record for non-aristocratic women who did not come under scrutiny of the courts, there are significantly more traces of close acquaintance between Milton and George rather than Catharine Thomason. In 1647 Milton entrusted George Thomason or his apprentice with the delivery of a letter to another friend, Carlo Dati, in Florence, in which he referred to Thomason as 'mihi familiarissimo' or 'my very familiar acquaintance'.[7] This errand was a trusted favour granted between friends who had known each other for at least six years as revealed by Milton's donation of four of his earliest pamphlets to the London bookseller: Thomason's copies of *Of Reformation* (1641),

[4] In his will Thomason repeatedly referred to 'my late dear wife's library' and to the fact that several of his children have already received 'large proportion[s]' of it. He hoped that his children would 'make better use of [the books] for their pretious and dear mothers sake': 'The Will of George Thomason', *The Library*, 2nd series, x (1909), pp. 34-43. For John Leonard's assessment of the poem's 'quiet ending achieved by simple means' see John Leonard, 'The Troubled, Quiet Endings of Milton's English Sonnets', in Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* (Oxford, 2009), p. 145.

[5] Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work and Thought* (Oxford, 2008), p. 184; William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography* (Oxford, 1968), p. 297; Lois Spencer, 'The Politics of George Thomason', *The Library*, 5th series, xiv (1959), pp. 11-27.

[6] Barbara Lewalksi, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 2003), p. 594.

[7] *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank A. Patterson et al., 18 vols (New York, 1931-8), vol. xii, pp. 52-3. For the argument that Thomason is the friend described here see *The Sonnets of Milton*, ed. Smart, p. 79; Lewalski, *Life of John Milton*, p. 210.

The Reason of Church Government (1642), *An Apology against a Pamphlet* (1642), and *Areopagitica* (1644) each proudly bear the mark 'Ex dono authoris' on their title pages. It is probable that Milton gave these gifts in full knowledge that Thomason had recently begun his magisterial book collection and that, as a committed Presbyterian, he would also have enjoyed the anti-episcopal sentiments flamboyantly presented in the first three titles (as a bookseller too, of course, he would have had a more than passing interest in *Areopagitica*'s strictures against pre-publication licensing). We simply do not know if Milton gave Thomason copies of his other interregnum works – and Thomason collected them all – because the latter stopped marking the provenance of books and pamphlets in this way in December 1644.[8] Nor can we be certain if the intense hostility to Presbyterianism that Milton displayed in print in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) and had been plying in the manuscripts of his sonnets in the months before and after Catharine Thomason's death, led to a temporary cooling of relations between the two men. Nonetheless, Milton is the author whose donations to Thomason's collection are signalled most frequently and is the only one who Thomason claimed gave him a presentation copy of his work on more than one occasion.[9] Such was the bond between Milton and Thomason that David Stoker has argued that, growing politico-religious differences aside, Milton interceded with the commonwealth authorities to restore Thomason's estates to him when, as a royalist, he was imprisoned for anti-government activities in the 1650s.[10]

The suggestion that George Thomason's is the friendship that Milton partly commemorates in Sonnet XIV was first made some time ago by William Riley Parker in his *Life of Milton* where he offered a rather downbeat assessment of the poem: 'This sonnet could commemorate a man as well as a woman ... it conveys no personal loss, and ... the character of its subject in no way emerges. Milton doubtless wrote it to console the bereaved husband who is not, however, addressed in the poem'.[11] We do not need to assent to this rather limiting reading of elegy, or sign up for some other grimly inevitable version of homosociality – that when Milton wrote about women, he was actually writing about men – to agree with Parker's broader point here. Unlike his treatment of his sonnet on the Piedmont massacre, or that on Henry Lawes, Milton's revision of the poem for *Poems, &c.* (1673) entirely deprived it of its original headnote, transforming it from an occasional lamentation on one woman's exemplary life and untimely death into a poem with an anonymized addressee about the competing merits of different virtues in the business of salvation.[12] Milton's depersonalization of the Thomason elegy here and in the Trinity manuscript, then, opened up his contemplation of the relationships between divine and human agency to a broader readership; occluding the occasion of its composition increased the circumstances in which the poem might console, revealing the meanings and pleasures to be had from recalling and then relinquishing a period of intense grief.

That Thomason himself might have requested the poem from Milton is certainly possible since he is known to have commissioned original verse from other friends on at least two occasions. A 1654 reissue of Edward Reynolds's theological tract *The Vanitie of the Creature* contains a new six-page versification of the prose treatise in the manner of an Aesopian beast

[8] The final text Thomason marked in this way, on 24 December 1644, was Jerome Alexander, *A Breviate of a Sentence given gainst Jerome Alexander Esquire* (London, 1644).

[9] Alongside Milton's four pamphlets and Jerome Alexander's *A Breviate*, Thomason apparently received the following as gifts from their authors: Samuel Hartlib, *A Faithful and Seasonable Advice* (1643); John Ley, *The Fury of War and the Folly of Sin* (1643); John Price, *Some Few and Short Considerations on the Present Distempers* (1642).

[10] David Stoker, 'Thomason, George (c. 1602–1666)', *ODNB*.

[11] Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, p. 305.

[12] John Milton, *Poems, &c. Upon Several Occasions both English and Latin* (London, 1673), pp. 57-9.

fable.[13] Reynolds, later Bishop of Norwich, was a moderate Presbyterian minister who became one of Thomason's closest friends (having thirty-one of his works published by Thomason himself); in a fresh epistle, dated 22 January 1654, he attributed the poetic turn of his new edition to his friend's tastes in imaginative literature:

> To George Thomason
> Sir,
> I have, upon your desire, composed this short Poem, as a Compendium of my Treatise touching the Vanity of the Creature, … as … Portraicture of the Toil which mortal men put themselves unto about Creature-Delights; together with their Vanity, and Insufficiencie to make men happy.
> I had no dexterity this way in my younger years, when my Fancy was more vigorous; and I am now super-annuated. Yet I look not on Poetry in *re sacra*, as a Juvenile Luxuriancie; it being honored by many Penmen of Holy Writ, and they followed by many grave and learned Doctors of the Christian Church … It was an absurd Conceit of Erastosthenes, confuted by Strabo, That Poetry was only for delight, not for doctrine or profit. I send it you, not in relation to an Herse (I cannot bury my living Friends, nor antedate their Funeral Elegies); but onely to let you understand how much power you have in
> Your most loving Friend.[14]

It is entirely plausible that Reynolds's affirmation of the Horatian commonplace that poetry was a vital inculcator of virtue, because it taught by pleasing, was a view shared by Thomason who in proposing the verses for this expanded edition sought to reassert the moral force of poetry. Either way, Reynolds had an acrostic about Thomason professionally copied and bound into the volume (see fig. 1). The second stanza in particular sees the bookseller's name as an expression of devotion to a related series of morally responsible practices: trade, worship, and the composition and interpretation of verse:

> Time runs, world fades Sin ripens Death draws nigh;
> Here comes the Judg, and there the prisoners lye.
> O minde your work, & lay to heart your End,
> Make him betimes who is your Judge your Friend.
> Assurance Office is on this side Grave,
> Sin there will wrack, whom Grace doth not here save,
> O do not stain your dealings with your Sins,
> No Trade is gain, but that which Heauen wins.[15]

Another Thomason and Reynolds production from a much less happy occasion also bears witness to their shared awareness of the consolations that Thomason found in poetry, his sense that elegy was the poetic mode which best revealed God's hand in the present. One of Thomason's responses to the death of his daughter Elizabeth in 1659 was to compile a commemorative copy of Reynolds's funeral sermon for her. He procured the services of a professional scribe to copy eight English and Latin elegies and epitaphs in a mixture of

[13] Edward Reynolds, *The Vanitie of the Creature* (London, 1637 [1654], BL, 4401.b.56). This edition was brought to light by Lois Spencer in 'The Professional and Literary Connexions of George Thomason', *The Library,* 5th Series, xiii (1958), pp. 102-18 (pp. 111-12).

[14] Ibid., sigs Ar-Av.

[15] Ibid., no sig.

elegant italic and roman hands into the final blank leaves of the volume.[16] One elegist made clear that his funereal work was commissioned by the bereaved father when he dedicated his poem 'To the Worthy Father of a very Virtuous Virgin deceased: who desired an obscure Person to make an Elegy'.[17] Another epitaph by G. T., presumably Thomason himself or his son (who contributed another poem to the small collection), echoes the anti-mortalist consolations of Milton's Sonnet XIV when he imagines Elizabeth Thomason instructing her mourners that: 'my Soule is long since flowne / To Paradise its blessed Home / Where it doth rest secur'd from Sin / and Misery' (see fig. 2).[18] Whether or not Milton was aware that this particular doctrinal position offered especial comfort for his friend when he composed his own poem in 1646, it seems plausible that he, like Edward Reynolds, knew that an elegy might help his friend to make some sense of his loss.

II

While Thomason commissioned elegies, his poetic tastes, as one might anticipate from a bibliophile with such all-consuming appetites, were not confined to this genre. The volumes of printed poetry Thomason bound together with more than 23,000 other pamphlets and books of the 1640s and 1650s represent an unrivalled source for any student of most genres of seventeenth-century verse. Even if one might lament his lack of interest in the period's major printed drama – he did not, for instance, collect the Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1647 or quarto editions of plays by Middleton, Shakespeare, or Webster – the printed verse preserved in the Thomason collection reveals an interest in an astonishing array of poetic forms and talents: from ballad to epic, pastoral, narrative verse and lyric, most modes of poetic expression available to early modern poets and their readers are here. Similarly, though one might regret sporadic absences of important editions of poetry from the collection – say, John Marriot's octavos of John Donne's *Poems* (1649, 1650 and 1654) or Thomas May's translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (1650) – our understanding of mid-seventeenth-century literary culture is forever indebted to Thomason's sense that poetry was worth preserving as a means of chronicling the tumultuous decades of the civil war, commonwealth and Protectorate. Thomason collected printed verse by an astonishing range of poets by any standard, including amongst others: Anne Bradstreet, Francis Beaumont, John Cleveland, Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, William Davenant, Sir John Denham, John Hall, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, Henry King, Richard Lovelace, John Milton, Francis Quarles, John Quarles, William Shakespeare, Samuel Sheppard, James Shirley, Sir John Suckling, Sir Thomas Stanley, Anna Trapnel, Henry Vaughan, Edmund Waller and George Wither. In refusing to allow his printed verse collection to be shaped by his own Presbyterian politico-religious convictions, and in not restricting himself to a 'stable' of talent produced by any single publisher, Thomason's archive anticipates and facilitates modern discussions about the early modern poetic canon, its potential expansion, and the validity of historicist modes of literary enquiry.

However, the full extent of Thomason's collection of seventeenth-century poetry is at once broader and narrower than this brief narrative of impoverishing bibliomania suggests. This is because interspersed amongst Thomason's bound copies of pamphlets and books are 105

[16] Lois Spencer has suggested that the same professional scribe was involved in the transcription of the Thomason acrostic and the funeral elegies for Thomason's daughter; Spencer, 'Professional and Literary', p. 112.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Edward Reynolds, *Mary Magdalen's Love to Christ. Opened in a Sermon Preached at the Funeral of Mistris Elizabeth Thomason. April 11. 1659* (London, 1659), no sig. BL, E.1820[1].

manuscripts, just under one third of which, thirty-two separate manuscripts of varying size, is verse.[19] Although these texts do not reveal as wide a variety of poetic forms as the printed archive – there are no amatory lyrics or sonnets, for instance – there are still single or multiple examples of: acrostic, ballad, dialogue, distik, elegy (with seven examples, the most common form), epitaph, panegyric, pastoral, mock panegyric, verse satire, and verse libel. Evaluating this material enables us to construct a picture of Thomason as a man whose habits of manuscript verse compilation reveal him to be less a disinterested custodian of the printed book, than an engaged member of oppositional scribal communities, a collector who refused to cordon off the literary as a privileged discursive domain but was convinced that occasional poetry – as much as any book or pamphlet – might amuse, unite and bring about social change.

This impression was one that Thomason himself was keen to cultivate when he added a syntactically dense statement about his collection to its manuscript catalogue after the Restoration:

> There have been greate Charges Disbursed and Paines taken in an Exact colleccon of Pamphletts that have been Published from the Beginning of that long and unhappy Parlem^{t} which Begun November 1640 which doth amount to a very greate Number of Pieces of all sorts and all Sides from that time until his Majesties happy restauration and Coronacon, their Number Consisting of neere Thirty Thousand severall peeces to the very great Charge and greater care and Paines of him that made the Colleccon … The Method that hath Been Observed throughout is Tyme, and Such Exact Care hath been taken that the very day is written upon most of them that they came out … In this Number of Pamphletts is Contained neere One hundred sevrall peeces that never were Printed on th'one side and on th'other (all or most of which are on the Kings side) which no man durst venture to Publish here without the Danger of his Ruine. This Colleccon was so privately Carried on, that it was never knowne that there was such a Designe in hand, the Collecto^{r} intending them onely for his Maj^{ties} use.[20]

Thomason's flaunting of his royalist allegiances, as one who preserved the memory of a dead king and his exiled son amongst his trunks full of paper and ink, is supported by his known political activities in the period: he participated in protests against Pride's Purge and spent considerable time in prison in April 1651 for his part in a Presbyterian conspiracy to return Charles II to the throne.[21] However, as we will see, we do need to treat his characterization of the manuscripts in his collection as exclusively fugitive pieces, works so thrillingly harmful to the commonwealth and Protectorate regimes that they could not be brought into print, with some caution. More than a century ago G. K. Fortescue commented upon the misleading nature of Thomason's description of his manuscripts, but neither he nor more recent commentators such as John T. Shawcross have given a detailed account of what is actually there.[22] An analysis of the manuscript poetry in the collection enables us to

---

[19] Scholars, following G. K Fortescue's pioneering work re-cataloguing the collection, routinely suggest that there are ninety-seven manuscripts in the collection. Chadwyck Healey's digitization of the manuscript materials for EEBO reveals that figure to be 105.

[20] BL, C.38.h.21, vol. i, no sig.

[21] Spencer, 'Politics of George Thomason', pp. 16-20; Stoker, 'Thomason, George'.

[22] 'The manuscripts … are bound up in chronological sequence with the printed portion of the collection … They hardly bear out the description given of them in the *Advertisement*'; G. K. Fortescue (ed.), *Catalogue of the Pamphlets, Books, Newspapers, and Manuscripts Relating to the Civil War, the Commonwealth, and Restoration, Collected by George Thomason*, 2 vols (London, 1908), vol. i, p. xxii; John T. Shawcross, 'Using the Thomason Tracts and their Significance for Milton Studies', *Studies in English Literature*, xlix (2009), pp. 145-72.

ascertain precisely what is at stake when Thomason aggrandizes his archive as a stunningly comprehensive trove of books and pamphlets alongside a glamorously secretive selection of manuscript texts. It also gives us scope to consider Thomason as more than an enigmatic superhero in the history of the book; he was also a seventeenth-century reader engaged in the much more familiar period practices of manuscript verse collection.

III

In line with Thomason's Restoration description of his collection, much of the manuscript verse that he acquired during the revolutionary decades was indeed aggressively or mournfully counter-cultural. The poems, in several hands – Thomason's own and, presumably, those of his clerks – typically condemn the violence, hypocrisy and radical excessiveness of non-monarchical government and long nostalgically for the return of the Stuarts. He collected post-regicide poems in praise of Charles I which imagined the parliamentary proceedings against the king as the bloodthirsty pursuit of a 'harmless hayre'.[23] He possessed transcriptions of several regicide elegies and epitaphs by anonymous authors, some of them printed after the Restoration, which affectionately remember the executed king as 'The Laws Protector, the peoples Master … The Honest Man, the Righteous Kinge', a monarch born to command even in the final moments of life:

> Thou never wantedst Subjects, no when they
> Rebelld thou madest thy Passions to obay.
> Hadst thou regain'd thy throne of State by power
> Thou hadst not then been more a Conquerour.[24]

Thomason appears to have prized the topicality of such poems above their formal inventiveness or the skill or status of their author in contemporary literary culture. This was perhaps inevitable given their place in a larger book collection in which the 'Method … throughout [was] Tyme', that is with a broad aim of providing a rigorously chronological documentation of the events of the day. As a result he had less interest in recording the authorship of poems than in marking the occasion of their inspiration and moments of their transcription: 'Two Libels Fund in a Church, 25 June 1645'; 'The King return'd to Holmby, Feb 10th 1646'; 'A Distik Made upon the Foower Honble Lords Yt Usualy Sate and Made a Howse in the Year 1649'; 'Upon the Sunne Shining So Clearly at the Time and Manner of the Kings Death'; 'Mr Feakes Hymne: August the 11th 1653, Christ Church'; 'Verses on the Speech Made VIth Dec 1655 by Pagan [Payne] Fisher in the Middle Temple Hall'.[25] This driving interest in topicality was matched by an eye for the kinds of acrostic we saw adorning the British Library copy of Reynolds's *The Vanitie of the Creature.* Thus rather than transcribing much slower and subtler unfoldings of poetic meaning through experiments in metre, rhyme or stanza form, Thomason's collection of manuscript poetry exhibits a preference for the instant visual impact of anagrams and acrostics. Having already collected such poems on the siege of Gloucester and one on John Lilburne – which also exulted in the knowledge that 'O I burn in Hell' was an anagram of his name – Thomason also kept an acrostic satire on William Lenthall, Speaker of the House of Commons, in which the speaker and subject of the poem clearly spelled out all

[23] 'Verses in Praise of Charles I' (1653, 669.f.17[4]).

[24] 'Epitaph on the King' (1649, E.531[33]); 'An Elegie upon the Death of our Soveraign Lord King Charles the Martyr' (1650, E.594[10]). This last poem was printed in *England's Black Tribunall* (London, 1660), pp. 44-6. For other regicide elegies in manuscript in the collection see 'Upon the Sunne shinning So Clearly at the Time and Manner of the Kings Death' (1649, E.555[20]).

[25] See: E.290[6]; E.379[7]; E.549[5]; E.549[5]; E.555[20]; E.710[13]; E.498[2].

that was worst about the recently dissolved Rump Parliament:

> Least all the world should laught at my disgrace.
> Eternall god! Truly confesse I must,
> Noe speech that euer yet I made, was just;
> Thy true Anointed, I haue voted downe
> Honour'd those people that usurped the Crowne
> And since thou art soe just to punish mee
> Lord let not any of the house goe free
> Loe! they are all as bad, as bad may bee.[26]

Thomason did collect some more technically accomplished oppositional verse. The most popular poem he preserved, on the evidence of survival rates in other manuscript collections of the period, was the anti-Cromwellian poem, 'The Character of a Protector', attributed by some contemporaries to the royalist poet-journalist John Cleveland.[27] Cleveland is not named as the author of Thomason's copy which he acquired in the middle of June 1654, probably on the 15th since he bound it between two other works he bought on this day: issue 209 of the government serial *Mercurius Politicus* and William Streat's exegetical work *The Dividing of the Hooff*. At twelve lines, Thomason's version of the poem is one of the shortest extant texts (the majority of manuscripts run to sixteen lines, as do the earliest printed editions) and is the earliest transcription we can date with any certainty. Like all others it seeks to expose hypocrisy and violence of Cromwell's rule:

> What's a Protector, tis a stately thing
> That Apes it in the non-age of a King
> A Tragick Actor: Caesar in the Clowne
> Hee is a brasse farthing stamped with a Crowne
> Aesops proud Asse maskt in a Lyons skin
> An outside saint with a white Divell within
> A bladder blowne with others breath puft full
> Both Phalaris and Phalaris his bull;
> Fantastick shaddow of the Royal head
> The Brewers with the Kings armes quartered
> In fine he is one whom wee Protector call

[26] 'Lenthall's Lamentation' (1653, E.694[11]). See also 'To Collonel Edward Massey' (1647, E.418[7]); 'The Anagram of John Lilburne' (1653, E.702[9]).

[27] According to the Union First-Line Index of Manuscript Poetry, there are seventeen extant texts of 'The Character of a Protector'. Brian Morris and Eleanor Withington, Cleveland's most recent editors, dispute the contemporary attribution of this poem as 'spurious' since it only appeared in *John Cleveland Revived* (London, 1660), its 1662 and 1668 reprints, and *The Works of John Cleveland* (London, 1687). As Morris and Withington have shown, these are hardly the most authoritative of editions on which to base trustworthy attributions since the edition is partly a printed miscellany containing 'Some other Exquisite Remains of the most eminent Wits of both the Universities'. However, a number of early manuscript transcriptions do, unlike Thomason's copy, tie Cleveland to the poem. A Restoration verse miscellany held at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, calls the poem 'Vpon Oliver L^{d} Protector by J. C' and refers to 'Clevelands Verses on the Protector'. A post-Restoration poetry anthology compiled by the London bookseller and propagandist John Dunton entitles the poem 'The Definition of a Protector. By Mr Cleveland'. See *The Poems of John Cleveland,* ed. Brian Morris and Eleanor Withington (Oxford, 1967), p. xxxiii; Brian Morris, *John Cleveland (1613-1658). A Bibliography of his Poems* (London, 1967), appendix; Brotherton Library, Lt MS. q.52, ff. 8rv; Bodl. MS. Rawl.Poet.173, f. 107.

From whom the King of Kings Protect us all.[28]

The poem gives voice to fears – shared by royalists and committed republicans alike – that the Protectorate is a terrifying variety of monarchy-lite. As a period of 'non-age', a word conspicuously underlined in Thomason's manuscript, it is not merely politically adolescent, but also the end of history itself; its institutions and insignia are mere simulacra of genuine regality, its head a windbag whose empty pronouncements might be amusing were it not for his penchant for extreme torture. The reference to the Sicilian tyrant Phalaris and the brazen bull he used as an oven to roast enemies and dissenters alive gives the poem's vision of the 1650s as bathetic echo a disturbing turn: the cruel inventiveness of the device was that this beautiful machine of death looked like an art installation, the screams of its victims, according to Ovid in *Tristia* III, were the mesmerizing epitome of cruelty because they sounded like just like the lowing of a bull.[29] The threatening image of Cromwell-as-Phalaris – intensified by the way in which Thomason's version of the poem, unlike every other manuscript and printed variant, does not descend into comic caricaturing of the brewer-Protector's bulbous 'copper' or 'brazen' nose – means that we are supposed to take the poem's final plea for God's protection seriously, and not as mere verbal play.[30]

The Phalaris allusion perhaps accounts for Cromwell's own sense of humour failure when he was given a version of this poem by the head of his intelligence service John Thurloe, almost a full six months after Thomason received his copy. Thurloe's text is two lines longer than Thomason's and seems to be a faulty memorial reconstruction of an original version of the poem; it opens 'A Protector, what's that?', omits the 'non-age' pun entirely and frequently lapses into metrical awkwardness.[31] The political context for Thurloe's transcription excuses his lack of attention to prosodic details. The poem was taken from the papers of the radical republican and Puritan colonel, Robert Overton, the leader of a group of disaffected army officers in Scotland, who, disappointed with Cromwell's arrogation of powers to himself as Lord Protector, had been arrested in Leith for anti-government activities.[32] In the first days of January 1655, as a consequence of his actions and the dissident contents of the poem, Overton was shipped to London and on 16 June was committed to the Tower where he tried to downplay the radical significance of the poem and his transcription of it:

> Objection III: But, say some, you made a company of scandalous verses upon the lord protector, whereby his highness and divers others were offended and displeased for your so doing.
>
> Reply III: I must acknowledge I copied a paper of verses, called the Character of a Protector; but I did neither compose, nor (to the best of my remembrance) shew them to any, after I had writ them forth. They were taken out of my letter case at Leith, where *they*

[28] 'The Character of a Protector' (1654, E.743[2]).

[29] Ovid, *Tristia and Ex Ponto*, ed. Arthur Leslie Wheeler (London, 1924), p. 145.

[30] For other versions of the poem containing references to Cromwell's nose see: *J. Cleveland Revived: Poems, Orations, Epistles* (London, 1660), pp. 78-9; BL, Additional MS. 75500; Bodl. MS. Don.E.6, f. 15v; Bodl. MS. Rawl.Poet.173, f. 107; Bodl. MS. Rawl.Poet.26, f. 148v; Brotherton Library, Lt MS. q.52, f. 8r; Brotherton Library, LT 13.

[31] *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe Esq; secretary, first to the Council of State, and after to the two Protectors*, 7 vols (London, 1742), vol. iii, p. 75.

[32] For an account of the Robert Overton's involvement in the Overton plot see Barbara Taft, '"They that pursew perfaction on earth": The Political Progress of Robert Overton', in Ian Gentles, John Morrill and Blair Worden (eds.), *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen of the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 291-3.

> *had lain a long time* by me neglected and forgotten. I had them from a friend, who wished my lord well, and who told me, that his lordship had seen them, and I believe laughed at them, as (to my knowledge) heretofore he hath done at papers and pamphlets of more personal and particular import or abuse.[33]

Even though later copyists of the poem sought to commemorate Overton's transmission of the text as the most important moment in its history – an eighteenth-century commonplace book, for instance, entitled it 'Verses Upon the Protector Wrote in Maj^{r} Gen^{l} Overtons own hand, & found in his pocket book when seized Leith 3 January 1654/5' – Overton himself was adamant that his own intervention was but one of several stages in its circulation and that the poem had actually been doing the rounds in circles very close to the Protector for some time.[34] If Cromwell's reaction makes that seem unlikely, the fact that George Thomason received his version of the poem a full five months before Cromwell's spymaster reveals just how well placed he was to receive anti-government manuscript poetry in the 1650s. Of course, Thomason's Presbyterianism meant he had little politico-religious affinities with Overton aside from a desire to remove Cromwell from power; nevertheless his receipt of the poem at a similar time to, if not before, such a major figure of the Cromwellian opposition signals his own prominence within the assortment of conservatives and radicals keen to overthrow protectoral government.

IV

Thomason pursued such dissident habits of collection most vigorously in 1649, in the immediate aftermath of the regicide, as well as in 1653, the final chaotic year of the republic. Robert Overton would have enjoyed the mock-panegyric Thomason collected on 19 May 1653, less than a month after the dissolution of the Rump Parliament during a period of intense speculation as to whether Cromwell would be made king.[35] The subject of this seeming encomium was Cromwell himself and the verses functioned as an instructive gloss to a portrait of the future Protector wearing a crown placed anonymously somewhere on the New Exchange in the West End of London. The poem's concluding ambiguity summoned memories of the regicide as it instructed Londoners to 'Kneele & pray / To Oliuer the torch of zion starre of day / Then shout O Merchants, Citts, and Gentry sing / Lett all men haue heads cry God save the King'.[36] Given his ardent Presbyterianism, Thomason's copy of a Fifth Monarchist poem, a 'Hymne' by the Fifth Monarchist leader Christopher Feake, is particularly noteworthy. Although Thomason had, earlier in the 1650s, once been keen to amass anti-sectarian satires – against Lilburne or the Fifth Monarchist author Abiezer Coppe – by autumn 1653, with sectarians already beginning to become disillusioned with Barebone's Parliament, this hostility had waned considerably as the Fifth Monarchists now offered the most vociferous critiques of (and potentially violent opposition to) Cromwellian government.[37] Despite the politico-religious gulf between himself and Feake, Thomason presumably found the poem's fusion of dissident hopes for insurrection and apocalyptic

---

[33] A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, vol. iii, December 1654 - August 1655 <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/thurloe-papers/vol3/pp99-116#highlight-first>. Emphasis added.

[34] BL, Add. MS. 47130A, f. 62v. This version of the poem, in a commonplace book in the Egmont papers, ignores all other extant texts to reproduce Thurloe's transcription exactly.

[35] Cromwell first aired the possibility of his kingship with Bulstrode Whitelocke in late 1652 and only dismissed it with the first draft of the Instrument of Government in the autumn of 1653. See John Morrill, 'Cromwell, Oliver (1599-1658)', *ODNB*.

[36] 'It is I' (1653, E.697[17]).

[37] For an example of the anti-sectarian verse see 'A Censure Upon the Flying Roule' (1650, E.594[3]).

yearning appealing more than four years after the execution of Charles I:

> The lambe shall ouercome the beast
> and taking him alive
> Into a Lake of brimstone fire
> Downe head long shall him drive.[38]

Thomason's transcription of Feake's text was expressive of one Presbyterian's hopes for a pragmatic oppositional alliance with other anti-Cromwellian groups, rather than a zealous conversion to this most radical of Puritan theologies. Evidence of his place in a more recognisably royalist scribal community can be found in his manuscript version of a poem on the frontispiece to *Eikon Basilike* dated 7 April 1649, the day after he obtained a copy of some surreptitiously printed elegies on Charles I and the royalist war hero Arthur, Lord Capel.[39] Even though Thomason only collected three of the forty-plus printings of the *Eikon* to appear in London 1649/50 – one English, one French, one Latin – he eagerly acquired copies of as much controversial manuscript material occasioned by the publication of the king's book as possible. The lyric entitled 'Verses explayning the Frontispiece of y^{e} kings book' features a persona of the dead king himself explaining the iconography behind William Marshall's emblematic engraving of him at prayer at the start of his book. He does so for a community of royalist readers presumably too stunned with grief to have read one of the many different versified 'Explanation[s] of the Emblem' provided beneath the image in different issues of the ubiquitous first printed edition of *Eikon Basilike*:

> Thus darkes set of my Light, which like a Ray
> Shott from Black Clouds strikes from the midnight Day
> When the Rough winds conspired & Waves engage
> I stood a Rock unmov'd to all their Rage
> So Palmes deprest advance their envied Height
> And Vertue gathers from its Curb, and Weight
> Grace, Glory, Vanity three Crownes held forth
> Truth taught mee a distinction of their worth;
> The first was Gay, but Heavy to be worne
> The Next was sharp but Light, a Crowne of Thorne
> The Third a Blessed and Eternall one
> With Beames of Beatifique vision.
> The Trifle of this World becomes the Ground
> And my Contempt, nor can the second wound
> With all her Speares my patient Hand by Grace
> Of my Redeemer, whose first wreath it was.
> In Heav'n my Soul beheld the Last, and I
> Enjoy what Hope lookd for, Eternity.[40]

In collecting this text, Thomason effectively styled himself the privileged addressee of a king who has triumphed over death, positioning himself in a coterie of royalist readers and writers so loyal to his memory that they could hear and transmit the monarch's voice from beyond the scaffold. Indeed the privileges of this speech act are heightened by the poem's rarity; it was even missed by Francis F. Madan when he compiled his magnificent *New*

[38] 'Mr Feakes Hymne: Christ Church, August 11 1653' (1653, E.710[13]).

[39] *Two elegeis* [sic]. *The one on His late Majestie. The other on Arthur Lord Capel* (London, 1649, E.550[3]).

[40] 'Verses explayning the Frontispiece of y^{e} kings book' (1649, E.550[4]).

Bibliography of the 'Eikon Basilike' (1950). Quite what the poem is, though, and why Thomason thought it worth collecting, is something of a riddle. A perfectly plausible hypothesis is that it is a copy of a printed explanation of an issue of the *Eikon Basilike* now lost. Like each of the six extant explanations, the poem offers a simple explication of the iconography of the frontispiece and provides translations of the Latin text adorning it. Thus the poem's references the 'Rock unmoved' and three crowns, 'gay but heavy', 'sharp but light', and 'Blessed and Eternall' are present, with minor variations, in all surviving printed poems on the frontispiece. Even though the poem's lyric posture is at odds with the majority of printed explanations (which strive for an objective interpretive authority through a third-person mode of address), there is at least one other known frontispiece poem of exactly the same length which also seeks to entwine the loyal desires to be close to an absent king with the intimacies of a first-person lyric utterance.[41] Unlike this other frontispiece lyric, however, the text Thomason copied within three months of the regicide was also enhanced by a musical setting by John Wilson, favourite of Charles I and professor of music at Oxford University. The text of Wilson's setting text is, aside from very minor variations in spelling, identical to Thomason's and is, according to the Union First-Line Index of English Verse, the only other known contemporary transcription of the poem.[42]

This potentially puts Thomason in very rarified company indeed since this was the period during which Wilson and the royalist poet-patron Thomas Stanley are thought to have begun collaborating on their own extended musical setting of odes based on *Eikon Basilike*, *Psalterium Carolinum* (1657). It is tempting to suggest, therefore, that Thomason's lyric is not a copy of a lost frontispiece poem at all but is actually an early royalist attempt to versify the king's book, an enterprise which – with the author's knowledge or not – was being considered by the Oxford professor of music alongside his own urgent royalist project to render the king's book tuneful as well as mournful. Though the Thomason lyric never made it into *Psalterium Carolinum*, its fluency certainly bears comparison with Stanley's twenty-seven odes in that volume, one for each chapter of the *Eikon* (though not, pointedly, one on the frontispiece). Another writer attracted to this enterprise was the antiquarian William Somner, one of the authors of the original printed verses accompanying the *Eikon Basilike* frontispiece and thus a key member of the network of authors, printers and publishers behind the production of the king's book.[43] He produced a separate pamphlet of poetic explanations on the subject, one of which was remarkably similar in lexis and tenor to the opening of Thomason's transcription: 'Whilst through Black Clouds breakes forth a Heavenly Ray / By Darknesse so sett off, it Shines like Day'.[44]

It is unclear whether Thomason knew Somner directly – although he acquired a printed copy of Somner's verses on 15 March 1649 – but he did share this royalist interest in metrical re-workings of *Eikon Basilike* with a man he knew intimately: his lifelong friend, Edward Reynolds, who finished his own version of Chapter 25, 'Penetential Meditations and Vowes

[41] In much the same style as Thomason's poem another lyric on the frontispiece has the dead king proclaim 'Behold how clearer I from darkness rise, / And stand unmou'd, tryumphant, like a Rock, / Gainst all the waves, and winds tempestuous shock'; *Eikon Basilike, or the Portraicture of His Sacred Majesty* (London, 1649), no sig.; Bodl. Vet.A3, f. 255.

[42] See Bodl. Mus.b.1, ff. 157rv. For a discussion of this manuscript and Wilson's career see Margaret Crum, 'A Manuscript of John Wilson's Songs', *The Library*, 5th series, x (1955), pp. 55-7; Ian Spink, 'Wilson, John (1595-1674)', *ODNB*.

[43] For Somner's poem 'Before three Kingdomes-Monarch three Crowns lie', see *Eikon Basilike, or the Portraicture of His Sacred Majesty* (London, 1649), p. 4; Bodl. Vet.A3, f. 806.

[44] William Somner, *The Frontispice* [sic] *of the Kings Book opened. With A Poem annexed: The insecurity of Princes. Considered in an occasionall meditation upon the King's late Sufferings and Death* (London, 1649), p. 3.

in the Kings Solitude at Holmby' on 18 June 1649. Thomason collected a printing of Reynolds's poem three days later and would have been in a very good place to evaluate the likelihood of his assertion that further poetic re-workings of *Eikon Basilike* from various 'Loyall' pens were forthcoming:

> I here present unto thee a flower plucked out of that most excellent storeyard *Eikon Basilike* meanly turned into vers, therefore I may boldy applaud, and admire the one, and referre my owne unto thy censure, yet if this findes acceptance (from Loyall Subjects) it will incite me to proceed with the other Meditations; which if I shall not be so fortunate as to perform, I hope some more happier, & Deviner Muse with an Elaborate Pen Dilucidate unto the world what is deficient in my Skill, but not in will.[45]

Reynolds did not publish any more versifications of the king's meditations and his discontinuation of a project first envisaged as a series – the current text being, as the title page reveals, 'Numb. 1' – perhaps suggests he was aware of 'Deviner Muse[s]' at work on this topic elsewhere. Thomason's transcription of an extremely rare poem on this subject in April 1649 means that he probably already knew this too and John Wilson's subsequent setting of that same poem intimates that their circles could well have overlapped. If this was indeed the case then it would help solve a long-standing riddle bedevilling studies of John Milton's polemical response to *Eikon Basilike*. *Eikonoklastes* appeared in the autumn of 1649 (Thomason's own copy is dated 6 October) complete with a reference to the king's book as a text which 'wanted only Rime, and that they say is bestowed upon it lately'.[46] Scholars agree that this is an allusion to *Psalterium Carolinum* but have been puzzled as to how Milton could have known of the text's existence given the very different circles Stanley and Milton inhabited and the fact that the text did not appear in print until 1657. However if Milton's and Thomason's friendship did survive the regicide, as David Stoker has suggested, then Thomason seems like a very probable conduit for this kind of privileged information.[47]

V

Given his status as one of London's foremost booksellers and his known involvement in anti-government conspiracies in the early 1650s, it is unsurprising to discover that Thomason should have been so well placed in networks transmitting manuscript verses keen on overthrowing the Protectorate or maintaining implacable loyalty to the Stuarts. However, consideration of a poem like 'Verses explayning the Frontispiece of y^{e} kings book' begins to make his claim that his manuscripts were texts that 'no man durst venture to Publish here without the Danger of his Ruine' look rather suspicious since, as we have already seen, poetry on the iconography of *Eikon Basilike* was an integral feature of this most popular of printed texts. Equally problematic is Thomason's 1655 transcription of Henry King's 'An Elegy upon the Immature losse of the Most Vertuous Lady Anne Rich', a poem which might have pricked Thomason's interest in the elegiac, but which can hardly be described as a dissident attempt to canonize the memory of William Cavendish's daughter and which he also collected in a printed

[45] Edward Reynolds, *The Divine Penetential Meditations and Vows of His Late Sacred Majestie in His Solitude at Holmby House, Faithfully Turned into Verse* (London, 1649), no sig.

[46] John Milton, *Eikonoklastes*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. D. M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols (New Haven, 1953-82), vol. iii, p. 406.

[47] Stoker, 'Thomason, George'. For a more intricate reading of the transmission of this information which sees John Hall and Andrew Marvell as successive links in the chain see Nicholas McDowell, *Poetry and Allegiance in the English Civil Wars: Marvell and the Cause of Wit* (Oxford, 2009), p. 217.

octavo less than two years later.[48] Likewise, Thomason's copy of manuscript verses 'Upon the King's Return to Holmby' by his fellow bookseller Robert Bostock, though aggressively Presbyterian in tone, is duplicated by the printed text of them elsewhere in his archive.[49]

Another scribal copy of a poem he inserted into his collection deepens the impression that Thomason's final characterization of his manuscripts is partly unreliable, the careful application of some post-Restoration gloss as he attempted to sell the archive to the king or the Bodleian Library.[50] This poem, 'To Sir William Davenant' by Sir John Denham, gives further credence to an emerging sense of Thomason as a bookseller who had some stake in royalist coteries transcribing manuscript verse during the Interregnum. Thomason actually collected a printed edition of this poem on 30 April 1653 when he acquired a book of satires, lampoons and parodies of Sir William Davenant and his epic poem *Gondibert* entitled *Certain Verses Written by Severall of the Authors Friends; To be Reprinted with the Second edition of Gondibert*. Timothy Raylor has convincingly argued that the manuscript of this volume was brought over to England from France by Sir John Denham in the previous month, March 1653.[51] Denham was responsible for at least eight of the poems in the octavo and sought to capitalize upon the notoriety generated by Davenant's epic which appeared in installments when Davenant was in prison in early 1651, and which Thomason tells us he bought in the January of that year.[52] The publication of the conspicuously incomplete *Gondibert* in stages was, as I have suggested elsewhere, part of a carefully considered strategy on Davenant's part to advertise his abilities to the commonwealth regime, abilities which were recognized when he was permitted to stage morally improving entertainments, which might encourage obedience to the new order, during the Protectorate.[53] The satires of Denham et al. are, in various ways, anxious and amused responses from a group of royalist writers to news of such potential defection. They were probably circulating in late 1652, when Davenant was writing to the republican Henry Marten and members of the Council of State thanking them for his release and offering his services to the commonwealth as a well-connected mind for hire.[54]

Thanks to Thomason, though, we can now date the existence of one of these poems much more precisely since he acquired a manuscript copy of one of them in late February 1651, that is, very soon indeed after *Gondibert*'s publication and when Davenant was still in prison. 'To Sir William Davenant' is a twenty-stanza poem which several other compilers of manuscript miscellanies and jest books collected under different titles later in the decade. It is written in triplets on two folio leaves and equates the reading and writing of *Gondibert* to the manifold

[48] 'An Elegy Upon the Immature Losse of the Most Vertuous Lady Anne Riche' (1655, E.853[30]). Thomason's copy of Henry King's *Poems, Elegies, Paradoxes and Sonnets* (London, 1657) is dated 4 May.

[49] Compare 'Upon the King's Return to Holmby' (1647, E.375[1]) and 'Herod & Pilate reconcil'd' (1647, E.377[23]) with *Herod and Pilate reconciled* (London, 1647, E.379[7]).

[50] On the fate of Thomason's collection after the Restoration see David Stoker, 'Disposing of George Thomason's Intractable Legacy, 1664–1762', *The Library*, 6th series, xiv (1992), pp. 337-56.

[51] Timothy Raylor, *Cavaliers, Clubs and Literary Culture: Sir John Mennes, James Smith, and the Order of the Fancy* (Newark, 1994), p. 198.

[52] William Davenant, *Gondibert, an Heroic Poem* (London, 1651, E.782[1]).

[53] Marcus Nevitt, 'The Insults of Defeat: Royalist Responses to Sir William Davenant's *Gondibert* (1651)', *The Seventeenth Century*, xxiv (2009), pp. 287-304.

[54] On his release Davenant wrote a thankful letter to Marten which reveals that 'I had rather owe my liberty to you than any man and … the obligation you lay upon me shall for ever be aknowledg'd by the uttermost endeavours'. His letter to Whitelocke is equally effusive in its offer of service: 'I have so much Ambition as to desire to be at liberty, that I may have more opportunity to obey your Lordship's commands': Brotherton Library, Marten/Loder-Symonds MSS., Political and Miscellaneous, Vol. ii, 1651-1658, f. 12; Bulstrode Whitelocke, *Memorials of the English Affairs,* 4 vols (London, 1853), vol. iii, p. 462.

trials of venereal disease (to which Davenant famously lost his nose in the 1630s). The poem ends by fantasizing a rather racy ending to Davenant's laborious, morally improving epic, placing the daughter of King Astragon in a compromising situation with the eponymous hero; the princess – quite why is unclear – gives Gondibert an enema, the most notable effect of which is that he finds himself unable to subordinate desire to virtue any longer:

> So well she handled Gondibert,
> That though she did not hurt that part,
> She made a blister on his heart.
>
> Into the garden of her ffather,
> Garden, (said I!) or backside rather
> One night she went, A rose to gather:
>
> The Knight he was not farre behind,
> Full soone he had her in the Winde:
> For, Love can smell, though it be blinde.
>
> Her businesse she had finish'd scarsly,
> When on a gentle bed of parsly
> Full faire and softly he made her Ars-ly.
>
> Finis
> The author Dr Donne.[55]

This is absolutely characteristic of the other poems in the *Certain Verses* volume; the manifold disappointments of *Gondibert*, and its author, are encapsulated by Denham's use of the bathetic triplet. The coarseness of the language is a deliberate attempt to puncture the grandiose intellectual and moral claims Davenant had made for his poem since its publication. Thomason's misattribution of the poem to 'Dr Donne', or John Donne the Younger is not actually that wide of the mark, since *Certain Verses* was published anonymously, and Donne was a member of Denham's circle who very probably had some involvement in the compilation of material for the volume.[56]

Why should Thomason have collected the poem, though, when it runs counter to the tenor of the rest of the elegies and anti-government satires in his manuscript collection and his own taste for verse with a clear moral or political function? Perhaps he saw Denham's poem as anti-government satire, noting earlier than others Davenant's willingness to accommodate himself to the new administration. Less speculatively, we can say that Thomason kept a copy because, like every other manuscript poem in the collection, it was acutely topical and was a noteworthy intervention for beleaguered royalist communities attempting to make some sense of political defeat.

One of the most significant effects of Thomason's determination to amass a book collection whose 'Method … throughout is Tyme', was that chronology rather than content, genre or format became the dominant vehicle for contextualizing verse. Thus, though we might

[55] 'To S^{R} William Davenant' (1651, 669.f.15[82]).

[56] Dismissing Donne the Younger's authorship of the poem is relatively straightforward. There is an autograph of the poem in one of Denham's own copies of his collected *Poems and Translations* (London, 1668, Yale University Library, Osborn MS. pb53, pp. 3-7). Moreover, the poem does not appear in Donne's collection of his own works, *Donne's Satyr* (London, 1662). For Donne's place in Denham's circle see Raylor, *Cavaliers*, p. 197.

reasonably be disappointed by the literary qualities of the manuscript poetry – and there is no disguising the matter that Thomason's archive of printed materials is infinitely superior in this respect – we would do well to remember that in binding individual elegies, satires and acrostics in with his thousands of exactly dated books and pamphlets, Thomason sought to preserve the occasions of oppositional verse composition and isolate moments of its transmission rather than fetishize particular poets or recontextualize certain poetic styles in the manner of the period's countless miscellany compilers.

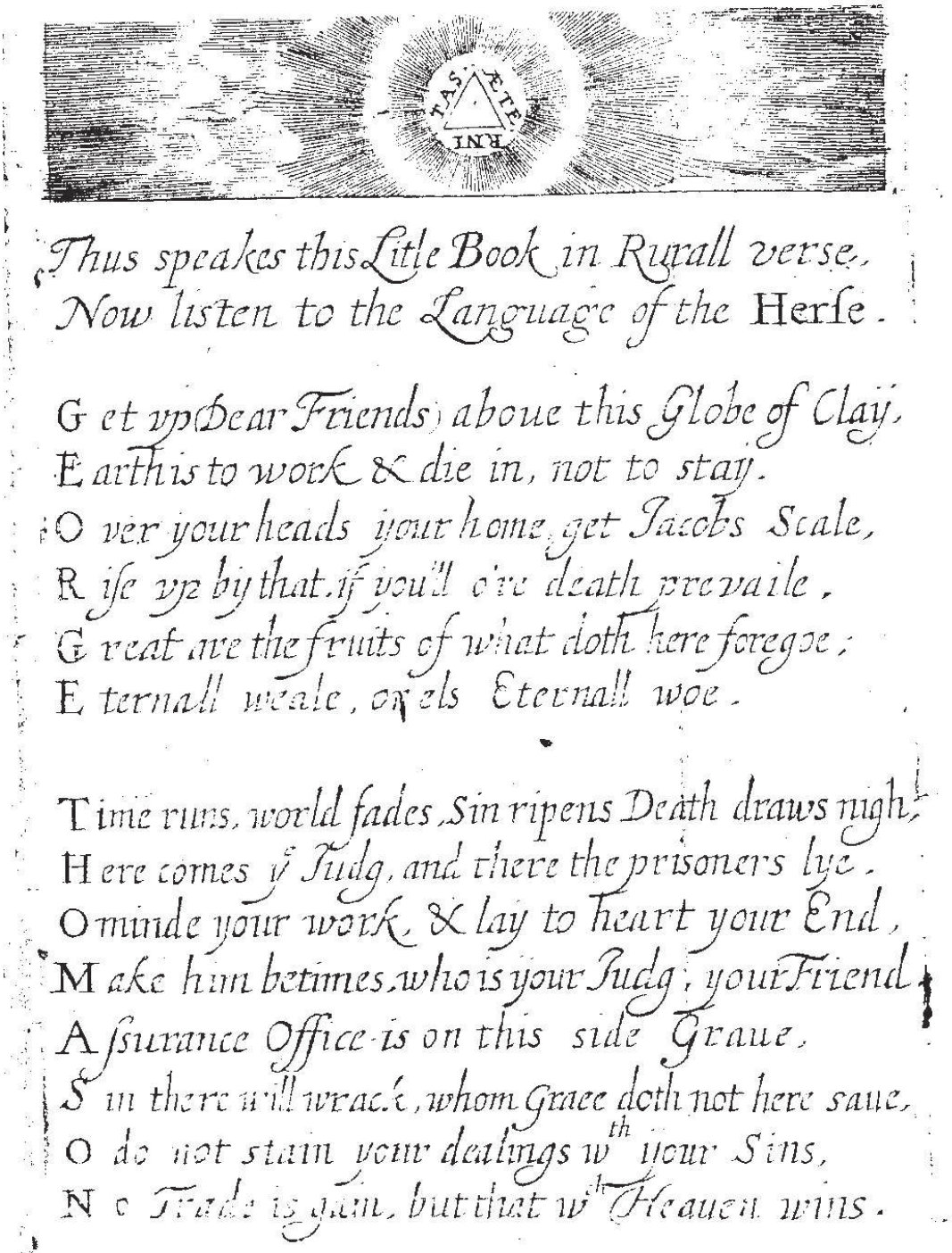
Unlike them, too, Thomason had especially ambitious aims in terms of potential readership, singling out present and future publics alongside Charles II as his ideal interpretive communities. In the prefatory statement to the catalogue of his collection of texts he reminded readers of: 'the use that may be made of them for the Publi[que] both for the present and after Ages may and will prove of greate Advantage to Posterity, and besides this: there is not the like, and therefore [it is] onely fitt for the Use of the Kings Maj[tie]'.[57] If the first half of that statement is incontrovertible, the second half explains away the relatively limited scope of his manuscript verse collection. Thomason used it to document for his restored king the slow, steady steps of a fellow traveller in exile (even if those steps were not always as radically oppositional as he claimed). Though literary scholars may squirm uncomfortably at Thomason's brand of hard historicism *avant la lettre* – where the contemplation of literary form is utterly subordinated to the harsh imperatives of time – it is impossible to ignore the fact that Thomason's voluminous and carefully dated archive of books, manuscripts and pamphlets provides the very foundations for any biographically, bibliographically, or historically informed analysis of English literature in the mid-seventeenth century. We might also add that his collection of poetry, in manuscript as well as print, gave John Milton another reason to write a sonnet.

Author note

Marcus Nevitt is Senior Lecturer in Renaissance Literature at the University of Sheffield, and the author of *Women and the Pamphlet Culture of Revolutionary England* (2006). He also edited *Seventeenth-Century Journalism in the Digital Age* (with Michael J. Braddick, 2017), and co-edited *Reader in Tragedy: An Anthology of Classical Criticism to Contemporary Theory* (with Tanya Pollard, 2019), and he is a contributing editor for *The Complete Works of Aphra Behn*. His essays include 'Shakespeare for Royalists: John Quarles and *The Rape of Lucrece*', in Jason McElligott and David L. Smith (eds.), *Royalists and Royalism during the Interregnum* (2010); 'Women in the Business of Revolutionary News: Elizabeth Alkin, 'Parliament Joan' and the Commonwealth Newsbook', in Joad Raymond (ed.), *News, Newspapers and Society in Early Modern Britain* (2013); and 'Sing Heavenly News: Journalism and Poetic Authority in Samuel Sheppard's *The Faerie King*' (*Studies in Philology*, 2012).

[57] BL, C.38.h.21, vol. 1, no sig.

Fig. 1. Acrostic from Edward Reynolds, *The Vanitie of the Creature* (London, 1637), no sig. Shelfmark: BL 4401.b.56.



Thus speakes this Litle Book in Rurall verse,
Now listen to the Language of the Herse.

Get vp (Dear Friends) aboue this Globe of Clay,
Earth is to work & die in, not to stay.
Ouer your heads your home, get Iacobs Scale,
Rise ye by that, if you'll o're death prevaile,
Great are the fruits of what doth here forego;
Eternall weale, or els Eternall woe.

Time runs, world fades, Sin ripens Death draws nigh,
Here comes y^e Iudg, and there the prisoners lye.
O minde your work, & lay to heart your End,
Make him betimes, who is your Iudg, your Friend.
Assurance Office is on this side Graue,
Sin there will wracke, whom Grace doth not here saue,
O do not stain your dealings w^th your Sins,
No Trade is gain, but that w^ch Heauen wins.

Fig. 2. Edward Reynolds, *Mary Magdalen's Love to Christ. Opened in A Sermon Preached at the Funeral of Mistris Elizabeth Thomason. April 11. 1659* (London, 1659), no sig. Shelfmark: E.1820.