John Donne Journal
Vol. 28 (2009)

Embracing Lucia: Reading Robert Herrick's "The Vine"

Abigail Scherer

Robert Herrick's "The Vine" has long been read as a projection of the speaker's sexual desires.[1] Darrell Hinchliffe writes that the poem "involves a speaker who is caught up in a phantastic projection of egocentric desire."[2] Lillian Schanfield similarly concludes that the poem is an example of "voyeuristic perambulations" in which the speaker "exudes an aura of adolescent lust coupled with a need to maintain a guilt-free position."[3] To be sure, from line six forward "the Vine" is referred to as "I" or "my," marking its stimulation as indistinguishable from the speaker's, or the "I" of line one. Yet rather than locate these desires in phallocentric longing alone, Herrick's dream of a vivacious vine, I argue, realizes a most challenging aesthetic feat. The poet may wake to a real world that abounds in transient or fleeting formulations, yet while dreaming, the poet imagines a prehensile device

[1]See, for example, Roger B. Rollin, "Robert Herrick and the Erotics of Criticism," in *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 130–142; Gordon Braden, *The Classics and English Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 158–159, 222; Manfred Weidhorn, *Dreams in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 104–105. "The Vine," Weidhorn writes, is "an unusual erotic poem [that] brings ingenuity and quasi-Freudian fantasy to the usual literal seduction scene common in the genre" (p. 104).

[2]Hinchliffe, "'But Do Not So': Herrick's Ravishment and Lyric Address," *The Modern Language Review* 96.2 (2001): 318.

[3]Schanfield, "'Tickled with Desire': A View of Eroticism in Herrick's Poetry," *Literature and Psychology* 39.1 (1993): 65.

(the extended expressions of the vine), that can still the object of his gaze, and enable both poet and reader to closely contemplate an otherwise ineffable form. Now translated to a plant that effects iambic schemes—his "mortal part" (1) has become a poetic line—the poet may evoke and preserve an imagined ideal, the otherwise chimerical Lucia.

"The Vine" is the tale of the speaker's "mortal part" (1) and its two metamorphoses: the first induced by dream, in which this part has been "Metamorphoz'd to a Vine" (1–2),[4] the last by an awakening that returns the vine to flesh. The first fifteen lines of the poem present the dreamt journeying of the vine as it encircles "one and every way" (3) the poem's additional subject introduced in line four, "the dainty *Lucia*." Throughout the dream the speaker is able to observe the vine's targeted movements and their multiplying effects. Thus, the speaker surmises, "Me thought, her long small legs and thighs, / I with my *Tendrils* did surprize" (5–6), while next he reveals, "Her Belly, Buttocks, and her Waste / By my soft *Nerv'lits* were embrac'd" (7–8). By line 15, the vine has also curved about Lucia's "head" (9), "temples" (11), "neck" (14), "armes and hands" (15).

In the latter part of the poem, a parenthetical thought is proffered which succinctly assembles the vine's earlier coilings into a single line: "(All parts there made one prisoner.)" (17). This orderly feat is immediately undone in the following lines which also introduce the turn in the poem's argument. As the vine has attempted "with leaves to hide / Those parts, which maids keep unespy'd" (18–19), the speaker experiences "the fancie" of "fleeting pleasures" (20–21), which in turn brings on his awakening. The poem ends with the speaker's final parenthetical utterance—"(Ah me!)"—heralding the translation of "this flesh of [his]" from a vine to something "more like a *Stock*" (22–23).

Several questions confront the reader: precisely what is meant by the speaker's "mortal part," how might we interpret its metamorphosis into a vine and its moves thereafter, who or what is the "dainty *Lucia*," why do the vine and speaker come to share the same referent "I," and finally, why has Herrick contextualized the poem's two transformations, vine and stock, in a dream and an awakening respectively. A "huge mysterious

[4]My quotations from Herrick's "The Vine" or *Hesperides* 41 are cited from *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. J. Max Patrick (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 26.

sadness" that he claims lies at the heart of Herrick's "The Vine" and remains unexplained prompts William Kerrigan to pause over the structural "contrast between the dream and the awakening."[5] It is "by no means obvious" to Kerrigan why the speaker's imagination should fail him upon his awakening. Nor, Kerrigan continues, does the poem satisfactorily account for its overall tristful tone, perhaps most audibly expressed in the speaker's doleful "Ah me!" (22). This sigh, writes Kerrigan, "signals regret. But what exactly is the disappointment?" Why, Kerrigan wonders, can't the imagination "albeit without the hallucinatory power of the dream" summon up the dream-conjured vine?[6]

In search of answers, the reader is confronted by a critical tendency to address such queries in a fairly monolithic manner. As mentioned earlier, Herrick's poem is often branded as erotica. Repeatedly, "The Vine" has been read as a "cheerful erotic fantasy," or else, a "conscious re-creation" of "daydreaming about sex."[7] Such readings have naturally blossomed into a discussion of Robert Herrick's own sexual proclivities.[8] The vine, we are popularly told, is a celebration of "the poet's own virile member"—an erection whose purpose is "to evoke a fantasy of bondage in which he [the poet] is the sentient bond."[9] Hinchliffe, whose article

---

[5]Kerrigan, "Kiss Fancies in Robert Herrick," *The George Herbert Journal* 14.1–2 (1990): 168, 165.

[6]Kerrigan, p. 165.

[7]A. J. Smith, *The Metaphysics of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 236; Rollin, p. 8. "The dream," writes Weidhorn, "is a fine evocation of a subconscious male (or a child's conscious) erotic fantasy of extending physical delight beyond all limits" (p. 104).

[8]Moira Baker writes, "the subject of much of Herrick's erotic verse is not woman's body at all, but the male poet's power to appropriate that body and manipulate it in language to create delicious fantasies for himself" ("'The Uncanny Stranger on Display': The Female Body in Sixteenth-and Seventeenth-Century Love Poetry," *South Atlantic Review* 56.1 [1991]: 17).

[9]Leah S. Marcus, "Robert Herrick," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*, ed. Thomas N. Corn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 172; Elisabeth Cook, *Seeing Through Words* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 104. See also Braden, who decides that the poem's "elaborate viticultural foreplay" culminates in a "retreat from full coition" (p. 222). This "fits," writes Braden, "in the long underground tradition of celibate clergy working out accommodations with their libidos without actually breaking the rules" (p. 230).

considers "postures and strategies that characterize masculine eloquence of Renaissance humanist chivalry," wonders about "the significance of a certain indirection and indecision in [Herrick's] verse that distinguishes him from poets of more confident masculine rhetorical powers."[10]

Disappointingly, Kerrigan's endeavor to tackle his discerning questions only resumes the discussion of the poet's sexual predilections. Kerrigan theorizes, "The nearest equivalent to the vine in the waking realm would then be the fingers of his hand." He continues, "Perhaps the dream itself is somehow aware of being an accompaniment to self-stimulation that would be shameful in the waking state," and decides finally that "hints of self-stimulation are left implicit in the general regret of "Ay me!"[11] "Besides regret," writes Kerrigan, we are left with only "the parting image of Herrick's erection."[12]

There is another line of critical thought, however, that sees Herrick's poetry as intensely focused on language—resolved on eliciting the delights of aesthetic discourse as well as revealing its limits—and which has thus far failed to either bolster or challenge the conversations that have pursued "The Vine." As he reads the *Hesperides*, Avon Jack Murphy observes an emergent persona "groping toward confidence in his own artistry and control, an assurance in the immortalizing power of poetry."[13] "These poems," Murphy summarizes, "are a rhythmically unfolding total reflection of a self-conscious artist's creative self."[14] Alastair Fowler points out that "writing about writing was common enough then. But Herrick's

---

[10]Hinchliffe, pp. 305, 308. Continuing, Hinchliffe observes, "Herrick often poses as a celebrant of erotic desire but he is frequently disempowered" (p. 321). J. B. Broadbent asserts, "All Herrick's sweets are the same, and too sweet—pretty lewdness is boring. People sense something wrong, a lack of genuine sexuality" (*Poetic Love* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1964], p. 246). Kerrigan similarly writes, "In a tradition stretching from Edmund Gosse to Gordon Braden, critics have intimated that something major and male is absent from Herrick's erotic verse" (p. 155).

[11]Kerrigan, pp. 165.

[12]Kerrigan, pp. 168.

[13]Murphy, "Robert Herrick: The Self-Conscious Critic in *Hesperides*," in *'Trust to Good Verses': Herrick Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Roger B. Rollin and J. Max Patrick (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978), p. 53.

[14]Murphy, p. 58.

introspection is profound, and correspondingly oblique."[15] Of Herrick's "highly erotic poems" in particular, Fowler specifies that they are "about aesthetic pleasure: about the balance, in fact, of difficulty and rhetorical effectiveness."[16]

Such Herrickean leanings with respect to poetics or rhetorical experimentation are not absent from "The Vine." As I read the poem, the vine's lyrical designs serve as my focal point. Herrick himself captions his poem with this key performer and promptly makes its curious appearance the subject of the poem's initial couplet. But rather than limit my reading of the vine's performance to a series of erotic intertwining, I wish to extend its appraisal. Attention to the vine's cursive character in all its variety, I would propose, will procure the poem's additional fantasy, and, I daresay its more essential project: a poet's dream of a line that can both express an ideal and hold that ideal in perpetuity.

The vine's resemblance to verse is perhaps most apparent when we recognize its horizontal weavings as lines of poetry. Winding at will, the vine's glissades possess Lucia in a series of double loops or couplets, while the syntactical inversions further extend the reach of the vine. The embrace of each end-stopped line reinforces the vine's successive as well as successful capture of its subject:

> Methought her long small legs and thighs
> I with my tendrils did surprise;
> Her belly, buttocks, and her waist
> By my soft nervelets were embraced.
> (5–8)

[15]Fowler, "Robert Herrick," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 66 (1980): 255–257; quotation from p. 257.

[16]Cleanth Brooks's well known explication of Herrick's "Corinna's going a-Maying" includes the provocative notion that "the poet is exploring the potentialities of language—indeed, as all poets must do, he is remaking language." Brooks continues, "our examination tends to suggest that not only our reading of the poem is a process of exploration, but that Herrick's process of making the poem was probably a process of exploration too" (*The Well Wrought Urn* [New York: Harcourt, 1975], p. 74).

A tercet's elongation of rhyme emulates the vine's "writhing" attitude, while its "rich clusters" may refer to either the cluster of consonants or rhyme sounds that enrich these lines:

> About her head I writhing hung,
> And with rich clusters (hid among
> The leaves) her temples I behung.
> (9–11)

On three occasions, the speaker adopts a parenthetical pose. The vine appears to assume curves that intend to pictorialize the meaning of the enclosed phrase. Hence, in the above lines 10–11, the vine's stealth "among the leaves" is further emphasized in the crouched profile of these marks. The enjambed status of this enclasped phrase further evokes the vine's dangling posture. Line 17 visually recreates the first half of its couplet: "So that she could not freely stir / (All parts there made one prisoner)" (16–17). Here, as the parenthetical enclosure of "All" Lucia's "parts" is itself sequestered to a single line, the inability of "All parts" to "freely stir" is securely reinforced.

Critical attention tends not to pause over the vine's various appearances. Seeming to pay no heed to the vine's stylistics, Hinchliffe likens Lucia to "a classical statue in a disheveled garden . . . overrun by this masculine vine."[17] Yet the vine's mode of travel is observably diverse—"crawling" (3), "surpriz[ing]" (6), "embrac[ing]" (8), "writhing" (9), "curl[ing]" (14) or "cre[eping]" (18). The ambiguous phrase, "Crawling one and everyway," with reference to the vine, denotes direction as well as mode. We learn that the vine is a composition of "*Tendrils*" (6), "soft *Nerv'lits*" (8), "rich clusters" (10) and "leaves" (11). These sundry moves and shapes, I would argue, do not simply facilitate the vine's physical enthrallment of Lucia.[18] Rather, as its versatility is verbally as well as visually arresting, the vine intends not only to fasten on Lucia, but also to fascinate reader and speaker. Furthermore, the speaker's reflections on the vine's sinuous moves reveal an additional fascination for how these linear configurations seem to be read by Lucia.

---

[17]Hinchliffe, p. 318.

[18]In his edition of Herrick's poetry, J. Max Patrick defines "Enthrall'd" simply as "fettered" (p. 26).

Those who argue that the vine's movements compose a bondage fantasy, fail to consider any other than a sexualized vision.[19] To regard Lucia solely as "a prisoner of lust, the helpless cynosure of the eroticism of domination,"[20] however, only encourages those critical voices that deem Herrick's poetry to be straightforward. To read Lucia instead as an elusive aesthetic vision that the poet strives to fix in verse challenges such blanket conclusions as, for example, those of Louis Untermeyer, who pronounces Herrick's "attitude toward life . . . simple," his poetry, "easy platitudes [that] served instead of a philosophy," and finishes with, "Herrick's fine-spun lines could not have borne anything weightier." [21] Yet the "fine-spun lines" that issue from the speaker's vine clearly do perform a remarkable, indeed weighty, aesthetic maneuver. For as the vine "craule[s]" (14) about the imaginary Lucia, it also embraces each part and ultimately bracelets "all parts" (17) in their ideal state. And perhaps most exciting, a future form that can only be inferior to the one freshly imagined or dreamt, is indefinitely deferred.

Thomas R. Whitaker recognizes in Herrick's poetry a recurrent interest in escaping from what we might refer to as the blight of mortal flux. Whitaker perceives that "the best of Herrick's poetry outlines an imaginative realm of some scope, and indicates an awareness of its limitations, its dangers, and its proper uses." According to Whitaker, Herrick's poetry repeatedly describes "the situation of man" as "immersed in natural flux, yet realizing and so transcending that immersion, demanding an escape into the ideal realm of art."[22] Likewise, A. Leigh Deneef observes in Herrick's works a repeated interest in aesthetic measures that prolong or sustain imaginary states—most especially Herrick's use of what Deneef refers to as the "poetic ceremonial."[23] This

[19]See Rollin, p. 139; Hinchliffe, p. 318; Cook, p. 104. Jonathan Post describes this bondage fantasy as "surprisingly blunt" (*English Lyric Poetry* [New York: Routledge, 1999], p. 117).

[20]Rollin, p. 139.

[21]Untermeyer, *The Love Poems of Robert Herrick and John Donne* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1948), pp. 8–9.

[22]Whitaker, "Herrick and the Fruits of the Garden," in *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 71.

[23]Deneef, *"This Poetick Liturgie": Robert Herrick's Ceremonial Mode* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), pp. 3–18.

ceremony, explains Deneef, allows the poet to "isolate specific and limited instances of human experience and transform them into significant and static celebratory rites in which both poet and reader participate."[24] This ritual, Deneef further elaborates, is able

> to free the act from the general transitory state of existence and to freeze it in a permanent form. . . . These little ceremonies actually become a means of escaping the unsure real world into the more stable world of the imagination.[25]

Herrick's dream of the vine is not a celebratory rite. However, the core principle of Deneef's theory—the "freezing" of an otherwise "transitory state"—I consider to be germane to the performance of the vine. Certainly, the course of Lucia's enthrallment can be viewed as a series of congelations. Her varied responses—"Enthrall'd," "surprize[d]," "embrac'd"—all communicate the similar act of being held, taken, or seized. While the line of the vine may constrict Lucia's "long small legs and thighs," "Her Belly, Buttocks, and her Waste," "her head," "temples," "neck," "armes and hands," in so doing, it also confers permanence upon each of these parts. In sum, Lucia is cured of changeability and the poet's contemplation of beauty, Lucia in all her facets, is dotingly extended.

The aesthetic formulations that perplex Herrick's "The Vine" cohere with a tradition of writers who recognize motionless beauty to be superior to that which continues to breathe, and thereby fluctuate. I turn briefly to the writings of John Keats and Marcel Proust, wherein we find a tussle between flux and fixity to be central to how each contemplates a work of art. In stanza one of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker determines that the urn's expressions are "sweet[er]" than "our rhyme," as they derive from a "still" object (1).[26] In stanzas two and three, the speaker appears envious of the urn's piper who is and will remain "Forever piping songs forever new" (24) to his lover who "cannot fade"

---

[24]Deneef, p. 4.

[25]Deneef, p. 17.

[26]My quotations from John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" are from *John Keats, Complete Poetry*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 282–283.

(19). The speaker apprehends that the urn's "silent form, dost tease us out of time" (44), as its images are indeed frozen in eternal warmth:

> Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
> Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
> . . . . . .
> More happy love! more happy, happy love!
> For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
> For ever panting, and for ever young.
> (21–22, 25–27)

Whereas the piper will forever be a "happy melodist, unwearied" (23) the poet's defeat as a melodist of eternal bliss is directly allied with his frail human form. The poet is only capable of rendering "passion" that is "breathing" or "human" (28), those passions that are realized, and thereafter wane. Such, we are told, that "[leave] a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd, / A burning forehead, and a parching tongue" (29–30). The vase, conversely, depicts passions "far above" (28) the human, as they remain still to be ravished, "still to be enjoy'd" (26).

Marcel Proust's meticulous cogitations on memory, specifically on how he might preserve his "first impressions"—rescue them from what he calls their "day-by-day deforming" so that they reappear in his mind unchanged—also acknowledge the futility of ever achieving his goal (p. 21).[27] He desires to "hold" a subject "motionless," and in this way, he hopes to fully ascertain the subject's beauty, "each of [its] intonations" (p. p. 21). As his alter ego attends a performance of the celebrated actress La Berma, he decides that to truly study this artist, catch all her fine inflections, would require him to "freeze each of the changing expressions on her face" (p. 21). In his attempt to do so, he finds himself evermore tormented by the pace of her delivery:

> I wished I could arrest and hold motionless before me each of her intonations, freeze each of the changing expressions on her face, so as to study them in depth and find out what was beautiful in them; at least I tried, by using all my mental agility, by having my whole attention at the ready and focused

[27]My quotations from Proust are taken from *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (New York: Penguin, 2004).

> on a line just before its delivery, not to waste in preliminaries any iota of the time taken by each word or gesture, in the hope of being able, by sheer intensity of attention, to absorb each of them as I might have done if I had been able to hold them before me for hours on end. But the time they occupied was so short! My ear had barely registered each sound when it was replaced by the following one.
>
> (p. 21)

Later, Proust writes of the difficulty of controlling his "senses" when confronting "the living person" (p. 63). Instead, frustratingly, he remains "too mindful of the countless forms, all the savors and movements of the living person" (p. 63). "But the beloved model keeps moving," Proust laments, "and the only snapshots we can take are always out of focus" (p. 63).

Herrick's poem also leaves us with the lingering portrait of a poet disillusioned, his imagination foiled by the poet's mortal self.[28] It is the eventual frustration of his dream—the divine vine become mortal—that feeds the poet's despair. In the poem's turn, begun in line eighteen, we come to discover that the vine's versatile extensions are armature against a more lethal human bondage, namely the "fleeting" pleasures of the flesh. Motivated by a desire to protect Lucia's modesty, the previously revelatory vine now stealthily "crept with leaves *to hide* / Those parts, which maids keep unespy'd" (18–19, italics mine). It is a gentlemanly gesture, paradoxically, that sets in motion the poem's only lewd episode. In his effort to cover up those maidenly "parts," the speaker confesses,

> Such fleeting pleasures there I took,
> That with the fancie I awook;
> And found (Ah me!) this flesh of mine
> More like a *Stock*, then like a *Vine*.
>
> (20–21)

The supple vine that had so easily and precisely delineated an imaginary design (so that even critics construe Lucia as an actual female) stiffens to a stout form derived from a human "fancie" (21). Undoubtedly, the

[28]Kerrigan points out that the poem "end[s] in reticence and paralyzing self-exposure" (p. 164).

stock-like form is meant to bring to mind the image of an erection, and the "fleeting fancies" appear to simulate an orgasm. The vine's pristine purpose to trace and preserve the gossamer contours of a dream is suddenly switched to a concern with mortal mores and pleasures. And in so doing, the spell of the lyrical vine is broken.

In imposing the moralistic habits of the mundane world upon the ethereal Lucia (arguably a more repressive form of bondage than those wrought by the vine's windings), a terrible revision is born. The speaker sees Lucia as *real*. And with this taint of reality, the vine loses all potency, indeed disappears. The sigh "(Ah me!)" (22), prefatory to the resumption of the speaker's "part" to fleshly shape, resounds with frustration. "Awook[ened]" to "the banality of a 'stock'," [29] the dreaming poet has in effect awoken to the nightmare of banal or "fleeting" verse. The final parenthetical utterance "(Ah me!)" (22), which follows the speaker's awakening, may also be the most interesting. The encasement of the speaker's wretched sigh—indeed doubly encased as it is contained in the center of the line—plainly depicts the poet's angst upon finding that rather than Lucia, it is he who is prisoner, tethered to a "mortal part" whose aesthetic reach is both restricted and transitory.

The metamorphosis of the *a*-mortal or poetic vine to "flesh . . . more like a *Stock*" is finally a meta-poetic gesture. A poetics that lithely transcends capricious reality is replaced by one encumbered. Interestingly, it is a shape described as "more like a *Stock*" [30] that returns the speaker to the vicissitudes or natural flux of the real world.[31]

---

[29]Hinchliffe writes, "In his waking world, the phallic 'vine' of his fantasy, which would incorporate the entire flourishing world of his desires, is reduced to the banality of a 'stock', both a lifeless stump and a merely masculine erection" (p. 318–319).

[30]*The Oxford English Dictionary,* online ed., s. v. "stock," n.[1]. "Stock," like "supplement," is a word rich in associations and is paradoxical in its use, meaning both "the type of what is lifeless, motionless or void of sensation" (A.I.1.c) and "the trunk or stem of a living tree" (A.I.2.a).

[31]In his poem, "The Street," Robert Pinsky reimagines Herrick's vine as a hub of humanity, one from which "all roads lead" (4). Pinsky's vine is thick, seeming to have grown infected, possibly from too much traffic with mortal man:

Although the poem's final lines may be read as a reversal of the vine's bold aesthetic experiment, leading to the poet's ultimate failure to fend off the waking world—to elude its haste, its variability—the dream of the vine as a means of permanently poising imaginative conjurations at their loveliest also endures. Though the stuff of dreams, and even in reverie only briefly sustainable, the vine's impulse to hold poet, reader, and subject forever enchanted is arguably a poet's most ambitious dream.

Nicholls State University

Streaked and fretted with effort, the thick
Vine of the world, red nervelets
Coiled at its tips. (1–3)

Pinksy's poem is cited from *History of My Heart* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1984), pp. 49–51; the lines I quote are on p. 49.