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To Write Sorrow in Jonson's "On My First Sonne"

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Critical studies of Jonson's Epigram 45, "On My First Sonne," agree largely in affirming the power of the poem but differ in accounting for that power.[1] A number of these studies examine Jonson's Epigram 45 in relation to its classical and Biblical sources.[2] Curiously, although many editors and critics note that the opening line of "On My First Sonne" alludes to Genesis 35:16-20, the naming of Benjamin, none has devoted extensive attention to the function of that passage as a subtext of Jonson's poem. In fact, Jonson's inscribed farewell to his son draws much of its emotional power from the poet's transformation of Genesis 35:16-20.

The Genesis episode concerns a death, but of the mother, not of the son. Rachel, dying in child birth, names the child Benoni, son of my sorrow, but Jacob calls the child Benjamin, son of the right or son of the right hand. The Bible's silence about why Jacob denies his wife's dying wish provokes (and receives) particular attention. Biblical commentaries on the naming of Benjamin suggest intriguing possibilities both about Genesis 35:16-20 and about Jonson's Epigram 45. Commentaries on Genesis can figure as evidence about Jonson's poem in several ways. It is likely that Jonson read some of them, and even more likely that he was familiar with interpretations advanced by some of the commentators.[3] More than this, not only are these commentaries on Genesis, useful for the insight they afford to the attitudes of Jonson's time, they should also be seen as exegetical performances that provide examples of possible *responses* to the passage from Genesis; as such, by virtue of their similarity and difference, they illuminate the response that Jonson inscribes in his poem. The fact that certain interpretations and interpretive strategies appear again and again in Biblical commentaries signals provocative or problematic aspects of the Genesis text by documenting widespread response. In addition, specific details of Jonson's poem are illuminated by seeing them as textual echoes of particular Biblical commentaries.

Jonson's reference to his "sin" in line 2 of the poem, for example, is probably an allusion to Genesis commentaries. A number of critics puzzle over why Jonson inculpates himself for "too much hope" and explain his sin with reference to Christian theology. L. A. Beaurline identifies Jonson's sin as pride, Kay as inordinate love in the Augustinian sense. Both critics treat Jonson's reference to his sin as a confession and focus their interpretations on his presumed sin.

Nevertheless, Jonson's reference to sin conceivably has its source in the commentary tradition deriving from Genesis 35:16-20, as well as in presumed prior transgression of the poet. French convert to Protestantism and Hebrew scholar Mercerus (c.1500-1570) notes that Rachel, as well as other Old Testament women, dies in childbirth in expiation of "cladis Sichimorum," the destruction of the Shechemites in revenge for Shechem's violation of Dinah (Genesis 34). John Calvin (244-45) and English popularizer Gervase Babington (262) interpret Rachel's death as Jacob's punishment for excessive affection.[4] Seen in this context, Jonson's reference to "my sinne" may appear less central to his poem; semantic emphasis might be placed on "my" rather than "sinne": Jonson's own sin is one in a historical catalogue of sins, all tending to the same end, rather than the particular cause of unique calamity. In addition, the attribution of Rachel's death to Jacob's excessive love may have suggested to Jonson the conflation of Genesis with Martial's Epigram 6.29, which concludes, "quidquid ames, cupias non placuisse nimis" [Whate'er thou lovest, pray that it may not please thee too much!]. Babington (1550-1610) makes the point about loving moderately in language strikingly similar to Jonson's:[5]

> But be comforted Iacob, and leaue all to God, who giueth and taketh at his pleasure. And learne we by thee whilest the world indureth, to knowe worldly comforts whatsoeuer they be, to be subiect to change. Loue with vnfainednesse, what may be so loued, but loue neuer too much for feare of a check. . . . Let his liking moderate our affections euer, and so happily shall we enioy the thing liked a great deale longer. But if thou exceede, werst thou as iust as Iacob, God will schoole thee as he heere did Iacob. Thy deerest Wife, thy deerest Childe, thy deerest friend, shall feele their mortality, that thy hart may be taught, and wish for eternitie, crying heauily, sighing with mournefull voice: Vanity of vanity, all is but vanity. (262)

One can see in the commentaries of Calvin and Babington a tendency to shift emphasis from Rachel's sorrow to Jacob's loss. There is, after all, a certain asymmetry or imbalance in regarding Rachel's death primarily as a punishment for Jacob. A far more widespread exegetical strategy, which also diminishes the conflict between the claims of Rachel and those of Jacob, is to minimize the difference between the names given by each to their son. Indeed, this probably constitutes the single most common interpretive tendency in Biblical commentaries. This strategy of conflating the two names appears in such disparate sources as the St. Jerome and Nachmanides. Moreover, those commentators who conflate Benoni with Benjamin do so by tracing different etymologies. The impulse to bring the two names into accord seems to have priority over the philological means used. According to Luther (272) and Pareus (1:374b), "the right hand" alludes to

Jacob's beloved wife, who is closest to his heart. By implication, Rachel is memorialized in the name Benjamin as well as in the name Benoni. St. Jerome notes the similarity of the two names (1042-43). The Protestant Peter Martyr, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford during the reign of Edward VII (147), and the Spanish Jesuit Perireus, author of the most popular commentary on Genesis in the Renaissance (1192b), reinterpret the Hebrew word "oni" of "Benoni" to signify strength as well as sorrow.[6] With this interpretation, "Benoni" becomes a virtual synonym for "Benjamin." These etymologies reveal clear lines of transmission. It is extremely likely that David Pareus, the Protestant professor of divinity at Heidelberg from 1584-1622, read Luther's commentary on Genesis and that Peter Martyr and Perireus read St. Jerome. Indeed, Perireus actually cites the church father. Leaving a side the technical question of influence, however, one can detect a common impulse to mitigate the harshness of Jacob's act of renaming by manipulating the significance of one or the other of the two names. Wolfgang Musculus (1497-1563), a Benedictine monk who later became a Lutheran, seems fairly unusual in actually registering how serious it is for Jacob to contravene Rachel's wishes. He comments:

> Praeualebat enim authoritas paterna voluntati matris, quantumuis vltimae, vtpote iamiam morientis.... Quae vero sit ratio nominis huius Beniamin, diuinandum magis arbitror, quam certo affirmandum. (683)
>
> [Certainly, paternal authority prevailed over the mother's will, howevermuch that desire was her last, inasmuch as she was already dying. ... How true the reason given in support of the name Benjamin may be, I judge to be more divined than proven certainly.]

The commentaries' shift in emphasis from the sufferer to the survivor prefigures, at the very least, and possibly influences Jonson's revision of Genesis in "On My First Sonne." In Genesis, as Musculus has observed, the wish of the mother dying in childbirth to memorialize her sorrow is thwarted by the power of the father to name as Jacob assumes the function of name-giving normally exercised by the matriarchs. In his poem, Jonson alludes both to the name given by the father and that given by the mother as he bids his son farewell, "Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and ioy." "Son of my ... ioy" is a revision of Benoni, son of my sorrow, but Jonson names his child in the very act of bidding farewell to his own son and his own joy.[7] The poet's language both acknowledges loss and performs the separation. Where the patriarch Jacob uses his power to name to expunge the loss of his wife, Jonson uses his power as a poet to create a memorial of his loss:

> Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lye
> BEN IONSON his best piece of *poetrie*.

Through indirect discourse, Jonson ascribes the words of the epitaph to his son as he consigns "his best piece of poetrie" to the grave.

The system of exchange—the mere substitution of one thing for another—exemplified in Genesis by the exchange of the name Benjamin for the name Benoni is transformed by Jonson into a method of writing his sorrow, which acknowledges loss as something that leaves permanent traces. For the duration of his poem, Jonson takes on the mother's vulnerability as well as the father's power to name, which, perhaps, accounts in part for the emotional power of "On My First Sonne."

In lines 3-4, Jonson uses a commercial metaphor to focus explicitly on the issue of exchange:

> Seven yeeres tho'wert lent to me, and I thee pay
> Exacted by thy fate, on the iust day.

In a traditional way, the language of commerce points up an unworldly message: the goods of the material world are not ours absolutely, but only ours on loan.[8] More specifically, as Kathryn Walls notes, "the iust day" alludes to the seventh, Sabbatical year in Mosaic law, recorded in Deuteronomy 15:1-2.[9] She observes that the poem works inversion and counter-inversion on the Old Testament code. In the Sabbatical year, all debts were to be released; here, a debt is called in. In the Sabbatical year, slaves were to be released; here, a son is released to heavenly rest. Walls concludes that these two reversals of Old Testament precepts suggest that the poet's loss is exchanged for his son's gain (136).

As an emendation to Walls' analysis of "the iust day," I should like to suggest that instead of balancing his loss against his son's gain, Jonson calls the entire economy of exchange itself into question in his poem. After all, the assertion of exchange is followed immediately by the exclamation, "O, could I loose all father now." The balanced, neatly separated antithesis of "lent" and "pay" seems to provoke the cry of pain which derives its power and pathos from its concentration of antithetical meanings in single words and phrases. "Loose all father" suggests both lose and let loose fatherhood (*OED* s.v. "loose" v.1, 10; "lose" v.3).[10] The word "could" both asserts, as a conditional, the possibility and expresses, as an optative, the impossible wish to "loose all father." The line exclaims the burden of fatherhood, a burden not to be discharged or released as easily as a debt. Similarly, the enjambed sentence that completes line 5 and continues through line 6, "For why / Will man lament the state he should enuie?" assumes that man will lament death even as it questions that response. The poet's question accommodates doctrinal reasons for rejoicing to the fact of grief. Moreover, the antithesis of "lament" and "enuie" succeeds that of "lent" and "pay" in the logical movement of the poem in order to posit a more complex kind of relationship. "Lent" and "pay" figure pure, self-cancelling reciprocity. By analogy, the son's good should

balance out the father's suffering. In contrast, both "lament" and "enuie" have reference to the state of the man responding as well as to the state to which he responds. The link of father to son underlies both terms of this antithesis.

The complex and problematic relationship of Ben Jonson, father, to Ben Jonson, son, appears in the epitaph encapsulated at the conclusion of the poem. In a moving revision of Jacob's act of naming, the poet allows the name Ben Jonson to shift back and forth between son and father. As we read, "Here doth lye / BEN IONSON his best piece of *poetrie*," we encounter a series of what Mary Oates, borrowing John Hollander's term, calls puns by discovery (132). "Here doth lie Ben Jonson" becomes, by the addition of the archaic possessive "his," a reference to the father rather than to the son. But, in a further retrospective shift, "Ben Jonson his best piece of poetrie" names the son by periphrasis.[11]

Not only does the referent of the name shift, but the nature of naming alters as well, along lines implicit in the Genesis passage. Commentators on the Bible story identify two different functions of the name: as a memorial and as an icon of power. As an icon of power, the name can be auspicious or inauspicious, since it has the capacity to foretell and affect the future.[12] Numerous exegetes follow this line of thought and explain how Jacob changes his son's name to one that presages strength and prosperity (Calvin 244; Pareus 374b; Perireus 1192b; Peter Martyr 146-47). Those who focus on the memorial function of the name explain that Jacob thwarts Rachel's desire to have her sorrow remembered because he does not want to renew his grief with the reminder of his loss (Musculus 683; Mercerus 585-86; Luther 272).

The memorial Jonson creates for his son possesses implicit powers of prophecy as well, although what the lapidary inscription assigned to Ben Jonson the younger foretells is poetic diminishment: nothing Jonson creates will ever be as good. The patriarch Jacob changes the name of his son to mitigate his own grief and to palliate his memory; Jonson prays that future emotional attachments be moderated, "That what he loues may neuer like too much." In so praying, Jonson attests to the intensity of his present sorrow. Jonson has used poetic language to perform his valediction and enact his loss, rather than just memorialize his son. The poet both loses and looses all father: as he inscribes his loss he simultaneously records the sorrow that abides.

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Notes

[1] L. A. Beaurline, "The Selective Principle in Jonson's Shorter Poems," *Criticism* 8 (1966): 64-74; Francis Fike, "Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *The Gordon Review* 11 (1969): 205-220; W. David Kay, "The Christian Wisdom of Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *SEL* 11 (1971): 125-36; Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1962); Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton

University Press, 1976); and Kathryn Walls, "The 'Just Day' in Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *N&Q* n.s. 24 (1977): 136, see in Jonson's poem the conflict between the father's feelings of loss and the son's gain of eternal peace. J. Z. Kronenfeld, "The Father Found: Consolation Achieved Through Love in Ben Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *SP* 75 (1978): 64-83, criticizes Kay and Fike for placing the poem in a theological framework that separates the love of the human and temporal from the love of the divine and eternal and interprets "On My First Sonne" as the reconciliation of the conflicting claims of the Christian and the father, rather than the victory of the former over the latter. For Roberts W. French, "Reading Jonson: *Epigrammes* 22 and 45," *Concerning Poetry* 10 (1977): 5-11, Anne Ferry, *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) and William B. Bache, "Verbal Complexity in 'On My First Son,'" *The CEA Critic* 32 (1970): 12, the central tension of the poem is that between the violence of Jonson's emotion and the power of his poetry to give it form. Jack D. Winner, "The Public and Private Dimensions of Jonson's Epitaphs," in *Classic and Cavalier: Essays on Jonson and the Sons of Ben*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), sees the poem focusing on the conflict between the public poet and the private man. Bache and French see Jonson's art containing his fatherly grief; according to Ferry, the poem records "the inadequacy of conventional language to control the painful force of human failing in the face of 'age' and death" (178-79). All quotations from Jonson are taken from the Herford and Simpson edition: *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925-52).

[2] Mary Ellen Rickey, "Jonson's 'On My First Sonne,'" *Explicator* 41 (1983): 19-21, and Kathryn Walls examine Jonson's allusion in lines 3-4 to Deuteronomy 15:1-2: "Seven yeeres tho'wert lent to me, and I thee pay, / Exacted by thy fate on the iust day" recalls the sabbatical year, in which debtors were to be released of their debt and servants released from servitude. Beaurline (67-68), Kay, and Trimpi (183) treat Jonson's allusion to Martial in the concluding couplet of his poem. Martial's epigram 6.29, in *Epigrams*, trans. Walter C. A. Ker, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), about the early death of a beautiful slave-boy, concludes "inmodicis brevis est aetas et rara senectus. / quidquid ames, cupias non placuisse nimis" (7-8) ["To unwonted worth comes life but short, and rarely old age. Whate'er thou lovest, pray that it may not please thee too much!"] Jonson concludes the epitaph for his young son with, "For whose sake, hence-forth, all his vowes be such, / As what he loues may neuer like too much."

Kay suggests that Jonson's translation of Martial's epigram 6.29 in the concluding couplet of his poem invokes the Augustinian distinction between proper and inordinate love, between "enjoying" things because they make men blessed in themselves and "using" them to sustain oneself as one moves to being blessed. Whereas Martial's epigram is the counsel of despair, a kind of touching wood to avert divine envy of too much excellence, Jonson rebukes himself for putting the hope of blessedness in a mortal object, for "lik[ing] too much" by making a mortal being the object of inordinate pleasure.

[3] For evidence of the popularity of Renaissance commentaries in the seventeenth century, see Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis 1527-1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), pp. 31-33. He observes that, "Above everything else Genesis meant to the intelligensia of the Renaissance the commentaries on Genesis"(6). In the same volume, he provides a useful checklist of commentaries with bibliographic information and short biographies of the principle commentators (269-77).

[4] Quotations from and citations of Mercerus, Musculus, Perireus, and Peter Martyr are from the following editions: Ioannis Mercerus, *In Genesin Primvm Mosis Librvm, sic a Graecis Appellatum, commentarius* (n.p., 1598); Wolfgang Musculus, *In Genisim Mosis Commentarijplenisimi... expenduntur* (Basel, 1600); Benedictus Perireus, *Commentariorvm et Dispvtationvm in Genesin...* (Cologne, 1601); and Petrus Martyr Vermilli, *In Primvm Librvm Mosis... Commentarii....* (Zurich, 1579). These editions were made available by courtesy of the Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. Quotations from Calvin are taken from *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis..* Trans. John King, 2 vols., Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society. Quotations from Gervase Babington are taken from *Certain Plaine, Briefe, and Comfortable Notes upon Every Chapter of Genesis. . . enlarged* (London, 1596).

[5] Fike also notes the verbal echo (218-19).

[6] Nachmanides uses this interpretation. See Mein Zlotnitz, trans., *Bereishis: Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, 4 vols. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1979), Vol. 4; quotations from St. Jerome taken from *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 23.

[7] For a close reading of the poem, see Bache.

[8] See Ferry 176-78. Jonson himself uses this conceit in his "Elegy on Lady Jane Pawlet" as well as in "On My First Sonne." William D. Briggs, "Source Material for Jonson's *Epigrams* and *Forest*," *Classical Philology* 11 (1916): 169-90, lists as classical sources for the notion of life as a loan: Seneca, Cicero, Plutarch, Sophocles, and Lucian (173).

[9] On this point, see also Rickey.

[10] See Arnold S. Stein, *The House of Death: Messages from the English Renaissance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 151.

[11] The pun on "poetrie" as that which is made or created is discussed by Trimpi (182-83).

[12] Fike cites a passage to this effect in the chapter on"Usual Christian Names" from Camden's *Remains Concerning Britain*:

> The first imposition of Names was grounded upon so many occasions . . . but the most common in most ancient times among all nations, as well as the *Hebrews*, was upon the future good hope conceived by parents of their children, in which you might see their first and principal wishes toward them. . . . So that the greatest Philosopher *Plato* might seeme, not without cause, to aduise men to be carefull in giving faire and happy names. (31, 2)

Fike goes on to note that Camden, who originally published the *Remains* in 1605, was with Jonson at the house of Robert Cotton when, in 1603, Jonson had an accurate vision of his son's death and suggests that Camden and Jonson might have discussed the question of naming (207).