

“Till busy hands/ Blot out the text”:
Realme in Satyre III

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Know thy foes: The foule Devill, whom thou
Striv'st to please, for hate, not love, would allow
Thee faine, his whole Realme to be quit; and as
The worlds all parts wither away and passe,
So the worlds selfe, thy other lov'd foe, is
In her decrepit wayne, and thou loving this,
Dost love a wither'd and worne strumpet; last
Flesh (it selfes death) and joyes which flesh can taste,
Thou lov'st; and thy faire goodly soule, which doth
Give this flesh power to taste joy, thou dost loath.
*Satyre III (33-42)*¹

In 1981 Edgar F. Daniels attempted to unseat the “accepted reading” of these lines.² That reading, of course, belongs to Wesley Milgate’s scholarly edition. Thirty years have passed since the publication of Milgate’s edition, but despite the problems with lines 33-35, which Milgate himself only partially acknowledges, these lines have received slender critical attention. Milgate understands *the foule Devill* to be the subject of *would allow*, and paraphrases the lines thus: “The foul Devil, whom you strive to please, would be only too willing, out of hate not love, to grant you the whole of his kingdom of Hell to satisfy you” (143). One problem with this paraphrase, as Milgate concedes, is that the phrase *to be quit* remains obscure, though he believes “the main sense is clear.” Another problem, and the more important of the two, is that the motive, his hatred, contrasts sharply with Devil’s act of generosity, the surrender of his kingdom. Not only is the

alternative reading proposed by Daniels intended to rectify the obscurity of the phrase *to be quit*, he contends that it also “meets the need for parallelism of idea, requires no syntactical gymnastics, and harmonizes with Christian tradition”(16). Rather than propose yet another syntactical arrangement, I shall defend the earlier reading of the lines by drawing attention to an overlooked semantic possibility, and attempt to answer the objections which Daniels raises by showing how they are no longer warranted or applicable, if my reading is accepted.

The alternative syntax of the lines offered by Daniels claims to make “*hate* the subject of *would allow*,” which he then paraphrases: “Your foes include first the Devil, whom clearly you strive to please, since if you hated him rather than loved him this would have allowed you to be willing to be free from his realm.” But the paraphrase makes it clear that *hate* is acting as the predicate of the implicit subject *you*, and the demonstrative pronoun creates reference problems. In fact, there is no clear antecedent for *this*. The awkward locution this revision occasions, however, is easily rectified when the pronoun *this* is replaced with *you* in the paraphrase: “since if *you* hated him . . . *you* would have allowed *you*[rself] to be willing to be free from his realm.” Nevertheless, that the substitution of pronouns is necessary should make it apparent that Daniels actually takes *thou* as the subject of *would allow*. Yet if *thou* is taken as the subject of these lines, the lines both require extensive re-locations and are no more than a fragment. While this reading leaves the phrase *to be quit* perfectly clear, meaning *to be free*, the number and kind of changes it demands are no less taxing than the alleged “syntactical gymnastics” required by Milgate’s reading.

What both Milgate and Daniels seem to ignore, however, is the possibility that *Realme* could mean anything other than “hell.”³ Daniels is justified, therefore, in criticizing the contradiction that Milgate and others are forced to attribute to the Devil, who is said to relinquish his *Realme* out of *hate* and also “to be rid of it,” in order to resolve the obscurity of the phrase *to be quit*. Milgate’s

suggested “in full discharge of what he owes you” is as unsatisfactory at the level of motive as Smith’s “willingly give you for your service.” In fact, this is exactly what Lucifer cannot do in *Ignatius His Conclave* to reward the service of Ignatius: “But since I may neither forsake this kingdome, nor divide it, this onely remedy [the relocation of Ignatius and the Jesuits to the moon] is left.”⁴ Thus, Daniels’s notion of “being free from” simply will not work with the Milgate syntax, because it is even more highly unlikely that the Devil will *free* a soul from hell for services rendered. Suppose for a moment, however, that *Realme* refers to the earth rather than hell. The lines would then make sense both with the syntactical relations assumed by Milgate-Smith and with the meaning of the phrase *to be quit* indicated by Daniels, for the Devil would only be releasing one from life on earth.

Realme occurs only four times in Donne’s verse, and never refers directly to either earth or hell. In the “First Anniversary,” however, it is used as a synonym of *Kingdome* (l. 124). And Donne would doubtless be familiar with the fact that Christ is tempted with “all the kingdoms of the world” by Satan (Matthew 4:8) and that in the *Vulgate* the translated phrase is *omnia regna mundi*, *regnum* being the root of the English derivative *realm*. It is also worth noting that Christ does not accuse Satan of misappropriating these lands but of seeking to displace the proper object of worship. Could it be that these lands properly belong to the *Devill*? Are they his to give? Perhaps not, but in II Corinthians 4:4 the devil is referred to as “the god of this world,” who has “blinded the minds of them which believe not” (KJV). Lancelot Andrews in a sermon on the phrase “Thy Kingdom come” (*adveniat regnum tuum*) from “The Lord’s Prayer” argues that because “the vessels of wrath and sin are exalted and prosper” in the world, “we may know that [the world] is not the true Kingdom.”⁵ Later in the same sermon Andrews reminds his listeners that they “pray against the kingdom of Satan, darkness and sin, that they may depart from us,” and so suggests that the kingdom of Satan is present on earth, that of God yet to come (394).

Evidence of Donne's familiarity with *regnum* is provided by its use as a synonym for *kingdom* in his translation of the word in *Ignatius His Conclave*. On my count *regnum*, or one its inflections, occurs twenty-one times, and every time but one it is translated as *kingdome*.⁶ The exception involves the phrase, *ille in Medio, in Inferno regno*, which Donne translates: "Now the *Pope* and *Lucifer* love ever to follow one anothers example: And therefore that which the one had done in the middle *world*, the other attempted in the lower" (72.8; italics added). It is, of course, a premise of the satire that the Pope "governes upon the face of [Satan's] earth" (23.24-25), but that the earth no less than hell is the domain of Satan.

If it is granted that *Realme* refers to the earth, then *to be quit* must mean "to be free from the earth" or "to die," and as such it modifies the direct object of *would allow*, that is, *Thee*. The lines mean something like this: "Acting out of hate, not love, the Devil would willingly allow you to be free from the earth." For those who serve the Devil there is an obvious catch-22. Like God, the Devil will free his servants from this world, but for very different reasons and to very different ends. It is not unlikely that this is what Donne wanted to suggest to his contemporaries, nor is the irony involved inappropriate to the indignant face of satire. Of the phrase *to be quit*, Grierson writes: "Whether we read 'quit' or 'rid' the construction is difficult. The phrase seems to mean 'to be free of his whole Realm' an unparalleled use of either adjective."⁷ That the Devil in Donne's poem would willingly allow this to occur, for hate, is thereby easily understood, because the devil stands to lose nothing in seeing the sinful, including the "desperate coward" whose feats of daring preface the speaker's injunction to "Know thy foes," depart this world unrepentant and so depart this world for hell.

Having overcome the supposed obscurity of *to be quit* and explained the grounds or motive for the devil's actions, which are resoundingly self-interested, it remains for me to try to answer the

other objections which Daniels makes. The first concerns the “need for parallelism.” Because the reader “is said to love the strumpet world and the decaying flesh,” Daniels writes, “good parallelism would require that the initial item in the series stress the fact that he loves the Devil”(15). That he loves the devil is already suggested by the fact that it is the devil whom he “Striv’st to please” and is directly asserted inasmuch as the devil is presupposed by the phrase “thy other lov’d foe.” Furthermore, the grammatical parallelism of *Striv’st*, *Dost*, and *lov’s*t argues against extending the agency of the auditor in the first example, since it is not extended in the subsequent examples. Finally, it is entirely fitting for Donne to have begun this section with a distinction between love and hate as motives, where love in the form of service is requited by hate, when it ends by defining the hierarchical order of accidental and essential *joyes* made available to the properly devout by God.

Daniels also objects to the “mental re-locations of phrasing on a scale that seems strange even in Donne” (15). These re-locations include the placing of *faine* and *to be quit*. *Faine* as a predicative adjective can modify the direct object, *Thee*, but as an adjective it is usually followed by an infinitive. In fact, of the four other instances in his verse where Donne uses *faine* as an adjective it is followed immediately by an infinitive, as in Satyre IV (63): “That I was *faine to say*” (italics added). Now the infinitive phrase, *to be quit*, is at a greater remove, measured by both a mere syllable count and the necessary enjambment of *allow/ Thee faine*, from *faine* than *faine* is from the verb *would allow* which it can, and in Milgate’s reading does, modify adverbially, and so it is hard to see how assuming that *faine* is an adjective is likely to lessen the difficult “mental re-locations of phrasing.” In his paraphrase, “this would have allowed you to be willing to be free from his realm,” Daniels must relocate the phrase *his whole Realme* (which does not differ at all from Milgate’s reading) and introduce the *copula* verb *to be* to indicate the adjectival relationship between

Thee and *faine* in order to accomodate his syntactical reordering. And I have already indicated other problems with his own relocation of phrases and creation of new lines.

The last objection Daniels raises is given the least amount of attention. He claims Milgate's reading is "inconsistent with the prevailing Christian tradition . . . in supposing that [the devil] would be willing to hand over his entire kingdom to any random sinner" (16). One cannot help but wonder at the use of the singular in "prevailing Christian tradition," but insofar as my revision of Milgate's reading, at the semantic level, makes it clear that the devil is surrendering nothing, this objection is sufficiently answered.

This 'revised' reading of the lines can also help us make sense of the relation of this passage to the poem to which it belongs. For one thing, if *to be quit* means to die, the relation of these lines to the instances of false courage that Donne has just listed becomes clearer. Exclusive involvement in any one of these "forbidden warres" lands one in a position in which the Devil would willingly have us quit this world. There is no suggestion that we will not die in our role as *Sentinell*, and yet we cannot but conclude that in this case God will be acting out of love, which is the central contention of the concluding couplet of "Holy Sonnet VI" ("This is my play's last scene"): "Impute me righteous, thus purged of evil, / For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devil." To think otherwise, that is, to think that "God is either a poor God, not able sufficiently to reward those that serve him; or else an unkind God That will not reward the duties that are performed by those that serve Him," is according to Lancelot Andrews "a fire to consume our faith," a fire which "is the motion of discontent" (V, 546-7). In contrast, the perverse erotic relation suggested by the lines concerning the devil and his suppliant in *Satyre III* where love is requited by hate, looks forward to the confused relations of Mirreus and company and the false churches they pursue.

Notes

1. All citations of the satires are from W. Milgate, ed., *John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). Citations from other poems come from A. J. Smith's edition (*John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971).

2. Edgar F. Daniels, "Donne's SATIRE III, 33-35," *The Explicator* 40.1 (1981): 15.

3. A. J. Smith's paraphrase accepts the syntactical relations suggested by Milgate: "The devil would willingly give you for your service his whole kingdom of hell, to be rid of it, though out of hate not love" (482); whereas John T. Shawcross glosses *his Realme* as "God's" (*The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, Garden City, NY:Anchor Books, 1967) p.23. M. Thomas Hester follows the rule of editorial glosses: "The 'foule Devill' is one who 'for hate, not love, would allow / Thee faine his whole Realme [which is the realm of hell that awaits the devil's lovers] to be quit,'" not specifying whether *to be quit* modifies the Devil's actions or those of the auditor (*Kinde Pitty and Brave Scorn: John Donne's Satyres*, Durham: Duke UP, 1982) p.62.

4. John Donne, *Ignatius, His Conclave*, ed., T. S. Healy, S. J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p.81.

5. Lancelot Andrews, *The Works of Lancelot Andrews, Sometime Bishop of Winchester* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1854; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1967), vol. V, p. 393.

6. Here is a complete list of instances of *regnum*: 16.3; 22.15; 22.22; 24.2; 24.23; 30.2; 32.2 1; 42.18; 50.14; 54.25; 56.5; 56.25; 68.9; 70.23; 72.8; 74. 1; 74.24; 76.19; 80.6; 80.19; 86.7. The numbers refer to pages and lines respectively of the Latin text, so 16.3 means that on page 16, line 3 the reader will find *regna longinqua* which Donne translates as "forraine kingdomes."

7. Herbert J. C. Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, vol. II, *Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, rpt. 1963), p. 114.