

# Lust and resignation in robert herrick's "the vine"



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Love is one of the most prolific topics in all of literature. From the perverse to the overly romantic, poets and authors from around the world continue to settle on love as a vehicle for relaying their innermost thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. “The Vine,” written by Robert Herrick in the 1600s is ostensibly about a man who dreams that a part of him is a vine that gropes and subdues a young maid; however, beneath the surface of this seemingly perverse affair lies a poem rich in explications on the nature of love: a concept based on mutual interest and not, as most readers will conclude, enslavement.

As if predicting potential debauched misreadings of the poem, Robert Herrick disassociates both himself and the speaker in the first two lines: “I dreamed this mortal part of mine / Was metamorphosed to a vine” (1-2). The word “dreamed” in this sense could refer to an actual dream or a more poetic sense of desire, but in either interpretation, the word showcases something that does not exist in typical aspects of reality. The use of the word “mortal” furthers this notion of literary dissonance, giving a connotation of deadlines, relentlessness, or otherworldliness, each depicting a mindset in which the “part”—both a phallus and a representation of a missing section, especially as applied to romantic affairs—is misused, or altogether unwanted. “Metamorphosed,” typically a transitive verb, is used in this passage as “having undergone an abrupt change,” solidifying the distance between the speaker (be it Herrick or not) as the events of the dream unfold.

In lines 3-8, the “vine” quickly becomes transparent, losing its bucolic romanticism and gaining a sinister air of forced delight. A vine is a perfect metaphor for the speaker’s lustful involvement: it grows blindly, gropes its

victims, and attempts to alter the environment in which it lives. Vines “crawl[...]one and every way,” depicting an absence in definite direction; they grow without insight, heedlessly stretching to places where they are not wanted, similar to the phallic “mortal part” in line 1. Vines also “enthrall” innocent bystanders—the word “enthrall,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means both “to captivate” and “to enslave”—showing that a vine is not a chaste image of gardens and the pastoral, but something with malicious intent. From the lines “And with rich clusters (hid among / The leaves) her temples I behung, / So that my Lucia seemed to me/Young Bacchus ravished by his tree” (11-13), it can be deduced that the malicious intent with which vines act attempts to change the areas where they grope. In this situation, that area is the body of a young maid, who is imprisoned (and altered) by the vine.

In addition to the vine's invasion of personal space, the vine in the poem mistreats Lucia with its base manipulation of her beauty. The vine adorns “rich clusters” upon the head of Lucia, replacing her beauty with the beauty of the vine. The speaker of the poem, then, has been metamorphosed into a vain organism outside of the mortal world where love is mutual. Bacchus, interestingly enough, is the god of wine making in Roman Mythology. In line 14, this motif is used to show the reciprocity of the events in the dream; the creation destroys, or “ravishes” in this sense, the creator. It is because of Lucia's beauty that the vine gropes and adorns her body, but that Lucia seems to the speaker as “Bacchus ravished by [a] tree” (13) shows the reader that it is not Lucia's beauty, the product of her lovely existence, that

faces manipulation. It is instead the vine—or, rather, the speaker who is metamorphosed to a vine—that is the victim in the poem.

The vine's pastoral beauty has been distorted, without provocation or control, into a sexual being with little appreciation for Lucia, a girl for whom it is suggested that the speaker has had prior feelings of romantic interest. This abrupt change in tone does not only exist thematically, but also structurally; the poem consists of perfect couplets, save for lines 9, 10, and 11. The additional rhyme forces an extended macabre and appreciation for the thematic upheaval in the poem. Just as the speaker is not in control of himself in the dream, so, too, does his control of the poetic line lessen. Lines 10 and 11 also feature the first use of parentheses, a poetic "aside" in which the speaker appears remorseful about the actions of the dream, foreshadowing the speaker's resignation in the last two lines of the poem.

From lines 14 onward, the dreamlike state of the poem is intensified, echoing the beginning lines. The lines "My curls about her neck did crawl,/ and arms and hands they did enthrall" show that the speaker is not in control of his body. The speaker did not "enthrall [Lucia] with his hands," but rather his "arms and hands they did enthrall [Lucia]" (15). The imprecise subject in this line rivals the absence of typical romantic adjectives in line 7, where Lucia's features are simply listed: "Her belly, buttocks, and her waist." The subject in the dream, as well as Lucia, are indecipherable not because of a surrealistic effect, but solely to lessen the romantic notions of the poem and render a precision to the poem's true meaning: lovers do not imprison their benefactors, nor do they manipulate their partners. The speaker of the

poem, then, is an astonished figure whose mortal love for Lucia has been worn down into sexual conquest during a perverse dream.

There is an air of anguish in the line “ All parts there made on prisoner” (17). Not only is the line offset by parentheses, showing an extended pause and moral attrition for the events depicted, but the line also separates Lucia’s features into an abstraction; “ all [of her] parts” (17) have been victimized by the vine’s lusty enterprise. Both in the dream and in reflections succeeding the dream, the speaker recognizes the lascivious behavior of the vine (his doppelganger), so attempts to conceal the “ unespied” parts which encourage the aforementioned lusty behavior; but this concealment, too, results in a corruption of love for which the speaker makes amends in the last two lines of the poem. Lucia, in addition to being a notable female name, is latin for “ light,” so when the speaker of the poem shades the maid’s unespied parts, he is actually performing a disservice to her imminent virtue. The vine hides her beauty from the world, captivating her not for a preservation of her beauty, but instead as a cultivation of its (the vine’s) own corruption. It is no shock, then, that this romantic avarice leads to “ fleeting pleasures” (20), a more appropriate euphemism for the sexual conquest that has been building up since line 3. Although the vine takes advantage of Lucia, there is an inkling of virtue in this act, for the poetic language affirms the speaker’s true thoughts about the events in the dream and lessens the perverse aspects of the poem.

In “ The Vine,” Robert Herrick establishes a series of vulgar images to display a vine taking advantage of a young maid; however, these images remain secondary to the diction of the poem, which creates the true meaning and

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implications for both the speaker and the poet. In the line “ That with the fancy I awoke” (21), the speaker negates the lack of virtue in the “ fleeting pleasures” of the previous line. Because the “ fleeting pleasures” were directed toward a woman in bondage, they were base and immoral; however, the speaker describes the entire matter as “ the fancy” (21). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “ fancy,” here, means “ an hallucination” or “ a delusion of the senses.” The speaker of the poem treats the entire dream with ill regard and recognizes the matter as a momentary lapse of reason. Dreaming of taking advantage of young girls is not a pastime of the poet; he instead relates the events of the dream in order to display his own virtue, which becomes clear in lines 22 and 23.

Although the poem up to this point has consisted of sexual conquest, lusty plants, and ravished girls, the intent of the poem is made perfectly clear in the lines “ And found (ah me!) this flesh of mine / More like a stock than like a vine” (22-23). The speaker is ashamed of the events that have unfolded during the course of the dream and appears delighted to explain himself. The word “ found” implies that there is something that has been lost (i. e., the virtue of the speaker, the metamorphosed mortal part) and regained through careful reflection. The use of parentheses to set off the speaker’s exclamation reaffirms the morose, yet ecstatic joy in the speaker’s awakening. In spite of these brief explanations, it is the word “ stock” that remains the most meticulous justification for the virtuous intent of the poet. The word “ stock,” in addition to a hard stalk, is a term used in the art of grafting, a process by which two plants are woven into each other and continue to grow mutually. The “ stock” (23), then, is the true nature of the

speaker's "mortal part" (1). "Stock" is not only a symbiotic pastoral bond in which two beings nurture each other, but it is also a metonym for true love, an emotional attachment in which compassion and self-sacrifice replace libertine acts of sexual conquest or forced romanticism.

In "The Vine," Robert Herrick uses the metaphor of a vine to show the selfishness and folly in sexual conquest. Through his meticulously crafted diction, he gives the world a slightly skewed take on the matters of true love, even bordering upon literary perversion, yet still manages to display a heartfelt rendition of the nature of true love.

Works Cited Herrick, Robert. "The Vine." Trans. Array The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume 1. Stephen Greenblatt. 9th Edition. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012. 1758. Print.