

Rereading John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14

BARBARA NEWMAN

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit you, but O, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.¹

I cannot recall when I first read John Donne's Holy Sonnet 14; I seem to have always known it. For years I thought this sonnet was the closest thing I knew to a perfect poem, not to mention a perfect prayer—the impassioned yet flawlessly elegant *cri de coeur* of a yearning soul. Long ago, when I still taught my university's version of English 101, I used to delight in pointing out the power of Strong Verbs—fourteen of them in the first quatrain alone. Those mighty monosyllables, each like a hammer blow from heaven! Those heart-shattering spondees! Then I'd wait for my students to discover the parallels, verb by inexorable verb, that build the contrast between mere patchwork and a new creation. Next we would examine the classic images of the second quatrain and the sestet: the intertwined figures of the City and the Bride. In the Apocalypse, both symbolize fulfillment at the end of time: the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. But in this text, both have fallen into enemy hands. The city is "usurped," its rightful lord reduced to siege warfare, its defenders turned traitors, while the bride is engaged against her will to her lover's mortal foe—a damsel in distress indeed. What then could be more natural, or more poignant, than her final, desperate bid to be rescued?

My sympathy with Donne's speaker was sharply challenged two years ago, however, when I came across a collection of sermons by my friend A. K. M.

Adam, one of the finest preachers in the Episcopal Church today. Reverend Adam, like Reverend Donne, is not one to pass up an opportunity for fiery, in-your-face rhetoric, and in this particular sermon he goes head to head with the Dean of St. Paul's, preaching against the perilous error of Sonnet 14.² That mistake, in his view, is to imagine God as "Superman in theological white robes," "a spiritual jailer, a conquering general," who will come to release us once and for all from our frailties so that we no longer have to exercise those tedious virtues of patience, perseverance, and constancy. To extend Father Adam's thought, would such a superhero God have endured the Cross? Would he not have asked his Father instead to send twelve legions of angels—or leapt down by miracle and raptured St. John and Mary Magdalene with him to heaven? But if the incarnate Christ truly reveals to us the nature of God, should we not expect him to remain "gentle and humble in heart," patiently bearing with us until we learn at last to bear with ourselves and our neighbors? Closer to this spirit is the poem "Discipline," by Donne's less flamboyant contemporary, George Herbert:

Throw away thy rod,
 Throw away thy wrath:
 O my God,
 Take the gentle path.

For my heart's desire
 Unto thine is bent:
 I aspire
 To a full consent.

Not a word or look
 I affect to own,
 But by book,
 And thy book alone.

Though I fail, I weep:
 Though I halt in pace,
 Yet I creep
 To the throne of grace.

...

Throw away thy rod;
 Though man frailties hath,
 Thou art God:
 Throw away thy wrath.

Much as I resisted my friend's hostile reading of Sonnet 14, I finally had to admit that the poem conceals a lingering, subtle temptation (or as A. K. M. Adam calls it, a "demonic snare"). As I continued to brood over the sonnet,

more qualms occurred to me. Donne stands within a medieval tradition that is perhaps best known through Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, in which a masculine speaker adopts the position of the generically feminine Soul and speaks in a woman's voice. It is a kind of spirituality in drag, invented by and for professed celibates, which takes on even stranger overtones when adopted by a married man. Here the speaker, impersonating a captive bride, begs to be freed by imprisonment and purified by rape. For that, of course, is the implication of "ravish," a word with a long and telling history. The verb derives from Latin *rapere* via Old French *ravir*: its root meaning is "to abduct, rape, carry away by force," but metaphorically it can mean "to exalt or transport with joy." By the thirteenth century, *raptus* and *ravisement* could denote either the crime of rape or the experience of mystical ecstasy. A medieval French poem hints at the link between these two senses:

Never would a woman dare to say
 With her own mouth what she so desires;
 But it greatly pleases her when she is taken
 Against her will, however it comes about.
 A maiden who is suddenly ravished
 Has great joy, whatever she might say.³

Even closer to John Donne's sentiment is an obscure thirteenth-century spiritual writer, Gérard of Liège, who points out that God is the perfect lover because he supremely possesses all that the heart seeks in its beloved. If we love beauty, God is the one on whom angels desire to gaze; if we love a person who buys our affections dearly, it is he who purchased our hearts with his terrible death; and "if our love requires violence, no one will do greater violence to attain it than he. For he seeks it as if with an unsheathed sword: either you will love him or you will die an eternal death."⁴ Here the threat of damnation becomes the ultimate aphrodisiac.

The Norton Anthology glosses "ravish" in Sonnet 14 as "rape, also overwhelm with wonder," and "enthrall" as "enslave, also enchant." On reflection, I had to ask myself whether, as a twenty-first century Christian feminist, I really want to pray in terms that evoke the ostensible pleasure of a rape victim? Do I want to exchange the delicate courtesy of the Annunciation for the violent pagan raptures of a Leda, a Danae, a Semele? For that matter, do I want to take on the role of an usurped town (Baghdad, for example) that—in the view of its besiegers—cries out for "liberation"? I hope we have learned to be suspicious, in these not-so-postcolonial times, of the political as well as the sexual assumptions that underlie Donne's figures. Of course, we could always take the easy way out and assert that, in this case, only the metaphorical meanings are relevant. If a critic says a play is "enthralling," we

want to see it, and if a singer or dancer is “ravishing,” we will rush to buy tickets. But this solution merely evades the problem, for it is precisely the tension between literal and figurative meanings that gives the sonnet its power.

So, in the cold light of reason, I nearly succeeded in rooting out my passion for Sonnet 14—or at least wresting it away from the realm of living spirituality into the (marginally) safer one of “literature.” And yet, and yet . . . for all the force of Father Adam’s arguments, and my own, I find myself still unable to recite the offending sonnet without spontaneously offering it as a prayer. Mere habit—or inveterate sin? Suppose that, weary of working out my salvation with fear and trembling, I really do want a “white-caped superhero” to deliver me from the toils of being human? Or, worse yet, suppose that after years of feminist thought and action, I am still bound by the patriarchal fantasy that women secretly long for rape? Yet, on the off-chance that some deeper, unsuspected wisdom might lurk within Donne’s tradition—and that of his precursors, the medieval mystics who have been my companions for years—I dared myself to see if I could manage to defend the spirituality of Sonnet 14 in the face of these objections.



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I begin with the situation that presumably inspired the poem, which is not a rare experience but one all too familiar to anyone who has seriously attempted prayer. To our immense frustration, we seem able to “surrender ourselves to God” fervently, frequently, and with no effect whatsoever. If, fifteen minutes after such an ardent prayer, I find myself as stingy and snappish as before it, I cannot help but wonder if the whole venture is an exercise in futility and self-delusion. “I . . . labor to admit you, but O, to no end,” writes Donne: the speaker asks God not to override his will but to strengthen it, overcoming its impotence. Or, in the alternative metaphor, if a woman *asks* to be raped—nay, passionately begs for it—what she is requesting is precisely *not* rape. The poem’s paradoxes are so troubling in part because they arise from that tangled confusion of agency that has always bedeviled Christian thought about sin and grace. Fittingly, the scriptural text that inspired A. K. M. Adam’s meditation on Donne was Romans 7.21–8.6, and he goes so far as to accuse Paul of the same “theological mistake” as the poet, the same impatience with the fallen will and its incorrigible rebellion. “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand . . . I serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” Donne’s speaker, having made this painful discovery, is not sure whether his captive reason is merely “weak” or downright “untrue.” If weak, it needs only reinforcement; if untrue, judgment and punishment. Similarly the bride, whom we might read as either flesh or spirit in this allegory, asks now to be divorced, now ravished, now imprisoned, now beloved. Does she know what she desires at all? The divided will contaminates the imagination: a city so long besieged can imagine liberation only as bondage; a bride betrothed to a man she hates can no longer see a difference between violation and love.

Finding her own agency to be hopelessly confused, the speaker falls back on God’s, longing now to resign agency altogether, to revel in an orgy of passivity. She would be battered, overthrown, broken, burned, abducted, imprisoned, enthralled, and ravished, in a frightful crescendo of domestic violence. Yet paradox rears its anguished head once more, for just as the literal meanings in this sonnet conflict with the figurative, so its surfaces clash with its depths. The speaker might long to be passive, or so she claims, but she is in fact active. Whatever might be true ontologically, in this sonnet it is not God who takes the initiative, but the praying subject. God’s actions are but timid—“knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend”—in comparison with what the speaker demands. From her own perspective she may be not so much a willing victim as an aggressive wooer, trying to seduce her distant lover with increasingly provocative come-ons. God in the poem *does* “take the gentle path,” as George Herbert puts it, but for the speaker, this is not enough. His patience is impossible to distinguish from his absence.

One might ask what would happen to the captive bride if her wish were granted, if she *were* to be enthralled and ravished? Contrary to all expectations, she announces that in such a case she would “rise and stand,” be renewed, become chaste and free—no longer abject, but able to act with dignity. This final paradox suggests that the last lines may not mean what I dare say the great majority of readers, myself included, have long taken them to mean. The sonnet seems on the face of it to remain deeply enclosed within the self: whatever the speaker wants, it appears to be some kind of *experience*—a mystical marriage, a “smiting in the Spirit,” a rapture like Paul’s on the Damascus road. This is a seductive reading, encouraged by the seduction metaphors of the poem itself; and it enables us to add self-indulgence to the other snares and temptations I have listed. Yet if we do read it this way, if we persist in confusing means with ends, the problem may not be John Donne’s but ours. Indeed, he would not be the first mystical writer to have been misunderstood in this sense.

Hadewijch of Brabant, the great medieval poet of divine ravishing, wrote splendid poetic visions of heaven, and in between them she took her celestial Beloved to task even more ferociously than Donne. In all likelihood, however, she spent most of her time not in rapture, but nursing the sick poor, with neither effective medicine nor pay. Perhaps she reaped the reward of their gratitude? But, unless her patients were also aspiring to sainthood, they might justifiably have believed their own sufferings from cancer or consumption to be far greater than hers from mystical love-longing, of which they probably knew little and cared less. Put differently: to be ravished and enthralled in a moment of ecstasy is one thing, to “rise and stand” for the rest of one’s life, quite another. It is only for the sake of the latter that the poet requests the former. His pyrotechnic language, in short, beckons toward a far less glamorous daily grind, which cannot be invoked in prayer only because it cannot be foreseen until the prayer is fulfilled—and if it *were* foreseen it would probably *not* be invoked. Had Anne Donne not died in childbirth at the age of thirty-three, John Donne might never have become Dean of St. Paul’s or written a single Holy Sonnet. It is far easier to pray “Batter my heart” than to pray for the fruits of that petition, easier to desire mystical ravishing than to long for the persecution and suffering that seem to be its inevitable consequences.

Let me propose, then, that the more serious problem with appropriating Donne’s prayer might not be so much its lack of political or even theological correctness, as our habitual reluctance to think too deeply about what we imagine we are asking. In plain speech, God no doubt knows that, whatever I might plead in a rhetorical moment, I have absolutely no intention of abandoning my comfortable life to go and embrace dying lepers in Calcutta. In fact, I fancy he might be pleasantly surprised if I managed to offer more than the

odd tax-deductible check for some progressive cause—almost any cause would do—that is closer to God’s heart than mine. As long as that remains the case, what right have I to ask anything *other* than the gentle path and the tedious, everyday virtues? Or, in the words of another poet, more circumspect in every way, “so how should I presume?”⁵

NOTES

1. John Donne, Holy Sonnet 14, cited from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), Vol. 1, 1271.
2. A. K. M. Adam, *Flesh and Bones: Sermons* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 17–21.
3. “Jamès fame n’osseroit dire / De bouch cen que tant desire; / Mès mont li plest que nen la prenge / Mal gré soen, comment qu’il avienge. / Pucele soudement ravie / A grant joie, que qu’ele die.” “La Clef d’Amours,” cited in Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 4.
4. “Si autem uiolentiam requirit amor noster, cest con li face force, nullus maiorem uiolentiam pro eo faciet quam ipse. Petit enim eum quasi gladio euaginato. Aut enim eum amabis aut eterna morte morieris.” Gérard de Liège, “Quinque incitamenta ad deum amandum ardentem,” ed. André Wilmart, in *Analecta Reginensia: Extraits des manuscrits latins de la reine Christine conservés au Vatican* (Rome: Vatican, 1933), 211.
5. T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” *Norton Anthology*, Vol. 2, 2365.