

## Narrative, Typology and Politics in Henry Vaughan's "Isaac's Marriage"

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"Isaac's Marriage" has attracted some attention as the only poem of the 1650 *Silex Scintillans* that was revised for the 1655 edition. A reviewer of my edition of Vaughan's *Complete Poems* asked "Who did this correcting, and why? And why that poem?" He went on to castigate me for dereliction of editorial duty; I had simply recited the facts of the case and had failed to theorize.<sup>1</sup> More recently Philip West has theorized: "Though critics have tended to ignore 'Isaacs Marriage', it is the only text which Vaughan decided to revise for the 1655 edition of *Silex*, suggesting that he continued to value and want to perfect it."<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say that Vaughan "requested" that "Isaac's Marriage" be reset with alterations, adding in a note that this interpretation is based upon internal evidence (64 and n. 6). These remarks need to be put into context. The first part of the 1655 edition of Henry Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans* is made up of unsold sheets of the 1650 edition, with the exception of leaves B2 and B3, which were reprinted. These leaves run from line 75 of "The Search," the poem before "Isaac's Marriage," to the end of "The British Church," which immediately follows it. The latter, a poem of some twenty lines, is thus the only complete poem, apart from "Isaac's Marriage," on those leaves. Four brief passages of "Isaac's Marriage" are amended and one error introduced.<sup>3</sup> What Philip West writes, of course, makes some sense. The fact that Vaughan introduced revisions does indeed suggest that he continued to value the poem. However, the phrase "the only text which Vaughan decided to revise" seems to me misleading, in carrying the implication that Vaughan valued the poem uniquely. The likeliest explanation for the revisions is that those sheets were spoiled in the

printing house and for that reason Vaughan was asked to supply fresh copy. Given the opportunity, he may well have wished to revise a number of poems, but publishers were no more likely then than they are now to accede to the wishes of an author whose work had already left them with unsold sheets on their hands.<sup>4</sup>

As an editor, critic and teacher I was naturally interested in the poem's biblical sources. I was given fresh occasion to think about the poem and Vaughan's particular "take" on its principal source when, in preparing to teach a course in biblical narrative, I read Robert Alter's book on that subject.<sup>5</sup>

I remain fascinated by Vaughan's description of Isaac's prayer above all, and want to add to what Barbara Lewalski and Donald Dickson have written about that passage.<sup>6</sup> Philip West, mentioning it three times in two pages, stresses Vaughan's youth at the time he wrote "Isaac's Marriage." My own exploration of the poem's meanings led to the reflection that its author was a remarkably learned young man.

"Isaac's Marriage" may at first appear to offer little more than a comparison between the innocence and simplicity of early biblical times and the moral ethos of the 1650s, as seen by a self-consciously pious ("puritanical") Royalist. Its epigraph ("*And Isaac went out to pray in the field at the even tide, and he lift up his eyes, and behold, the camels were coming*") points to one verse only of the amply detailed narrative of Genesis 24 and the poem begins with the invidious comparison between the biblical then and Vaughan's now: "Praying! and to be married? It was rare, / But now 'tis monstrous" (1-2). At line 5, however, in what appears as an explanation of Isaac's prayer, the reference moves away not merely from the epigraph's reference to Genesis 24:63 but from the story of Isaac's marriage to the earlier episode (Genesis 22) in which God "tempted" Abraham to offer Isaac for a burnt-offering. We are thus reminded of the typological significance of Isaac, which has several aspects: he had been born as a result of God's intervention, when his father Abraham was a hundred years old and his mother ninety (Genesis 17:17) and, to make it quite ex-

plicit, past the menopause (Genesis 18:11); and he had been offered up as a sacrifice by his father. With regard to both miraculous birth and sacrifice he was seen as a type of Christ; he was typical also in relation to the subject of this poem, since his marriage to Rebekah was regarded as a type of the marriage of Christ to the Church.<sup>7</sup> As Philip West points out, Isaac features as a child sacrifice in a number of seventeenth-century poems about Abraham's faith.<sup>8</sup> What needs to be stressed is that Vaughan's choice of Isaac's marriage as his subject, and more than one instance of language indicating knowledge of patristic allegorical and typological expositions, reminds us that for Vaughan 'the British church' did not begin with the Reformation. He was clearly both aware of, and in sympathy with, the manner in which Philo and the early Fathers treated the marriages of the patriarchs as spiritually significant. He was no doubt aware also that the marriage of Isaac, who took only one wife, was regarded as the most significant of all.<sup>9</sup> That the Church had historically regarded the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah as especially significant, and continued to do so, is indicated by its appearance in the Order for the celebration of Holy Matrimony in the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>10</sup> This last piece of typology involves a question controversial at the time, as between the Roman Catholics, who favoured seven sacraments, and the Reformed Churches, which favoured two. The acceptance of marriage as sacramental by the Roman Catholics had its basis in Paul's admonitions to wives and husbands in Ephesians 5, ending with the words "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church" where the word translated "mystery" in the Authorized Version is *sacramentum* in the Vulgate ("Sacramentum hoc magnum est, ego autem dico in Christo et in Ecclesia"; 5:32). Belonging to the group of Laudian Anglicans who fell under the general condemnation "An Arminian is but the spawn of a Papist," neither of the Vaughans took undue precautions to avoid such imputations. Thomas for example had remarked that "Marriage is in a moderate sence *Sacramentall*."<sup>11</sup>

In Vaughan's explanatory passage there is a nice mingling of well-established typological reference and more esoteric lore:

But thou a chosen sacrifice wert given,  
 And offered up so early unto heaven  
 Thy flames could not be out; Religion was  
 Rayed into thee, like beams into a glass,  
 Where, as thou grew'st, it multiplied and shined  
 The sacred constellation of thy mind.

Here the matter of the sacrifice of Isaac is linked, by way of explanation, to a less widely known aspect of the Isaac-Christ typological nexus, the implied sinlessness or moral perfection of Isaac, anticipating Christ who "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). That this is important to what Vaughan wishes to convey in the poem is suggested by his recurrence to it at the end:

Thus soared thy soul, who (though young) didst inherit  
 Together with his blood, thy father's spirit,  
 Whose active zeal, and tried faith were to thee  
 Familiar ever since thy infancy.  
 Others were timed, and trained up to't but thou  
 Didst thy swift years in piety outgrow,  
 Age made them reverend, and a snowy head,  
 But thou wert so, ere time his snow could shed;  
 Then, who would truly limn thee out, must paint  
 First, a young Patriarch, then a married Saint.

Vaughan's language, especially in the earlier passage ("Religion was / Rayed into thee, like beams into a glass") may be his own, in the manner of his other appropriations from Owen Felltham, but the idea has an ancient source. Jean Danielou remarks that for Philo the Patriarchs "represent stages in the mystic ascent: Abraham is the virtue which comes from study, μαθησις; Jacob, that which is acquired by moral effort, ασκησις; while Isaac is virtue perfected, τελειωσις, which is entirely a gift of God, from the nature (φυσις) which is infused (αυτομαθης)." <sup>12</sup> Danielou goes on to comment that in the typological approach it is "Isaac who holds the first place, on account of his birth and sacrifice [...] for Philo he always represents perfection. For he was not born according to the ordinary laws of birth, but through divine intervention. He represents 'infused' virtue,

αυτομαθησ, a purely divine operation, and his marriage to Rebekah typifies the union of virtue and wisdom [...]. It is his birth and marriage which are essential [...] his sacrifice takes second place."<sup>13</sup> Danielou illuminates the typology of Isaac further by reminding us that Josephus bears witness to a tradition which makes Isaac consent voluntarily to his death;<sup>14</sup> and that in Galatians 3:16 Paul tells us that Isaac's birth is a type of Christ (one might add that this interpretation is strengthened by Galatians 4:22-26 with its references to Ishmael and to Isaac).

Vaughan's dealing with Isaac in this poem is also consistent with Boehme's view, as set forth in the section "Of Regeneration" in *The Way to Christ*: "For the Promise of Christendom was made to Abraham; therefore the Type was then also set forth by two Brethren, Isaac and Ishmael, in order to show how Christendom would behave itself, and that two sorts of men would be in it, viz., true Christians and Lip-Christians. Which latter under the title of Christianity would be but mockers, as Ishmael was and Esau, who also was a Type of the outward Adam, as Jacob was a Type of Christ, and his true Christendom."<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that significantly different estimations of the importance of Isaac's marriage, and of Isaac himself, were available. Augustine writes that "there can be no doubt that the merits of [Abraham's] faith and obedience were superior [to those of Isaac], so much so that God says that the blessings he bestowed on Isaac were granted him for his father's sake."<sup>16</sup>

Lines 13-23, in evoking the licentious behaviour of the times, contain passages that remind one of the concreteness of certain of Vaughan's secular poems: on the whole realistic depiction of particular evils is rare in *Silex Scintillans*. It functions here, as on occasion later, to evoke by contrast the virtues of Isaac and his bride. It is interesting to see what Vaughan selects from the biblical account and what he adds to it. Line 30, in which Rebekah is described as "the chaste, and lovely object" of Isaac's thought, corresponds to Genesis 24:16: "And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her;" but lines 31-38, in which Rebekah is shown not to exhibit

the sophisticated coqueries observable in Vaughan's contemporaries, have no such explicit backing in the biblical account, in which we learn her name, the fact that she was a relative "in law" of Abraham and that she had a pitcher on her shoulder, before we learn of her beauty and virginity. Her carrying the pitcher is made occasion for further animadversion on the corruption of Vaughan's times, and the role of the servant in the episode of the drawing of the water (Genesis 24:17) is ignored in a way that makes Rebekah's charity and hospitality entirely spontaneous. It is typical of Vaughan that he should have remembered the camels of the biblical account and forgotten the gift of jewels, emphasizing instead the "native [...] simplicity" of Rebekah. In fact Vaughan omits reference to verses 21-60 of the Genesis 24 account, ensuring that his poem does not simply rehash the narrative. Before turning to what Vaughan does instead, it is worth remarking in what ways the poem is consonant with standard contemporary commentary and how it differs. Vaughan's treatment is interesting in relation to what he might have read in recently printed bibles, as it is in relation to the more ancient and rarefied discussions of Philo and the early Fathers. Vaughan stresses that angels advised Isaac's servant (Abraham's rather in the source) "what to do, and say," whereas a contemporary catechism puts the question "What may servants see here?" and gives the answer "How to undertake their Masters' business." The further question "What other good property is in that servant?" is answered "He would not eat [...] before he had done his master's business" (4).<sup>17</sup> The annotations to a Bible published in London in 1645<sup>18</sup> comment on the chastity of the proceedings, suggesting (on 24:2) that the servant was sent "so that the choice of his wife might be made rather by religious discretion, than sensuall affection." This serves as a reminder that part of the point of Vaughan's poem is to oppose sexual licence in behaviour, as the Preface to the 1655 *Silex Scintillans* opposes licentiousness in verse. A Bible published in 1649, with annotations from the Geneva Bible,<sup>19</sup> stresses the servant's obedience to his master, and, of verse 33, the fidelity servants owe to their masters; it comments, in relation to the jewellery given to Rebekah by

the servant (24:22,30) that God then "permitted many things [...] which are now forbid"; says of verse 58 "This sheweth that parents have not authority to marry their children without the consent of the parties"; and, of verse 63 (the epigraph to Vaughan's poem), "This was the exercise of the godly fathers, to meditate God's promises and to pray for the accomplishment thereof."

It is possible, in relation to the biblical narrative and standard contemporary commentary, to make these points: that Vaughan de-emphasizes the role of the servant and avoids the banality of the commentaries on that role; that in ignoring the jewels and pointing up the "freshness" and "simplicity" of Rebekah he is both accepting the then-current view (in relation to the jewels) and following his own preference, expressed elsewhere, for unadorned feminine beauty.<sup>20</sup> It seems also fair to say that in basing the poem on verse 63 Vaughan focuses largely on Isaac; whereas almost the whole of the biblical account is given over to Abraham's discussion with his servant, the servant at the well with the women, his conversation with Rebekah, followed by his conversation with her male kindred. The episode, according to the rules enunciated by Alter, ends at verse 61, when the servant and Rebekah leave to return to Abraham. It is perhaps worth adding that in his choice of epigraph, Vaughan is recalling a biblical occasion which gives sanction to what was apparently his own habit: to pray and meditate in the open air, and to do so in the morning and "at eventide."

Barbara Lewalski deals with "Isaac's Marriage" in accordance with her general thesis, saying that Vaughan "includes among the first poems of *Silex* a sequence in which Catholic modes of meditation on the events of Christ's life ("The Search") and upon the creature as an ordered scale of ascent to God ("Vanity of Spirit") are found wanting." The corrective is applied in "'Isaacs Marriage,' through an analysis of the Protestant meditative exemplar, Isaac in the fields" (172). She points out that it follows "The Search" and argues that it "is almost certainly intended as an example of proper meditation—in several modes at once. One key to this intention is that Vaughan's text

here was "a locus classicus for meditative practice, cited in all the Protestant manuals" (336). Lewalski's view of the poem's interest and success is apparently based on the way in which it "serves as a paradigm for the several meditative kinds important in *Silex*," as "meditation on a biblical event [...] an occasional meditation upon a particular marriage [...] a meditation upon experience—Isaac's courtship, and our courtships, and God's ways with Isaac [...] a meditation upon a biblical text, displaying in the Protestant way the speaker-mediator's engagement with that text and its meanings for him and us [...] [and] a brief nature-meditation on Lahai-roi's well, in which a cyclical round of emanations resulting in showers which produce perfumes is set forth as an emblem of Isaac's prayers" (336-37).

Accurate as this account is, one might wonder whether the incorporation of several different meditative kinds is in itself inherently likely to produce a successful poem; and one may not be fully convinced that Vaughan conceived it primarily as a model, an example for his readers of "proper meditation." A comparison of the poem with standard contemporary homiletic on the same subject suggests an intensity of engagement which goes beyond the didacticism implied in Lewalski's account, in spite of such passages as "marriage of all states / Makes most unhappy, or most fortunates." The ecstatic description of Isaac's prayer, followed by the extended simile beginning at line 53, are both quintessentially Vaughan and at some remove from the biblical account. There is perhaps some tension between the traditional description of the soul as feminine<sup>21</sup> and what, in the context, cannot help but seem like sexually-charged and masculine language (of undressing, piercing, scattering). Similarly, the "brief nature-meditation on Lahai-roi's well" of Lewalski's account omits consideration of the well as fertility-symbol and female-symbol<sup>22</sup> (Vaughan's anachronistic use of "his" as a neuter possessive is perhaps unfortunate in this connection) and the way in which the cycle of emanation-shower-perfume, elicited by the masculine Sun, operates as feminine analogue to the sexually-charged description of Isaac at prayer. The entire passage, from lines 43 to 62, is both baroque and quintessen-



tially Vaughan, and serves to remind us that dislike of the sexual crudity attendant upon some wedding ceremonies, in Vaughan's time apparently as well as in our own, does not entail rejection of sexuality. In my view, West fails to take this passage into consideration when he describes the poem as a "curiously prim meditation on the nuptials of Jacob's father," as the wording of that description fails to take into account the significance of the marriage of Isaac in biblical typology.<sup>23</sup>

This poem, though it occurs in the 1650 *Silex Scintillans*, nonetheless raises the question of whether the reader should be looking for "passages, whose history or reason may seem something remote" (Preface to the 1655 volume, pp. 142-43). If the poem had been first published in 1655, there would be the suggestion that one aspect of the interest of the subject for Vaughan was personal: his twin brother Thomas had married a Rebecca, and Isaac married a kinswoman, as did Vaughan himself in marrying his deceased wife's sister. In that respect the poem might have been regarded as an apologia, within the circle of those who knew him personally, for doing what others might have thought questionable. This aspect only has bearing if we accept that Vaughan might have been intuitively prescient.<sup>24</sup> How we read this poem is significant in relation to West's judgment that Vaughan was "influenced by the Protestant typology that developed from what Aquinas [...] called the *tropological* or moral sense of Scripture. Rather than reading the Old Testament for types of Christ, the new typology read scriptural persons, objects and events as types of the spiritual lives of individual believers and events of the present day" (42). Vaughan's language in "Isaac's Marriage" makes it clear that he is familiar with, and making use of, a more traditional typology influenced by Philo. It is likely that the author of such a poem, himself a young married man, would have seen an *applicatio* in reference to himself, but such self-reference is not primary to the poem.

In religio-political terms, Vaughan chose the marriage which was held to typify the marriage of Christ and the Church: a marriage which was later held by the Roman Catholics to impart to all Christian marriages the nature of a sacrament. It is evident throughout his

religious writings that Vaughan made little effort to distance himself from the imputation of crypto-Catholicism frequently levelled at Laudian Anglicans during this period; not because he was a crypto-Catholic but because he saw himself as a member of the historic Church to whom the early Fathers were as important as post-Reformation divines. His position resembled that of Hooker, for whom the Catholic Church, though in error, remained "a part of the house of God and a limb of the visible Church of Christ."<sup>25</sup> The flaunting of banners his opponents thought Papistical was a kind of defiance likely to encourage readers whose sympathies were with the faithful remnant of Laudian Anglicans. There is a further possible religio-political implication which raises the question of what may be validly held to be "context." In Galatians 4 Paul writes:

28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. 29 But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. 30 Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.

The contemporary implications of verse 29, in terms of eventual emancipation, are clear, as is the call to subterranean opposition in verse 30, if we admit that the passage may be relevant context, as I should argue that it may. It is often remarked that literature and music are linear arts: a matter of words and notes following one another in sequence through time. But, in books read and re-read, as the Bible was by many of Vaughan's contemporaries, the reader's apprehension of meaning is likely to have synchronicity enough. Alert contemporaries would have needed no Concordance to recall the reference to Isaac in this Pauline context. Moreover, they were used to the notion that meaning in one part of the bible was to be controlled and enriched by reference to other parts, as George Herbert expresses it in "The Holy Scriptures II": "This verse marks that, and both do make a motion / Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie."<sup>26</sup>

T.S. Eliot remarked, of the notion that hermetic ideas might be important in Vaughan, that this would make the poems mere cryptograms, and it might be felt that to suggest Galatians 4:28-31 as part of the "meaning" of "Isaac's Marriage" is to invite similar comment. But this is to ignore the relationship between censorship, legally spelled-out or implicit in power-relations at any particular moment, and the way in which writers go about their work. If the bible itself can be called "The Great Code,"<sup>27</sup> and if, as Owen Barfield wrote, the New Testament is latent in the language of the Old,<sup>28</sup> there is little question that allusion to it carries much of the "encoding" of political comment in Vaughan's poems and in those of some of his contemporaries. Indeed, the implicit reference to the banned Book of Common Prayer was not without its message to that work's adherents.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Poetry Wales* 11.2 (1975): 140.

<sup>2</sup>Philip West, *Henry Vaughan's Silex Scintillans*, (Oxford: OUP, 2001) 53-54.

<sup>3</sup>For details see Alan Rudrum, *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1976, repr. 1995) 541-42.

<sup>4</sup>The 1650 volume was published by Humphrey Blunden, the 1655 by Henry Crips and Lodowick Lloyd, who had purchased Blunden's bookshop from his widow. See West 63.

<sup>5</sup>See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), especially chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: PUP, 1979) 336-37; Donald R. Dickson, *The Fountain of Living Waters. The Typology of the Waters of Life in Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987) 151-52.

<sup>7</sup>See the chapter "Allegory of the Marriage of Isaac" in Jean Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality* (London: Burns & Oats, 1960; a translation of his *Sacramentum Futuri*). He remarks (134) that the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca is considered as a

mystery by the Pseudo-Barnabas (XIII.2), and quotes "Rebecca is a type of the Church and Isaac a type of Christ."

<sup>8</sup>He cites poems by Francis Quarles and Alexander Ross (54 n 81).

<sup>9</sup>See the chapter "The Allegory of the Marriage of Isaac" in Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality*.

<sup>10</sup>"[...] as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant betwixt them made" (*The Book of Common Prayer 1559*, ed. John E. Booty [Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1976] 293).

<sup>11</sup>*Anthroposophia Theomagica, The Works of Thomas Vaughan*, ed. Alan Rudrum (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984) 72.

<sup>12</sup>Danielou's quotation from Philo's *De Congressu Eruditionis Gratia* 35-36 (p. 135) is also important in this connection.

<sup>13</sup>Danielou 118. He adds that in the Rabbinical literature the sacrifice of Isaac is prominent. He argues, however, that the "cycle of the Patriarchs, more than any other, came to be strongly touched by the Philonian influence, to such an extent that in the great commentators from the third century the two streams meet" (131).

<sup>14</sup>Danielou refers to *Antiquities of the Jews* I.xiii in *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, tr. William Whiston, Standard Edition, p. 49. In the Loeb edition, tr. H. J. Thackeray (London: Heinemann, 1930), see pp. 109 ff.; especially 115.

<sup>15</sup>This passage of Boehme is of course consistent with Romans 9:1-13.

<sup>16</sup>Book 16, ch. 36 of *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 699.

<sup>17</sup>*The Way to True Happinesse, Leading to the Gate of Knowledge [...] by question and answers, opening briefly the meaning of every severall book [...] of the Bible*, 1642 (Bodleian 8 J 556 Th) 4.

<sup>18</sup>Bodleian 101 c 196.

<sup>19</sup>Bodleian Douce B. B. 168 (1649)

<sup>20</sup>In, e.g. "St. Mary Magdalen" (p. 273).

<sup>21</sup>Vaughan treats the soul as feminine, although the Welsh *enaid* (soul) is masculine. See the note to "The Burial of an Infant," *Complete Poems* 570.

<sup>22</sup>See Alter 52.

<sup>23</sup>See the chapter "The Allegory of the Marriage of Isaac" in Danielou, *From Shadows to Reality*.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas and Rebecca were married, by Thomas's own account, on September 28, 1651 and Henry's first wife Catharine was almost certainly still alive when the poem was first printed. Thomas Vaughan refers to a "great glass full of eye-water, made att the pinner of Wakefield, by my deare wife, and my sister Vaughan, who are both now with god" (*The Works of Thomas Vaughan* 587). The reference is almost certainly to his sister-in-law Catharine, Henry's first wife.

<sup>25</sup>See H. R. Trevor-Roper's review of the Preface and Books I-V of *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* in *The New York Review of Books* 24.19 (24 November 1977). 50. It is worth remembering too that Hooker had been accused of "impiously ascribing to God a general inclination [...] that all men might be saved" (51), which puts him squarely with the Laudians as against the Calvinists of Vaughan's time.

<sup>26</sup>*The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1941, repr. 1959) 58.

<sup>27</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

<sup>28</sup>*Saving the Appearances* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) 176.