WIT, PRIDE AND THE RESURRECTION: MARGARET EDSON’S PLAY AND JOHN DONNE’S POETRY

For reasons internal and external to Margaret Edson’s play Wit, it is easy to miss the serious dialogue with John Donne’s poetry to be found in it. Internally, the last utterance we hear from the dying scholar on the subject of her studies seems to be a rejection — she emphatically does not want to hear Donne recited to her in her extremity, preferring a children’s story. Equally telling seems to be the play’s condemnation of what a character calls Donne’s “salvation anxiety” — the endless complicating of God’s simple gift of grace. Externally, audiences and reviewers seem resistant to two stark Augustinian themes sounded by the play: the recalcitrance of human pride and the utter graciousness of the Resurrection. I shall argue that far from rejecting Donne, the play grapples with these theological issues in terms largely set by Donne’s divine poems.

As readers familiar with the play are aware, Wit presents us with the ordeal into which a distinguished middle-aged scholar of seventeenth century English poetry is plunged when she is diagnosed with deadly ovarian cancer. Assigned for treatment to the research hospital at her university, she is under the care of Dr. Harvey Kelekian, head of medical oncology, but she is most often attended by a former student, Jason Poser, who is now a clinical fellow in oncology, and by Susie Monahan, primary nurse for the cancer inpatient unit. During the entirety of her fatal illness, Vivian Bearing receives but one visitor: Professor E.M. Ashford, her former mentor and predecessor as eminent Donne scholar. Although she is gowned in hospital garb throughout, it is not the medical apparatus surrounding Professor Bearing that provides the primary material for reflection in the play; rather, it is the theological substance to be found in the poems she has so often anatomized.

In order to make this case, it will be helpful to frame the texts used by Edson with two well known poems that are not quoted in the play. The first is so strikingly apropos that one might easily imagine it to be the Donnean origin of Wit; it is “Hymn to God, My God in My Sickness.” For in that poem, the speaker, like Vivian Bearing, lies in the grip of a fatal disease from which he does not expect to recover. He describes himself stretched out,

Whilst my Physicians by their love are growne
Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie

_REN 55.2 (Winter 2003)_

163
RENASCENCE

Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne
That this is my South-west discoverie
_Per fretrum febris_, by these streights to die (II.6-10).

Although this second stanza of the poem is the only one to mention the physicians, it is clear that we are to envision the entire scene as one in which they are in close attendance as the speaker contemplates his soul’s last journey. And in view of issues which emerge in _Wit_, two aspects of their relation to the patient are worthy of note. One is that their “love” of the patient has led them to turn him into a “Mapp.” With the best of intentions, they have reduced his body to a series of signs which they may read. Secondly, their prognosis seems to be a given. The patient will die. The only question that frets them is, how? By what strait will the soul make its exit from one life to the next?

The connections between these physicians and those who attend Edson’s Donne scholar are easily drawn. Dr. Kelekian and his team know perfectly well that patients do not survive stage four metastatic ovarian cancer. From the time Vivian receives her diagnosis, her prognosis is certain. Thus, their “love” for her quickly turns her into a set of signs to be read. How long can they keep her alive? How many chemo treatments can she withstand? What can they learn about her _“febris”_ as they chart her passage through it? Bearing herself is acutely aware of the nature of this interest. And the irony of the fact that the medical doctors are doing to her what she has so often done to a literal text in the past is borne out to her when she is visited on Grand Rounds. As she observes the medical observers she muses:

> Full of subservience, hierarchy, gratuitous displays, sublimated rivalries — I feel right at home. It is just like a graduate seminar.

> With one important difference: in Grand Rounds, _they read me_ like a book. Once I did the teaching, now I am taught. (37)

This moment of self-recognition on Dr. Bearing’s part is also mirrored in Donne’s poem. For while his physicians determine the manner of his death, Donne contemplates its meaning. And so Vivian, too, is forced to face in existential terms what for her medical colleagues remains a matter of research. Her attention must be turned so that she, too, will “think here before” what “I must doe then.”

Such a turn to the business of preparation for death is precisely what Vivian needs. Unlike the speaker in Donne’s poem, Bearing is not ready to look beyond the horizons of the world in which she has successfully made her way. Thus the poem is not only descriptive of Vivian’s state as an object of research laid out before her doctors; it is also theologically
prescriptive, charting the course she must follow. Her own spiritual self-examination must be as rigorous as the scrutiny her physicians employ. And it will be painful. As Vivian says after eight months of treatment, "[I]t is highly educational. I am learning to suffer" (31). Given Bearing's ironic tone it is easy to miss the fact that here she speaks the plain truth. Within the Augustinian context established by the Divine Poems she knows so well, suffering, insofar as it leads to self-examination and helps to defeat pride, is a blessing.

But "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" is predictive of the play in one final way. Unlike much of Donne's religious poetry, this poem may be said to surmount the doubt of salvation that accompanies acute awareness of sin.¹ The central assertion of the poem is that "death doth touch the Resurrection": just as on a world map the opposite edges (east and west) indicate the same line, so the end of this life is the beginning of the new. And the key to this paradox is Christ's resurrection, the means by which, in Christian reckoning, death is overcome by new life that utterly supplants it. The speaker in the poem asks God to account him one of Christ's own; he prays for his suffering to be identified with Christ's, so that he may also share in Christ's glory ("By these thorns give me his other Crowne"). Thus this hymn may be said to adumbrate Wit's surprising conclusion, when Vivian Bearing's death is succeeded by a resurrection gesture: she gets up from her deathbed, her clothes fall away from her, and she reaches upward toward the light. In this image, indeed, "death doth touch the Resurrection."

Since "Hymne to God my God in my sicknesse" contains both the medical setting to be found in the play and the resurrection telos towards which the play points, I will suggest that it also provides a fitting motto for Vivian Bearing's spiritual pilgrimage: "Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down."² Without death, there is no resurrection. Even so, joyful allegiance to God comes only after self-centered pride has been conquered. In the spirit of the Augustinian tradition to which he belongs,³ Donne believes pride, understood as rebellious indifference to God, to be the root of human sin. And so deeply rooted is this pride that only God's intervention can dig it out. Since sin's reach extends throughout our being, extracting it is painful. Adversity and even suffering thus paradoxically become occasions for thanksgiving, for they are signs of God's radical surgery.

This lesson, implicit in so much of Donne's work, is most boldly taught in a second Divine Poem that Vivian does not mention. Perhaps the most offensive of Donne's Holy Sonnets to modern sensibility is "Batter my heart."⁴ For it not only condones human suffering, but demands it from God's hand as the only corrective to sin. It is not sufficient for God merely
to "seek to mend" the speaker's heart as a tinker might mend a pot; God must beat, fire, and remake the vessel entirely if it is to be once again serviceable to its maker. In the two paradoxes that close the poem the speaker asks God to "enthral" (enslave) him in order to free him, and to "ravish" him in order to make him chaste. Battery, slavery, rape — these horrors of human conduct are employed as metaphors of God's dealings with those he loves. In a sermon, Donne provides a rationale for such unlikely love. It is much worse for us, notes Donne, if God does not punish us than if he does, for to be spared means that He has forgotten us. How woeful we are if God, "forbearing to take knowledge of our transgressions, . . . shall say of us, as he does of Israel, Why should ye be smitten any more?" For this happens only "when God leaves us to our selves, and studies our recovery no farther, by any more corrections . . . ." (qtd. in Gardner 283).

This notion that suffering may indeed be a vehicle of God's mercy is crucial to an understanding of Wit. And in fact, it may be no coincidence that Dame Helen Gardner provides the sermon quotation above immediately after quoting from, "If poysous minerals," the Holy Sonnet that is the subject of Vivian Bearing's lecture in the play. For both Donne and Gardner's scholarship loom large in this work. What has largely gone unappreciated about the play in the commentary that has so far appeared is that Professor Bearing herself undergoes an inner religious drama remarkably like one portrayed in the sonnets in which she is expert. Her suffering during her ordeal with ovarian cancer and its treatment is, as Donne suggests, a means to correction, and ultimately salvation. Just as it is difficult for modern sensibility to accept Donne's drastic metaphors in "Batter my heart," so audiences resist the suggestion that Vivian Bearing's ordeal might actually be a needed antidote to that form of sin Donne knew so well, pride. And equally startling is the gesture of resurrection at the end of the play, which like the grace which Donne anxiously doubts, offers the full redemption neither she nor her doctors can supply.

In interviews, Margaret Edson has expressed mild surprise that critics have not paid more attention to the religious aspect of her play: "The play is about redemption, and I'm surprised no one mentions it. Grace is the opportunity to experience God in spite of yourself, which is what Dr. Bearing ultimately achieves" (Martini 24). Despite notable exceptions in essays by Betty Carter and especially Martha Greene Eads, most commentators have fastened upon the medical aspects of the play. Victims of ovarian cancer have used it as a rallying point. Medical professionals have employed it to discuss patient rights and research ethics. In several American cities, sold out performances have been followed by lengthy talk-back sessions that have focused on these issues. The play thus seems
valuable to much of its audience for its realistic portrayal of courageous suffering and its attack on the indifference of doctors. But Edson is right to be surprised. At its moral center, the play is not about kindness, but redemption.

Despite what at least two critics (Iannone and Wheeler) have claimed, there is a clear connection between the spiritual crisis Bearing faces and the poetry she studies. Like the Donne of the Holy Sonnets, she is unable to trust God, in large part because she lacks the humility to do so. For example, Dr. Bearing is much more like her physicians than unlike them. In her absorption in research she resembles Kelekian and his research fellow Jason. Like them, she is ambitious, having worked her way to a position of eminence in her profession, of which she is understandably proud. Her callousness to students anticipates Jason's indifference to bedside manner. When her former student turned physician prepares her for a pelvic exam and leaves her, feet still in stirrups and knees spread apart while he searches the hall for a nurse, Vivian can only wryly register that she wishes she had given him an "A." This observation seems to acknowledge that while power relationships have been reversed, she has been as ruthless in her own arena as the callow doctor. Further, her reliance upon "wit" keeps her at a distance from others and initially increases her suffering. She has made no friends and has no remaining family. Her only visitor is the faculty mentor who originally inspired her, the Gardner-like Prof. Ashford.

Thus, in the long run, her illness humiliates her in an edifying sense, breaking down her pride to prepare her for a childlike faith. Although Bearing does not invite God's excruciating remediation, as Donne does when he asks God to "breake, blowe, burn and make me new," the ordeal of cancer ultimately has this effect on the once aloof professor. In other words, the secularized exegete is made to follow the Augustinian trajectory described by her subject: God raises up only those whom he has first cast down. As terrible as it sounds to contemporary ears accustomed to regarding suffering as pure evil, Vivian's pain is a good thing. Her suffering brings salvation. To borrow the title of Tim McLaurin's novel, she is cured by fire.

Taking our cue from Dr. Bearing herself, we can turn to the texts within the text of the play to "read" the progress of her soul. The first important text is delivered in a flashback from Bearing's college days; it is "death, be not proud." Bearing remembers a confrontation with her great mentor Prof. Ashford over textual accuracy. Prof. Ashford informs the young Vivian in stern tones that she has used the wrong edition for her paper on the most famous of the Holy Sonnets. In the edition Vivian used, the punctuation is incorrect. Instead of a semi-colon and exclamation
point, the final assertion of the poem should be preceded by a comma and followed by a period: "death, thou shalt die." In this way, Ashford explains, "Nothing but a breath — a comma — separates life from life everlasting." The application of this point as it arises later in connection with Vivian’s illness is that death is to be accepted as a part of life, the final victory over it having been secured. Thus, the individual need not approach it with inflated drama. Rather, quiet confidence is in order. Secondly, Prof. Ashford urges her pupil to curb her inclination to approach life’s difficulties as intellectual puzzles to be solved. After the brief lecture on textual accuracy, Vivian mistakenly concludes that what the poem says about death is simply a metaphysical conceit. "It’s wit!" she declares. Her older and wiser teacher disagrees. The poem, she insists, is about life and truth. She urges Vivian to turn aside from her paper for the afternoon and enjoy her friends, thus gaining the experience that will free her from over-intellectualizing. But Vivian returns to the library.

The second text examined in the play is one that Prof. Bearing herself analyzes. It is another Holy Sonnet — one in which she sees mirrored what we come to know as her own wit-ful anxiety. In her remembered classroom explication of "If poysonous mineralles" the professor stresses that in Donne’s poems, "metaphysical quandaries are addressed, but never resolved" (48). The speaker in this poem, she argues, begins with the brash certainty that God will not punish human sin if He overlooks the deadly actions of poisons and serpents. But the poet quickly loses his nerve. Recognizing the heinousness of his own sin and the reality of God’s judgment, he is gripped by fear, and instead of pleading for God’s mercy, asks that God forget him: "when the speaker considers his own sins and the inevitability of God’s judgment, he can conceive of but one resolution: to disappear" (50). What the speaker skips over, in other words, is the obvious and simple solution that he has only to accept God’s forgiveness. But this he apparently cannot do.

We might describe the speaker’s failure as a lack of faith. Unable to escape judgment through wit, he cannot admit that God might extend the salvation he cannot supply for himself. Rather than trust to God’s mercy, he prefers to hide. And in the course of the play, we are meant to see that this is precisely Vivian’s situation. Here we come to the second important theological concept registered in Wit. The pride which led her to that state of isolation characteristic of sin has but one cure, and she cannot avail herself of it. Plainly, Vivian is a victim of both cancer and her doctors. Equally obvious is her courage. But most important of all is the fact that her loneliness is self-inflicted. Like Ivan Ilych before her, but most particularly like the Donne she creates for her students, Vivian’s greatest obstacle as she faces death is her own pride. The point is borne out in a
subtle way by the fact that immediately after the reverie in which she recalls her lecture — indeed before she has finished it — she is summoned out of her room for an ultrasound. "It should not be now," she insists. "I am in the middle of — this. I have *this* planned for now, not ultrasound" (51). Since this exchange calls attention to the intrusiveness of hospital procedures, it is easy to miss that Vivian resents any imposition on the imperious control she has exerted over her life. Distinguished professors are not used to having their lectures interrupted. And it is not only physicians, but more profoundly mortality that has wrested control from Vivian's hands.

Of course, Vivian would be mistaken to place her ultimate trust in modern medicine. But she would be equally misguided to attempt to regain her old autonomy. The hard spiritual lesson of her ordeal is that her position has been false all along. This is the point of the final text she hears — a text that is the product not of wit but of wisdom. When Vivian's old mentor comes to visit her in her extremity, she has with her a children's book, bought for her great-grandson. It is this book the enfeebled Vivian wants to hear, not recitations of Donne. This final text, explicad by Vivian's mentor, provides a neat contrast to Vivian's own virtuoso interpretation of Donne's sonnet. The book is simple where Donne is complex, reassuring rather than provoking. But it is also profound, as Prof. Ashford explains, for it is a testament to faith, and thus offers the spiritual medicine that Vivian most needs.

This final text is *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown. In it, the bunny tells his mother he is going to assume a new shape and run away. But regardless of the guises he proposes, the mother has an answer: "'I will be a bird and fly away from you,' says the bunny. 'If you become a bird and fly away from me,' said his mother, 'I will be a tree you come home to.'" Finally, the would-be truant gives up: "'Shucks,' said the little bunny, 'I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.' And so he did" (80).

The message for Vivian is twofold. First, this simple tale is an antidote to the anxiety-producing complexity of Donne and the competitive interpretative hubris to which Vivian and her medical counterparts have fallen prey. The straightforward consolation of the children's book is very much like that of the orange popsicle Vivian shares with the sympathetic nurse, Susie. But secondly, the book offers a directly theological affirmation. Prof. Ashford sees in this tale, "A little allegory of the soul. No matter what it hides, God will find it" (80). Thus the hopefulness of the book springs not from human kindness, but from trust in God's overriding mercy. Not only is the manner of the story contrary to Donne, but its content provides an answer to the fearful sonnet explicad earlier.
RENASCENCE

by Prof. Bearing: it is impossible to hide from God, but also unnecessary. One has only to relinquish one’s defenses to find the security they could never provide.

Precisely this theological message is suggested by Prof. Ashford’s final words, and by Vivian’s triumphant gesture at the conclusion of the play. When Prof. Ashford finishes reading the book, Vivian has drifted into a childlike sleep. Before she leaves, Prof. Ashford pronounces what amounts to a benediction: “It’s time to go. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” While the Shakespeare quotation seems strictly conventional, these words are fraught with meaning. For it is Vivian’s time to “go” as well, and the request for angel song is a prayer for the dying consonant with the “little allegory of the soul” we have just heard.

These words also provide the framework for Vivian’s last, symbolic action in the play. Rising from her bed, the woman we know from the pronouncements of the medical staff to be dead walks toward a light and begins removing her few garments. At last she lets fall her hospital gown, and according to the stage direction, stands “naked, and beautiful, reaching for the light” (85). Given the context of Donne, *The Runaway Bunny*, and Prof. Ashford’s benediction, this action must be seen as a sign of resurrection, when as St. Paul says, “We shall be raised incorruptible.” And the fact that it is the power of God that allows Vivian so to rise is underscored by the medical defeat that precedes her triumphant gesture. Jason Posner, the brash young resident, has ignored the “do not resuscitate” order on Vivian’s chart, and vainly summoned the code team. After belatedly recognizing the order, he collapses in chagrin, and tellingly murmurs, “Oh, God,” in unwitting testimony to the real agent of Vivian’s salvation.

In Margaret Edson’s play, God eschews the manner of the hound of heaven for the way of a mother, refusing to let us outrun the bounds of divine love. Although Vivian Bearing’s victory over the pride that separates her from God’s grace is never registered in a moment of conscious renunciation, it is begun in her acceptance of her friends’ sympathy. And indeed, the audience has been prepared for her transformation by an earlier moment of self-reflection that recalls her reading of “If poysisoneous mineralls.” After confessing her fear and confusion to Susie, Vivian shares a popsicle with the nurse and with her help comes to the decision not to be resuscitated should her heart stop. Vivian comments on this exchange:

Now is not the time for verbal swordplay, for unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphysical conceit, for wit.
SYKES

And nothing would be worse than a detailed scholarly analysis. Erudition. Interpretation. Complication.

Now is a time for simplicity. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness.

I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. But I see that I have been found out. Oooohhh.

I’m scared. Oh, God. I want . . . I want . . . No. I want to hide.
I just want to curl up in a little ball. (69-70)

While she fails at this point to complete the process, the movement of grace has begun in Vivian. Her self-disclosure in this passage amounts to a confession. She forsakes self-sufficiency and turns to God. And what she wants when she speaks the sentence that she cannot bring herself to finish can be supplied from her own interpretation of “If poxosonous minarallns.” What the speaker in the sonnet wanted but could not bring himself to accept, according to the lecture, was forgiveness. The hesitation she shows by attempting to follow Donne’s speaker into hiding is temporary, the action of grace having gained its last needed momentum from her confession.

Edson herself insists that her character does respond in this way: “finally there’s a breakthrough, and it happens in the last ten seconds of her life” (Carter 26). When asked at a conference why Vivian is naked at the end of the play, Edson answered, “What else would you wear to a redemption? It’s ‘Come as you are!’” (Carter 25). And fittingly, God completes for Vivian what she, stripped of the illusion of self-sufficiency, cannot accomplish for herself. To adapt a Biblical metaphor, she is clothed (only!) in righteousness, but it is a borrowed outfit.

Not surprisingly, the play’s ending has puzzled viewers. Typical and plain spoken is this response from a generally appreciative reviewer:

The only problem I have personally with Wit is in the perception of what it’s about. As Chalfant [Kathleen Chalfant, the actress who played Vivian Bearing in a New York production] proclaimed in a recent interview, the feeling is that the play is about redemption. In this instance, I simply don’t get it. Although it is a staggering artistic accomplishment, I am definitely not redeemed. As the brilliant mind and stalwart singular lifestyle of Dr. Bearing is reduced to dependency on [a] dear but slow-witted nurse — and ignoring the final gorgeous but obviously theatrical device of the character rising from her deathbed, throwing off all her clothes and standing bald and naked facing upward toward a bright white light — I personally could see only the anguish of loss, not an uplifting experience. (Holder 2)
Holder's problem is that the ending is only redemptive and not merely theatrical if one sees it as a sign of resurrection and finds the Resurrection credible. Vivian Bearing can only be remade and newly whole through a miracle. Clearly, her final gesture is metaphorically, but the metaphor only offers hope to those who see it with the eyes of faith. The gesture, we might fairly say, is a kind of promise, just as Christians from the time of St. Paul have looked on Christ's resurrection as a promise, the very one which Donne claimed in the hymn written in his sickness: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died . . . For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (I Cor. 15:20, 22). Vivian's renewed and transformed body is neither a happy fantasy nor an ill-conceived image of a soul's ascension into heaven. Rather, it is an emblem of hope based upon faith that Jesus' resurrection has accomplished, in Rowan Williams's words, "A restoration of the world's wholeness" (72). The process of redemption now begun will be completed in a future which Christ's resurrection has revealed.

As an ending to Bearing's story, the resurrection gesture could hardly be more fitting. For, as Donne knew, it is only through this drastic act of God that the terrible wrongs of life can be set right. Given the reach of human pride and the finality of death, nothing but the power of God can save us. This is why both Christian intellectuals such as Carol Iannone and secular interpreters such as the makers of the HBO film get the play wrong. It is neither about simple kindness as Iannone believes, nor can a wishful (and fully clothed!) return to youth convey Bearing's redemption, as it is made to do in the film version of the play. The grace to which Edson refers in interviews must be God's prevenient grace. That is, it is only as God is at work before and in spite of our actions and intentions that redemption is possible at all. The awful temptation of pride is the refusal to acknowledge that grace. The miracle of grace is that God overcomes our pride, even when pride is defended with all the subtlety of wit. And the ultimate and life-restoring instance of this shocking and undeserved grace is the Resurrection, in which we may hope to share: "Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down."

Wit should be regarded as an expression of what Karl Rahner called anonymous Christianity, or even more precisely, as one of Karl Barth's parables of the Kingdom. Although Professor Bearing makes no explicit connection between the Christian orthodoxy of the Holy Sonnets and her own crisis, we are invited to see her in that light. And in fact, the three texts within the text of the play supply that context. Her redemption at the end does indeed remain what Wheeler calls a "theatrical lie" unless we see it as participating in the Resurrection of the One whom the play never names. But if we are willing to grant that the triune God is at work extra
SYKES

muros ecclesiae, we are free to let Edson’s character bear witness not to the strength of the human spirit, but to the healing power of Easter.

Notes

1) Frontain maintains that Donne goes so far as to attempt to provoke God to violent action against him in order to gain assurance that God has elected him for salvation.

2) This line, the poem’s conclusion, is a reworking of the Vulgate translation of Ps. 146:8. See Shawcross’s note, 392.

3) Various critics have placed Donne along a wide band of the theological spectrum of his time. Most convincing to me is the view that the mature Donne sought a middle way within Anglicanism, adopting some of the emphases of moderate or conforming Calvinists without rejecting the broad mainstream of Catholic theology. Thus the term “Augustinian” seems most appropriate, especially where the matters of sin and grace are concerned. See Young and Johnson.

4) Theologian Sarah Coakley explores the connections between sexual desire and desire for God, using this sonnet as her point of departure. She chooses this poem precisely because it is so offensive, particularly in light of feminist concerns. She admires Donne for making explicit a connection that she believes to be implicit throughout Trinitarian theology, although she sharply criticizes the “Western, Augustinian heritage” he represents. See Coakley.

5) On this point, I, at least, find Edson to be an astute theological critic of Donne, contra Iannone. Although Donne is searing in his analysis of sin’s hold on the human soul, his grasping after the assurance of faith often seems unsuccessful, and he can only pray for what he has not received. Mary Arshagouni Papazian argues that this same emotional experience is registered in the Confessions of Augustine and the works of John Bunyan (434). See also John Carey’s treatment of Donne’s anxiety concerning death.

6) In this way, too, Edson follows Donne (and Augustine). Young makes a solid case for Donne’s unreserved acceptance of the doctrine of prevenient grace, at the same time that he rejected Calvin’s notion of irresistible grace on the grounds that it denied free will.

Works Cited


RENASCENCE


