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W;t, Donne's Holy Sonnets, and the Problem of Pain

Sean McDowell

During the last several years, one of the fastest-growing exposures of John Donne's poetry to new readers has occurred not in the college classroom but on the American stage, through the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *W;t* by first-time playwright Margaret Edson.[1] Widely acclaimed by critics, theatergoers, and medical ethicists alike, *W;t* dramatizes the physical decline of Dr. Vivian Bearing, a professor who attempts to cope with terminal metastatic ovarian cancer, in part by referring to Donne's Holy Sonnets. Teachers of Donne's poetry should take notice of the play, not simply because it features a formidable seventeenth-century scholar as its protagonist, but because it *mis*introduces the Holy Sonnets—and by extension, John Donne—to audiences who might not have been familiar with them. It

[1]Recipient of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for drama, *W;t* began as a small production in Costa Mesa, California, and is now being performed off-Broadway and in cities across the United States, as well as abroad. The popular Mike Nichols film version of it (2001), featuring Emma Thompson in the title role as Dr. Vivian Bearing, quickly found its way to videocassette and dvd. Professors across the country are beginning to work the play into their college classrooms in disciplines outside of English. One of my colleagues at Seattle University has taught it in a nursing ethics class; another has taught it in a philosophy course on the human person.

caricatures what it means to be a Donne scholar in our current age; it oversimplifies the gestures of the Holy Sonnets it quotes; and it dismisses the content of several of the sonnets in an effort to parallel Bearing's situation with that of Donne's poetic speakers. Because of these representational problems, most Donne scholars with whom I have conversed have complex reactions to the play. On the one hand, many cannot help but respond sympathetically to Bearing's plight; indeed, her physical degeneration and ensuing mental anguish are moving on many levels. On the other, many dislike and, in some cases, even revile Edson's simplistic rendition of the scholarly profession. This equivocal response partly results from Edson's starkly drawn professor stereotype. Indeed, as Carol Iannone has remarked, the stereotype is so "outdated" that "it is difficult to imagine a professor of this kind—the astringent and unfeeling academic—in the touchy-feely world of the contemporary university."[2] But the ambivalence also issues from Bearing's performance of what many would consider a suspect reading practice that misconstrues individual poems and removes them from relevant historical, philosophical, and cultural contexts. Even though Donne often speaks eloquently to the existentialist concerns of our modern era, many of us must exercise our imaginations more forcefully—and do more contextual reading—to appreciate the full flavor of his devotional sensibility. Such contextualizing, however, is absent from Bearing's meditations. Thus, while *W;t* is in dialogue with Donne's canon, it addresses the problem of pain from a perspective that Donne and his original readers would have considered—in theory, at least—quite alien. Moreover, it presents, in effect, different poems from the ones Donne's original readers knew or from the ones we read in many a classroom today.

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[2]"Donne Undone," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, 100 (February 2000): 12. Iannone also objects to the way the "great John Donne, to whose work Vivian has devoted her life, must be cut down [to size]."

For readers unfamiliar with *W;t*, it has a running time of between ninety and one hundred minutes, and the plot centers on Bearing's rendition of the story of her illness from the initial diagnosis to her last breath. The elimination of the fourth wall reinforces the meditative nature of her account. She moves back and forth between the present and her memories, and she comments on events as they are depicted. Her meditations begin by highlighting the central concerns of her life to this point: prestige, erudition, precision of thought, and notoriety as a tough professor and a tough person. They then progress through the stages of her illness, from the initial diagnosis to her ultimate decline. With each stage of degeneration, she finds she must relinquish a part of her professorial self-image. She loses her dignity, for example, when Jason Posner, a clinical fellow and former student of hers, clumsily gives her a pelvic exam while making embarrassing conversation. On top of the multiple invasions to which she must submit, the experimental chemotherapy robs her of her hair, as well as her ability to teach or perform research. As her cancer spreads, and as she fights near constant bouts of fever and nausea, she loses more and more control of her body and of the choices the doctors make regarding her body.

Throughout, while the play critiques the excessive paternalism of the medical profession,[3] the main focus of Bearing's meditations

[3]According to Rosette C. Lamont, in "Coma Versus Comma: John Donne's Holy Sonnets in Edson's *WIT*" (*Massachusetts Review* [Winter 1999–2000]: 575), "Edson has written the perfect metaphor for the dehumanization of our modern world. A dehumanized world even as we pretend to advance science." Also see Martha Greene Eads' essay, "Unwitting Redemption in Margaret Edson's *Wit*," *Christianity and Literature* (Winter 2002): 246–9, for a discussion of the play's contrast of compassionate medical professionalism (in the character Susie Monahan) with dispassionate medical professionalism (in Harvey Kelekian and

is on how she copes with her losses. Donne's Holy Sonnets prove instrumental in establishing her sense of self. This becomes clear in how she characterizes Donne's poetry. "The salient characteristic of the poems," she says,

> is wit: "Itchy outbreaks of far-fetched wit," as Donne himself said.
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> To the common reader—that is to say, the undergraduate with a B-plus or better average—wit provides an invaluable exercise for sharpening the mental faculties, for stimulating the flash of comprehension that can only follow hours of exacting and seemingly pointless scrutiny....
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> To the scholar, to the mind comprehensively trained in the subtleties of seventeenth-century vocabulary, versification, and theological, historical, geographical, political, and mythological allusions, Donne's wit is...a way to see how good you really are.

Jason Posner). It is fair to say that the play affirms a feminist, human-centered ideal of medical care against a paternalistic, research-centered ideal. On Tuesdays during the play's 1999 run at the Union Square Theatre in Manhattan, the cast members remained after the performance to participate in moderated discussions with members of the audience. As Suzanne Gordon reports, during one of these sessions, a physician in the audience changed the course of the conversation when he asked, "Why are we focusing exclusively on the doctor-patient relationship when we should be looking at the nurse-patient relationship and what doctors can learn from nurses?" ("Doctor's Brains," *The Nation* 269.4 [26 July 1999]: 33). Gordon further explains, "The fact that so few people publicly recognize the centrality of nursing to the play's message—that intelligence exists not only in medicine but in the kind of caregiving traditionally devalued in our society—highlights the persistence of our ambivalent attitudes toward female caregiving in general and nursing in particular."

> After twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is quite as good as I.[4]

As this description shows, Donne's poems furnish the measure for Bearing's demonstration of her abilities and figure prominently in her efforts to maintain her self-image. She epitomizes the professorial egotist and passes her view of the poems as performance pieces in wit (and as opportunities for interpretive preening before a captive audience) to her students. Jason, who is in charge of tracking her experimental chemotherapy, also supports the description of Donne's poems as tests for the mind, although he delivers his views in a decidedly different vernacular:

> This guy John Donne was incredibly intense. Like your whole brain had to be in knots before you could get it.... The Holy Sonnets we worked on most, they were mostly about Salvation Anxiety. That's the term I made up in one of my papers, but I think it fits pretty well. Salvation Anxiety. You're this brilliant guy, I mean, brilliant—this guy makes Shakespeare sound like a Hallmark card. And you know you're a sinner. And there's this promise of salvation, the whole religious thing. But you just can't deal with it.... It just doesn't stand up to scrutiny. But you can't face life without it either. So you write these screwed-up sonnets. Everything is brilliantly convoluted. Really tricky stuff. Bouncing off the walls. Like a game, to make the puzzle so complicated. (75–6)

For both characters, the "screwed-up" Holy Sonnets are puzzles meant to test one's wit, one's ability to follow the convolutions of Donne's thought. This conception of the sonnets informs Bearing's explications of the poems. For example, she introduces "If poysonous mineralls" as an example of "[i]ngenuity, virtuosity,

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[4] *W;t* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 20. All subsequent quotations from the play come from this edition.

and a vigorous intellect that jousts with the most exalted concepts" (48). She is not interested in the sonnet's role within a larger devotional context; rather, she is fascinated by its demonstration of an "[a]gressive intellect" at work, an intellect, one suspects, like her own. Later, she says of the poem, in a reading supposedly paralleling Richard Strier's, that the speaker's desire to "*hide* from God's judgement" runs counter to doctrinal assurances of "*forgiveness*" for all sinners (50).[5] She writes off the speaker's exclamation to God beginning at line 10 as a shift from "cleverness to melodrama," and ultimately her overriding concern is not the issue of faith raised in the poem but whether she and her students have "outwitted Donne" or "been outwitted by" him. Throughout the play, when she is not remembering her performances of the sonnets for her students, Bearing refers to the sonnets to display her wit to the audience. After she recites the first five-and-a-half lines of "This is my playes last scene," she remarks, "I have always particularly liked that poem. In the abstract. Now I find the image of 'my minute's last [sic] point' a little, shall we say, *pointed*" (52–3).

Eventually, however, the crippling pain of her illness disables her wit. Her physical torment becomes so intense that even her gallows humor fades, and subsequently, her relationship to

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[5]Even though Bearing describes Strier to her students as a "former student of mine who once sat where you do now, although I dare say he was *awake*" (p. 50), her ruminations about this poem do not do justice to the complexity of Strier's argument. In "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608–1610," *Modern Philology* 86 (1989): 382–4 especially, contrary to Bearing's claim that Donne's speaker "can conceive of but one resolution: to *disappear*," Strier writes that the "sense of sin and the fear of God in this poem are so profound that being forgotten replaces being forgiven as the alternative to damnation. The distinction of this poem is that it is willing to voice this view, not to palliate or evade it" (pp. 383–4). Surely, voicing the fear Strier describes is not tantamount to wanting to "disappear." I examine Bearing's treatment of this poem at greater length below.

Donne's sonnets changes. Her pain forces her to focus on those few moments she has left. By the end of the play, as Bearing nears death, her mentor, Professor E. M. Ashford, whose initials and demeanor conjure images of the university don from the 1950s and 1960s, visits her and offers to recite some of Donne's sonnets for her diversion. Bearing responds with a pained "Noooooooo" (79). Here, at the end of her life, she rejects Donne's sonnets, her life's work, because she associates them with her anguish. They come to represent the mental torment accompanying her physical torment. The only reading matter she can tolerate is the children's story, *The Runaway Bunny* (1942), by Margaret Wise Brown.[6] Earlier in the play, we learn that it was during Vivian's own first reading of this story that she fell in love with words. Now, her failing condition has forced her to regress to one of her earliest reading experiences, all professorial pretensions gone, along with any need for John Donne.

Undoubtedly, the play demonstrates how terminal illness forces us to abandon our careers and re-evaluate our understanding of our strengths, commitments, and priorities. But by treating the Holy Sonnets and John Donne more generally as ballast that must be cut loose for redemption to occur, the play misses an ideal opportunity to explore mortality in a more complex way. The dismissal of Donne's sonnets signals a misreading of how they can be, or perhaps were originally intended to be taken. The play suggests that the sonnets function primarily as instances of "verbal swordplay" rather than as instruments for consolation, but this view results more from a modern critical orientation than from any historicized understanding of reader response. In treating the sonnets in this way, Bearing betrays her almost exclusively New Critical bias (in the most simplistic and stereotypical sense of this term). She behaves as if the poems were artifacts intended

[6]The rejection of Donne in favor of Wise Brown "mirrors Edson's own decision to abandon graduate studies to teach kindergarten" (Eads, p. 242).

principally for verbal dissection. They become an elaborate game that a skillful interpreter can "win" only through mental acuity. This is the attitude she takes when considering her students, for example. Bed-ridden and in isolation, she meditates: "If they [the students] were here, if I were lecturing: How I would *perplex* them! I could work my students into a frenzy. Every ambiguity, every shifting awareness. I could draw so much from the poems. I could be so powerful" (48). In other words, Bearing as a critic is more interested in the performance of her interpretive prowess than in any historicized reconstruction of the poems' meaning or impact on non-scholarly readers. For her, wit is all that remains in the sonnets when the context of faith is removed. Indeed, it is all that should remain in the business of interpreting and professing literature.

While Bearing may be styled an acclaimed modern reader of the sonnets, she misses what would have been obvious to Donne's original readers: that comfort might be found in the issues the sonnets raise and in the ways the sonnets respond to these issues.[7] Her obliviousness in regard to this point amounts to more than simply a critical blindness; rather, it reveals to us a serious flaw in her characterization. No actual literary scholar today would achieve such a high level of prestige in her discipline with such a blinkered understanding of her primary subject of study. As Mary A. Papazian explains, "In turning to Donne in her pain, Bearing ironically misses the very essence of his ministry as a pastor in the English Church."[8] Bearing wonders at one point what Donne

[7]In fact, Roman Dubinski claims Donne intended at least some of his Holy Sonnets to be read alongside the Penitential Psalms during his friends' evening devotions: "Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Seven Penitential Psalms," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Reforme* 10 (1986): 201–16.

[8]Papazian made this remark at the 2002 John Donne Society Conference as part of her response to the paper session in which I presented an earlier version of this essay. I thank her for kindly allowing me to make use of her unpublished comments.

would make of the fact that her medical treatment is actually destroying her immune system, as if unaware that Donne addressed the complicity of disease in mortality in his other writings. If Donne were a character thrust onstage to address Bearing in her time of suffering, I suspect he would deliver a message in accord with the one he gave to auditors at Lincoln's Inn in a pair of sermons in the Spring or Summer of 1618. The first of these treats Psalm 38.2: "*FOR THINE ARROWES STICK FAST IN ME, AND THY HAND PRESSETH ME SORE.*" Donne takes the "arrowes" here to refer specifically to afflictions, both of the soul and the body. He argues that these arrows are sent by God as corrections, and that the Christian glorifies God by using these corrections properly. God "*tries* us by these arrows, what proof we are," he says.[9] "Or [God] *punishes* us by those arrows of new sins, for our former sins; and so, when he hath lost one arrow, he shoots another." God "shoots arrow after arrow, permits sin after sin, that at last some sin, that draws affliction with it, might bring us to understanding." According to Donne, disease is simply another of God's arrows, and when it strikes, the Christian is faced with a choice—either try to pull the arrow out by resisting temptations, lamenting past "transgressions," and turning to God; or leave the arrow in and reject God's cure. Several of Donne's sonnets can be interpreted as the speaker's struggles with whether to remove or leave in the arrows, and as I have argued elsewhere, simply dramatizing those struggles could have served to edify Donne's original readers.[10]

In another sermon on verse three of the same Psalm, Donne defines sickness as a product of the Fall and as evidence of God's anger. He remarks, "In *poverty* I lack but other things; In

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[9]*The Sermons of John Donne*, Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 2:67. All subsequent quotations from the sermons come from this volume.

[10]"Edification and the Reader of Donne's *Divine Poems*," *Discoveries* 17 (1999): 1–2, 10–12.

banishment I lack but other men; But in *sicknesse*, I lack my *self.* And, as the greatest misery of war, is, when our own Country is made the seat of the war; so is it of *affliction*, when *mine own Body* is made the subject thereof" (2.80). In addition to suffering a loss of "*self*," Donne says the sick person lacks rest and as a result, endures a living death, in that he or she becomes a lingering victim of the mortal combat. Yet this condition cannot be located in the body alone. Paraphrasing St. Basil, Donne urges that

> The soule hath Bones, as well as the body, and there shall be no Rest in those Bones. Such a signification is applyable to the Flesh, as well as the Bones; The flesh may signifie the *lower faculties* of the soule, or the weaker works of the higher faculties thereof; There may bee a Carnality in the understanding; a concupiscence of disputation, and controversie in unnecessary points. *Requirit quod sibi respondere nequit*, The mind of a curious man delights to examine it selfe upon Interrogatories, which, upon the Racke, it cannot answer, and to vexe it selfe with such doubts as it cannot resolve. (2.84)

If the habitual weakness of the flesh creates doubts in a person's mind, how much greater these doubts become when that weakness is exploited through actual physical suffering. In Donne's sermon, recognition of the divine anger responsible for sickness becomes the remedy for sickness. If suffering sinners can bring themselves to recognize sickness as the physiological result of sin, they can begin the spiritual convalescence that will make them whole. Donne concludes that seeking Christ (the "*Physician*") through remorse, penitence, and humility will restore wholeness to the terminally ill person and enable him (or her) to survive death through the promise of resurrection.

Donne's message would be a harsh one for a cancer patient because it suggests that she is culpable in her suffering. But the seeming cruelty of the message underscores how radically Donne's

assumptions about mortality differ from those of the modern scholar, Bearing. Donne assumes the central consideration during a period of terminal illness should be the afterlife and not the life being abandoned, and this religious orientation proposes grounds for consolation. As Donne contends, "though the clouds of [the] arrows [of tribulation] may hide all suns of worldly comforts from thee, yet thou art still *under the shadow of* [God's] *wings*" (69). Early in the play, Professor Ashford tells Bearing that the comma between "And death shall be no more" and "Death thou shalt die" in Helen Gardner's text of Holy Sonnet 6 shows that "[n]othing but a breath—a comma—separates life from life everlasting" (14). Intellectually, Bearing appears to understand what this means but not from the standpoint of faith. Similarly, when faced with her own death, she cannot bring herself to pray because prayer, to her, is not the action of a scholar. When nauseated or in pain, she exclaims, "Oh God," but never as part of a direct address to God. Donne's speaker, by contrast, exclaims *to* God, to "importune" Him, to lay siege to Him, because Donne believes this "impudency" is God's will and part of the Christian's role. For Bearing, however, "Oh God" is simply an exclamation without an intended auditor. Thus Bearing misses the communal vision of Donne's theology, as recently described by Jeffrey Johnson,[11] and she misses the intimacy with which Donne's theology informs the sonnets. She chooses to face her cancer alone, while the specialists

[11]Johnson sees this communal vision arising from the dissolution of hierarchy in Donne's understanding of the Trinity and in the bond formed between the divine and created humanity: "To be precise, within the framework of creation, Donne persistently articulates the image of the godhead in terms of a divine community that, through consultation, manifests the relationship between Creator and creatures within the Church, as it liturgically reinscribes the eternal unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (*The Theology of John Donne, Studies in Renaissance Literature*, vol. 1 [Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1999]: p. 2). See especially chapters one and two.

hover around her, thereby invoking the *situation* of *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, but not Donne's *responses* to illness.[12]

Bearing need not share Donne's beliefs to be a Donne scholar. Yet her inability to meditate on any of Donne's metaphysical questions and answers constitutes a missed opportunity that could have deepened the portrayal of her journey through illness. Even so, the final scene suggests that within the fiction of the play, she finds redemption of some sort after she dies and reaches, "naked, and beautiful," toward the "little light" that suddenly appears. Frontain argues that by undergoing the "necessary humbling of pride that precedes a kindling of compassion" and in so doing, becoming a "child again," Bearing's soul is "no longer hiding," and she now "can be released into the light."[13] The play's portrayal of redemption, however, is enigmatic at best. It depicts redemption without a theology. As Eads points out, the final scene "depicts a redemptive moment devoid of any specific religious association."[14] Furthermore, if we cast Bearing's acceptance of human kindness in a redemptive paradigm, we should note that Donne's religious poetry then becomes relegated to the secular or fallen past left

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[12]Raymond-Jean Frontain takes a different view on the possibility of parallels between Donne and Bearing in "Reaching for the Light: Donnean Self-Fashioning in Margaret Edson's *W;t*," *PMPA* 25 (2000): 1–15. According to Frontain, Bearing comes to "understand her power to fashion her own death, to script how her 'last scene' will be played," much like Donne rehearsed his death with the help of a winding cloth (7). Thus, "paradoxically, it is only by suffering the loss of her classroom and of all that she holds dear that she fulfills her vocation as a teacher, fashioning her death—as Donne fashioned his—into the greatest lesson she can offer others" (4). While Bearing shares Donne's fascination with selfhood throughout much of the play, however, she also eschews Donne's religious preoccupations. These preoccupations significantly shape Donne's response to illness, not only in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* but elsewhere as well.

[13]Frontain, pp. 9–10.

[14]Eads, p. 242.

behind. While this is too bad, given the degree to which Donne's writings centrally grapple with the operations of Grace, it is not surprising, given Bearing's limited comprehension of Donne. Instead of finding the beginnings of redemption in a theology, in faith, or in Donne's verse, Bearing finds it in a Popsicle given to her by her nurse Susie, her instructor in compassion. Finally, even as she learns the meaning of kindness, it never issues from any vocalized sense of a divine agent. The redemptive process presented onstage accords with Edson's view of Grace, which she defines as the "opportunity to experience God in spite of yourself."[15] An active pursuit of God is not required; redemption simply happens to you when you die.

Nevertheless, although Bearing the *person* discovers the light, we may question whether Bearing the *scholar* similarly may be redeemed. Just as few (if any) actual scholars understand their subjects so myopically, few (if any) are so disinterested in personal or professional interests outside of close reading. Bearing's world is contracted; she resides chiefly in four settings—her classroom, her library, her home, and her hospital—and one can hardly imagine her anywhere else. One cannot imagine her advising students, debating with colleagues about the departmental curriculum, serving on university committees, acting as a resource for the public, or fighting for any non-self-centered cause, social or otherwise. Her sheltered life, along with her self-serving approach to teaching the sonnets, share responsibility for what is best described as her habit of misreading. Simply put, her exclusively secular, narrowly academic worldview sifts Donne's texts in ways that his original readers—and most of his modern readers—would not. Her readings of the Holy Sonnets are synecdochical, in that they center on the operations of the speaker's wit, in lieu of the situational context or purposes of his utterances. With the exception of "Death be not proud," the final line of which becomes

[15]Adrienne Martini, "The Playwright in Spite of Herself," *American Theatre* 16 (1999): 22.

the signifier for either the sensational declaration of death or a rational acceptance of death (depending on whether one uses Grierson's or Gardner's text), Bearing places greater emphasis on the beginnings and middles of sonnets rather than on their conclusions.[16] That is, she is interested primarily in the speaker's twisting of a conventional situation, his attempts to create and then bypass paradoxes, and his ability to analyze minutely the aspects of doubt, frustration, and suffering. As Bearing says of Holy Sonnet 5, the "speaker turns eternal damnation into an intellectual game," and it is the game that interests her, not eternity (49).

The meaning's-press-and-screw approach to reading the sonnets, to borrow Coleridge's phrase, often misses the point, however. This is where the *conclusion* of many a Holy Sonnet comes in. Whether the speaker requests Christ's "pardon," pleads with God to "forget" his sins, begs that the commandment to "love" will override all earthly statutes, or enjoins God to "burn" him "with a fiery zeal," the sonnets often end with some direct importuning of God.[17] In many cases the final couplet serves as the culmination of the argument, even if today the message might not be nearly as interesting to perform in front of a live audience of undergraduates as some earlier lines. The best example of Bearing's habit of selective reading is her meditation on "This is my playes last scene" while she waits for a technician to administer yet another round of grueling tests. As is her habit, she recites some lines from memory, in this case the first five-and-a-half lines as follows:

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[16]Iannone notes that Bearing "may well be misreading the conclusion" of Holy Sonnet 5 (p. 13). The same is true of other sonnets as well. Bearing typically misreads or ignores the endings of the sonnets because her reading strategies leave no room for the contexts these endings require.

[17]Line 14 from "At the round earths imagin'd corners," "If poysonous mineralls," "Father, part of his double interest," and "I am a little world made cunningly," respectively.

> This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint
> My pilgrimages last mile; and my race
> Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace,
> My spans last inch, my minutes last [sic] point,
> And gluttonous death will instantly unjoynt
> My body, and soule. (Edson, p. 52)

Bearing leaves off in the middle of a line and of a thought: she fixates on "gluttonous" death's "unjoynting" of body and soul, the horrific reality of the mortal condition nearing its conclusion. After successfully composing the scene of Donne's poem, she then proceeds to apply it to her own situation. She remarks,

> I have always liked that poem. In the abstract. Now I find the image of "my minutes last point" a little too, shall we say, *pointed.* I don't mean to complain, but I am becoming very sick. Very, very sick. Ultimately sick, as it were. In everything I have done, I have been steadfast, resolute—some would say in the extreme. Now, as you can see, I am distinguishing myself in illness. (52-3)

Superficially, the link she draws between her circumstances and those presented in the poem *appears* valid. Donne's speaker imagines his last hours; Bearing similarly recognizes that she endures her final or "ultimate" sickness, after which the play will end. Unlike Donne's speaker, however, she cannot transcend the image of her final act. Instead of contemplating a hereafter, she emphasizes to the audience, with her customary wry wit, that she is "distinguishing" herself "in illness," the same way she distinguished herself in any of her other pursuits.

Yet Bearing commits an error of omission, made all the more noticeable by her curtailing of line six. In the rest of the sonnet, Donne's speaker rebounds from the horror of impending death and moves toward a declaration of disconnection from the sins that have bound him to earth and to evil:

and I shall sleepe a space,
But my'ever-waking part shall see that face,
Whose feare already shakes my every joynt:
Then, as my soule, to'heaven her first seate, takes flight,
And earth-borne body, in the earth shall dwell,
So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
To where they'are bred, and would presse me, to hell.
Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evill,
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devill. (6–14)[18]

Death entails nothing more than a sleep, after which the soul in its "flight" will abandon the body to earth and slough off its ballast of sins, which otherwise would "presse" the speaker's soul to hell. Death will cause all the parts of his person to rise or fall to their respective birthplaces. Careful in his choice of words, Donne uses "impute" in its theological sense. He asks God to ascribe Christ's righteousness to him so that he may be "purg'd of evill," and in the final line, he renounces the corporeal (or diabolical) forces responsible for corruption. The lines Bearing omits radically change both the meaning of the poem and the reader/auditor's sense of the speaker's emotional disposition. Donne's speaker is not trotting onstage for a curtain call, like an actor reciting a Shakespearean epilogue; he imagines his physical death as a prelude for the true last act, his journey into the afterlife. His colloquy in the final couplet is freighted with his desire for worthiness. Bearing misreads the poem to arrive at a witty punchline ("Now I find the image of 'my minutes last point' a little too, shall we say, *pointed*"). Her omission of the lines underscores

[18]Quotations from Donne's poetry come from the *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: Anchor Books, 1967); the references to Donne's sonnets from the play come from *The Divine Poems of John Donne*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

the selectivity within her habit of applying Donne's sonnets to her own condition. She behaves as if the sonnets serve mainly to buttress her professional ego.[19]

As Jason remarks, Bearing is not a "cupcake," nor is she religiously devout. But if she is such an acclaimed early modern scholar, so used to exactitude in her knowledge of her subject, it is curious that when she tries to imagine how Donne would react to the paradoxes of her illness, she never once thinks of Donne's speaker's attempts to "wrastle" with God, even in the poems she recites from memory. Many connections between Bearing's moments of pain (physical and psychological) and Donne's speaker's attempts to find consolation suggest themselves. For instance, "Thou hast made me" deals specifically with decay and

[19]Interestingly, in her memories of her pre-professorial self, Bearing comes across as being both meeker and more receptive. Apparently, she lost both qualities while pursuing her path to scholarly perfection. Her illness forces her to recover these qualities as part of her redemptive process. In "Wit, Pride and the Resurrection: Margaret Edson's Play and John Donne's Poetry" (*Renascence* 55 [2003]: 163–74), John D. Sykes, Jr., sees Bearing's circumstances framed within the Augustinian context established in two Donne poems not in the play, "Hymn to God my God, in my sicknesse" and "Batter my heart." "Unlike the speaker in Donne's poem," Sykes writes, "Bearing is not ready to look beyond the horizons of the world in which she has successfully made her way. Thus the poem ["Hymn to God my God, in my sicknesse"] 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" (pp. 164–5). The difficulty in reading *W;t* against the Augustinian resurrection *telos* is that the play avoids discussing the idea of a corrective God, much less any articulated notion of God's mercy. The closest it comes to invoking a Christian context is Ashford's remark that the story of *The Runaway Bunny* is an "allegory of the soul" and God's tireless search for it.

the process by which a sick person vacillates between hope and despair:

> Thou hast made me, And shall thy worke decay?
> Repaire me now, for now mine end doth haste,
> I runne to death, and death meets me as fast,
> And all my pleasures are like yesterday,
> I dare not move my dimme eyes any way,
> Despaire behind, and death before doth cast
> Such terrour, and my febled flesh doth waste
> By sinne in it, which it t'wards hell doth weigh;
> Onely thou art above, and when towards thee
> By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe;
> But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
> That not one houre I can my selfe, sustaine;
> Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art
> And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.

The moments of hope come from consideration of God and salvation; despair creeps in when the "old subtle foe" (11) distracts the speaker from this divine focus and prevents him from seeking Grace.[20] Even in the midst of suffering, though, Donne's speaker gives spiritual advice apropos of facing terminal illness: he says at the end of "If faithfull soules be alike glorif'd," turn, "O pensive soule, to God, for he knowes best / Thy griefe, for he put it into my breast" (12–4). Bearing need not subscribe to Donne's Christianity, especially when doing so for her would be hypocritical. When she wonders what Donne would have made of her lost hair, lost eyebrows, violent fevers, and rampant cancer, though, the answer seems fairly clear: Donne would say, "turn to God."

Ultimately, Donne and Bearing approach the problem of pain from entirely different perspectives, thereby illustrating not only the perspectival differences between early modern and modern

[20]This is how I interpret God's "leave" in "By thy leave I can looke."

Western cultures, but also the limitations of Bearing's delineation as a character. While Bearing rehearses her death by thinking of how her colleagues ("most of whom" were her "former students") would write a volume of mediocre essays in her honor, Donne rehearsed his death by wrapping himself in a winding sheet. The speaker of Donne's sonnets imagines both his own death and the end of the world and not simply because it represents a final terminus, but because it proposes an occasion for taking measure of spiritual health. In other words, the activity is supposed to precede some effort to reform and improve that health. Donne argues that the Christian should "come to God, reason with God, plead with God, wrastle with God, and be received and sustained by him" (*Sermons* 2:54). Bearing does none of these things, and so it should come as no surprise that the sonnets offer her no consolation. She never behaves as if they should.

By *not* making any religious connections in her meditations on the Holy Sonnets, even in passing, Bearing shows us how easy it is for modern readers to downplay, however unintentionally or unconsciously, the importance of Donne's devotional context. Whenever we do so, we in effect create new versions of Donne's religious poems and pass these on to our students. Modern readers are just as entitled to their own interpretations of the poems as Donne's original readers were. Nevertheless, we should recognize and acknowledge the aftereffects of an exclusively modern perspective, be it New Critical or New Historicist: if we present secularized readings of the Holy Sonnets *as the only ones* to our students, we sacrifice the past and can no longer legitimately claim to be cultural historians—literary critics, yes, but not historians.

The example of Dr. Vivian Bearing, finally, brings up two basic but challenging questions for Donne scholars: Must a reader be an active, believing Christian to appreciate the Holy Sonnets—or any of Donne's other religious writings, for that matter—with full comprehension? And, does anyone who lacks strong religious convictions automatically transform the Holy Sonnets into entirely different texts? Time and again, scholars studying the early

modern period have demonstrated that while partisan agreement with a religious (or other) belief system is unnecessary for enlightened literary understanding, sympathetic engagement with a writer's religious assumptions reveals operations in his or her religious writings that are visible only within the context of Christian discourse. To cite one example, the genesis of Louis L. Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954)[21] began with a tip from a modern devotional practitioner. Martz recounts the crucial episode that resulted from the bewilderment he and his students faced while trying to decipher the structures of Donne's *Anniversaries*:

> What forerunning form or tradition could have suggested such construction to Donne? Perhaps the model might have come from traditions in medieval religious writing? So the leader of the discussion [Martz] asks a colleague, Robert Menner, the Old English scholar, whether he knows of any such structures in medieval literature. The scholar knows of none, but he has a Jesuit father in his graduate class, and he will ask him whether he knows of any such traditions. The Jesuit smiles and says, "Yes, I practice such exercises frequently." And he recommends reading the third volume of Pierre Pourrat's *Christian Spirituality* to find out about the widespread practice of spiritual exercises on the Continent during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[22]

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[21]New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954; rev. ed. 1964.

[22]"The Poetry of Meditation: Searching the Memory," *New Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century English Religious Lyric*, ed. John R. Roberts (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994), p. 189. Martz's open-mindedness in his pursuit of the meditative context strikes me as an essential ingredient for the most significant modern scholarship. H. James Jensen, a noted Restoration and eighteenth-century scholar, relates a similar story of discovery at the beginning of *The Muses' Concord: Literature, Music, and the Visual Arts in the Baroque*

Most likely, the unnamed Jesuit was not walking anachronistically in the shoes of his seventeenth-century counterpart; yet he was in contact with a living devotional tradition with deep roots, a tradition possessing explanatory power in the context of Martz's seminar. If the Jesuit had not been at Yale in the 1940s, we may wonder, whether Martz would have found the lead to his landmark thesis. Perhaps another scholar eventually would have uncovered the significance of the interrelations between early modern meditative practices and English poetry. Without Martz, however, we may legitimately question whether the trajectory of 20th-century Donne criticism would have been the same. Would even discussions of Donne's *Protestantism* have unfolded in their present

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Age (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976): "Several years ago, I read a paper to a graduate seminar explaining why I thought John Dryden's 'A Song for St. Cecilia's Day, 1687' an ambitious failure. I later told my ideas to my old friend and teacher Samuel Monk, and after much discussion I decided to look again at the poem. This second look made me realize that things were more complicated than they appeared. The poem seemed to spring from a wealth of complex seventeenth-century thoughts and poetic practices. I started reading. In obscure but fascinating works, I encountered all sorts of ideas about the nature of seventeenth-century psychology, artistic creation, education, moral values, social mores, scientific discoveries, and issues of taste. Although the impetus for my studies came from the desire to learn about one poem, the results applied to all Baroque art. I gradually realized that the ideas I was finding allowed me to enjoy seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art much more than I ever had before, so I decided to write a book" (p. xi). Jensen's book became one of the most enlightening articulations of Baroque aesthetics. Similar stories can be found in other fields within the discipline of English, especially in the work of contextual scholars. I cannot imagine Vivian Bearing ever admitting that she misread a poem in one of her essays, even if such a misreading eventually led to deeper insights.

form if Barbara K. Lewalski, in *Protestant Poetics* (1979),[23] had had no one with whom to respond?

Such a question is unanswerable, of course. Clearly throughout our modern critical era, however, some of the most profound insights into Donne's poetry have resulted from our imaginative reconstructions of Donne's cultural surroundings. Scholars today who study and write about the seventeenth-century religious imagination remain in contact with its contexts, at least in their imaginations. Bearing lacks this contextual imagination, which is why many of us cannot help but find her professorial self merely a caricature of the Donne scholar. Long before her final moments, she claims her most significant scholarly achievement is a book called *Made Cunningly*, an analysis of the 1633 edition of the sonnets, in which she "devote[s] one chapter to a thorough examination of each sonnet, discussing every word in extensive detail" (19). Despite the superficial resemblance of this floor plan to that of Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1997),[24] if the explications offered in this book followed those in the play, I doubt Bearing's volume would find many readers in 2004. As an enterprise, 21st-century Donne scholarship tends to value context not because it is some current fad, but because we read the poems as more than verbal puzzles—we read them as evidence of a life, a culture, and an age.

Undoubtedly contemporary readers who follow a daily devotional regimen similar to Donne's own might view the texts with a heightened immediacy or emotional intensity because of their added personal relevance.[25] Even so, *W;t* offers hope for

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[23]Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

[24]Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

[25]Having taught at both a Big Ten university and a Jesuit university, I can see the differences one's institutional setting makes in teaching Metaphysical poetry. On campus at Seattle University recently, a colleague of mine, Fr. Emmett Carroll, SJ, recently gave a homily on St.

others of us who are not as devotionally minded. In the middle of her reading of *The Runaway Bunny*, Professor Ashford pauses to consider the mother bunny's promises to find little bunny wherever he will go. She remarks, "Look at that. A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it. See, Vivian?" (80). To which Vivian replies, "Uhhhhhh." In contrast to Bearing, whose obsession with being formidable has limited her as a person and reduced her efficacy as a scholar, Ashford never loses sight of spiritual implications, even in presumably secular texts and even if she refrains from proclaiming herself a Christian believer. "Ashford is exacting enough to have set the standard for Vivian," Eads explains, "yet she recognizes the value of enjoying the company of friends on a sunny day."[26] Both scholars are experts in the communicative powers of language; only Ashford, though, realizes how far and how much Donne's poems communicate because her interpretive endeavors exist in a larger world. She appears to respect Donne's Christian beliefs, regardless of whether she holds them personally. Her example reveals that as long as the *idea* of the soul remains in view when considering the Holy Sonnets, the bridge between modern readers and seventeenth-century readers can remain open. The richest readings of the sonnets manage to traffic freely across this bridge.

Seattle University

Francis de Sales, whose discourses on meditation (as Martz demonstrated) appear to have influenced Herbert. Students who heard that homily would much more readily connect the faith issues raised in a Herbert poem to the "real world" than students at my former institution.

[26]Eads, p. 250.