

## Death Be Not Proud: An Analysis of Margaret Edson's *Wit*

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyzes both the play and the HBO special dramatization of Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Prize winning drama Wit, inspired by her work as an AIDS-oncology clerk. The play features the first-person narrative of Dr. Vivian Bearing, a specialist in John Donne and metaphysical poetry, who, in the course of the play, dies as the result of terminal metastatic ovarian cancer. Although the drama is an uncompromisingly serious look at death, it also shows how language and humor can help us to deal with tragedy, even when that tragedy. This paper looks at how language structures the world of Wit through an examination of the power of naming in language, the capacity of language to inform as well as obfuscate, the use of language to create humor and to provide emotional comfort and connection.*

Atlanta kindergarten teacher Margaret Edson won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1999 for her wrenching 1991 play *Wit*. Her first and only play, *Wit* was inspired by work that Edson did as a clerk in an AIDS-oncology unit in a Washington-area research hospital. It features the first-person narrative of Dr. Vivian Bearing, a professor with a specialty in the 17th century metaphysical poetry of John Donne, a highly intellectual poetry that responded, in part, to what was perceived as the oversentimental stance of poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. Metaphysical poetry often characterized by the yoking violently disparate elements; the resulting discordance was meant to create meaning and insight. Bearing uses her intelligence, wit, and love of John Donne, and occasionally Shakespeare, to cope with what is, ultimately, terminal metastatic ovarian cancer. Although the drama is, in many ways, an uncompromisingly serious look at death, it also shows how language and humor can help deal with tragedy, even that our own impending death.

In addition to the stage production, we also have in an HBO special dramatization that starred Emma Thompson. The play and TV version differ somewhat providing different dramatic emphases. In general, however, the two versions create a similar impression and communicate essentially similar messages.

This paper looks at how language structures the world of *Wit* through an examination of the power of naming in language, the capacity of language to inform as well as obfuscate; the use of language to create humor that helps us cope; and, finally, the use of language to provide emotional comfort and connection. Through the language in *Wit*, we gain insight into the worlds of medicine and literature and, ultimately, what it means to be human.

First, a brief plot summary: Dr. Vivian Bearing is a noted scholar of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Metaphysical poetry and a specialist in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne, "the poet's most intense exploration of grand themes such as life and death. (Al-Solaylee). Ironically that she has also dedicated

her life to Donne; "A scholar who dedicates herself to the mind of John Donne is ignoring the fact he was a man of enormous emotional and physical appetite. . . . In her fixation on him, Vivian has stayed with his words on the page, not the whole human being." (Al-Solaylee). "This tough mind and her uncompromising nature help her deal with the initial diagnosis of Stage Four metastatic ovarian cancer. She has been referred to Dr. Harvey Kelekian, a noted cancer research scientist, for inclusion in experimental trials designed, hopefully, to increase her chances of survival. She is to be included in eight months of monthly treatments, to try to shrink her tumors; for one week each month, she will be hospitalized for treatment with particularly aggressive drugs that produce, as Kelekian describes them, "profound side effects."

The play, and the TV special, take us from Bearing's first meeting with Kelekian, at which he enlists her participation in the experimental studies, to months later when she dies as the result of the cancer and the treatments. The play/TV special presents us with Bearing's progressive deterioration in the hospital as well as flashback scenes to key moments in her life. Presented mostly as monologues, usually given directly to the audience, the play looks at the issues of life and death in an uncompromising fashion. As a 17<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Dr. Bearing was fascinated by wit, a "reference to the 17<sup>th</sup> century fascination with literary conceit, paradox and wordplay." (Al-Solaylee). As Cohen notes, "During the Renaissance, the term 'wit' referred to intelligence or wisdom. As applied to the metaphysical poets, it has the connotation of intellectual and verbal ingenuity. . . [It] involves surprise, a desire to startle readers, to make them look at things in a new, unconventional way." Cohen continues, this ability to see the paradoxes in life and to enjoy wordplay sustain and confound her and, in the end, help her to come to terms with her own death, mortality, and ultimate immortality. In *Wit*, we see how the onslaught of cancer forces Vivian Bearing to view and live her life differently .

### The Power of Language to Name

In part, *Wit* is about the power of naming. We know that language has a "pivotal power. . . to name what does and does not exist. We notice what we name and tend not to recognize or reflect on phenomena we leave unnamed." (Wood 108). Equally importantly, how we name also comments about us and our world.

We are reminded of the power of naming in the first scene in the HBO special. Dr. Harvey Kelekian, the research scientist treating Dr. Bearing (who, no matter how bad things get, bears up under the ordeal), sits her down to give her the prognosis for her treatment. She refers to him in the course of the drama as Dr. Kelekian and, occasionally, as Kelekian. He, on the other hand, begins their first discussion in the manner that so many medical

doctors do, by referring to her as "Miss Bearing," even though he also acknowledges that she is a professor and, therefore, more appropriately addressed as Professor or Doctor Bearing. In naming her as "Miss," he seems initially to emphasize, her unmarried state as well as to deny her equal status with himself. In this opening scene, he does finally address her as Dr. Bearing but only after they have commiserated with each other about the lack of thoroughness in today's students. Thereafter, interestingly enough, he addresses her as Dr. Bearing; he comes to admire and respect her according her a naming honor given to few others. Ironically, he often refers to his research associate as Jason, a much less formal naming that could indicate a friendly attitude but which, in this case, could also be a way to put Jason in a position not equal to Dr. Kelekian or, on occasion, to Dr. Bearing.

Others in the drama reveal inner selves in the naming process. Dr. Jason Posner, a cancer fellowship intern and research assistant to Dr. Kelekian, is primarily responsible for Vivian Bearing's day to day care while she undergoes the eight months of aggressive chemotherapy treatment. Ironically, Dr. Posner was once a student in Dr. Bearing's class on John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets, a class, he later notes, in which "you can forget about that sentimental stuff. *Enzyme Kinetics* was more poetic than Bearing's class." (Edson 61) And forget he does. Although he is always respectful, generally addressing her as "Professor Bearing," he is not always as respectful to others. For example, he addresses the females he works with as "girls," as when he leaves Professor Bearing draped and alone, with her feet in the stirrups, in the examroom while he goes off to find Susie, the clinical nurse, because he has "Got to have a girl here. Some crazy clinical rule." (25).

In contrast, Susie, the woman who becomes Dr. Bearing's primary nurse, uses a variety of names that mirror her respect for her patient and also her connection to her. The first time we hear Susie address Vivian, Susie uses "Ms. Bearing." As the drama progresses and Vivian becomes more ill, Susie occasionally addresses her as "sweetheart," an occurrence commented on by Vivian: Do not think for a minute that anyone calls me "sweetheart." But then I allowed it." (51). When, for the first time, Vivian admits she is scared, Susie names her "honey," generally considered a term of endearment. (52). And, after Vivian cries, Susie addresses her as Vivian; at that point, they are two women on a first name basis.

In a comically insightful scene early in the drama, the process of naming, particularly in medical contexts, is examined. Bearing has been taken to her first chest X-ray appointment. The technician on duty has been charged with gathering essential information which, not surprisingly, includes naming:

Technician 1: Name.  
 Vivian: My name? Vivian Bearing.  
 Technician 1: Huh?  
 Vivian: Bearing. B-E-A-R-I-N-G. Vivian. V-I-V-I-A-N.  
 Technician 1: Doctor.

Vivian: Yes, I have a Ph. D.  
 Technician 1: Your doctor  
 Vivian: Oh. Dr. Harvey Kelekian. . . (15-16).

From the technician's point of view, Dr. Bearing is just another body, not really a person whom to connect. Yet, part of the point of the play, with its emphasis on the effect of language, is to show us the power of naming and the effect of neglecting meaningful naming.

The play also teaches us how, at some level, language is inadequate to name. It sometimes is, for example, insufficient to describe what is happening in our lives. In a pivotal scene in the play, young Jason is doing his first medical interview, with Professor Bearing as the guinea pig. After asking her the standard questions about prior and present medical conditions, he asks her to describe her pain:

Vivian: Oh, about four months ago. I felt a pain in my stomach, in my abdomen, like a cramp, but not the same.  
 Jason: How did it feel?  
 Vivian: Like a cramp.  
 Jason: But not the same?  
 Vivian: No, duller, and stronger. I can't describe it.

Although they use it in an attempted dance of meaning, neither Jason or Vivian finds language a satisfactory medium to increase understanding. In the end, it cannot do the experience justice: "I want to tell you how it feels. I want to explain it, to use my words. . . I can't. . . There aren't. . ." (56)

In brief, the emphasis in the play on the seemingly simple phenomenon of naming helps us to focus on both the power and inadequacies of language. The play, as well, teaches about how language can be used to mask reality.

### Language as Obfuscation

Although language is clearly a medium that has the possibility for delivering information clearly, *Wit* equally clearly shows the capacity of language to obfuscate. This aspect is most clearly demonstrated by the way that medical language serves as a code among the medical professionals and, seemingly, as a way to keep the medical consumer out of the loop. For example, while senior professor Dr. Kelekian takes his students on "Grand Rounds," supervising their examination of patients, he aims to teach and explicate particularly interesting cases. Given the privilege of leading the discussion of Vivian, as she watches and occasionally interjects a comment or two, Jason notes "Hexamethosphacil with Vinplatin to potentiate. Hex at 300 mg. per meter squared, Vin at 100. . . Metastases are suspected in the peritoneal cavity. . . a significant part of the tumor was de-bulked. . . myelosuppression, a lowering of blood-cell counts. It goes with saying. With this combination of agents, nephrotoxicity will be next." (32). Kelekian congratulates Jason on his command of the details, but not many patients would be able to follow the discourse.

Language is also used as a shield, allowing care providers the illusion they are being personable. At various points, we note Kelekian, for example, admonishing Dr. Bearing to "Keep pushing those fluids" (34), which becomes his standard final remark as he exits her presence.

Annoyingly, this language habit is something Jason picks up and uses even more mindlessly than his mentor, with his own little twist: "Okay. Look. Gotta go. Keep pushing the fluids. Try for 2,000 a day, okay?" (47). Another example of this same phenomenon is the standard greeting, used ironically by Vivian in the play's opening, a greeting that seems friendly but is seldom more than a bland time filler:

Vivian: Hi. How are you feeling today? Great. That's just great. . . . I tend toward something a little more formal, a little less inquisitive, such as, say, "Hello." But it is the standard greeting here. There is some debate as to the correct response to this salutation. Should one reply: I feel good," using "feel" as a copulative to link the subject, "I," oo its subjective complement, "good" or "I feel well," modifying with an adverb the subject's state of being? . . . I am waiting for the moment when someone asks me this question and I am dead. I'm a little sorry I'll miss that." (7-8).

Sadly, in one of the last scenes in the play, we see how empty this opening greeting can be. Dr. Posner has entered Vivian's room, greeting her with the standard, "Professor Bearing. How are you feeling today?" (63). He then goes about taking her vitals and doesn't realize until seconds later, that she is dead.

There are many other examples of medical obfuscation, something most people experience when they must have contact with the medical establishment. More surprising is the play's presentation of the obfuscation that can occur with poetry such as Donne's. After all, "to 'anatomize' a poem down to its punctuation was similar in some respects to the way a medical researcher studies the anatomy of a human being." (*Wit*). As critic Les Gutman notes,

"Falling in love with words at her father's knee as a young girl, Vivian seems to have maintained a monogamous relationship with literature. . . Her scholarship was her consuming and unrelenting passion, blinding her to other concerns and even to the underlying sense of humanity it should be teaching. . . . Where another person might have a friend hold her hand for comfort, Vivian's poems are her only friends."

It is not entirely surprising that Vivian has chosen to focus on Donne. Because the metaphysical poets were concerned with the mind and the puzzles that the world presents to the mind, they would often use highly sophisticated vocabulary. At one point, Vivian comments on her (and Donne's) love for words. Explaining how exciting it was to learn the meaning of the "soporific" in a discussion with

her father, she then notes, "The illustration bore out the meaning of the word, just as he had explained it at the time, it seemed like magic. So imagine the effect that the words of John Donne first had on me: ratiocination, concatenation, coruscation, tergiversation." (37). Like the medical provider who uses exact medical language, even when it doesn't connote to the consumer, Vivian revels in Donne's language and in the complexities of scansion and the metaphysical form and use of wit, in the "subtleties of seventeenth-century vocabulary, versification, and theological, historical, geographical, political, and mythological allusion, Donne's wit is . . . a way to see how good you really are. After twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is quite as good as I." (18-19). Even when she notes that most of the students she taught didn't really understand (39-43, 48-51) Dr. Bearing enjoys her craft.

In an interesting scene, we see both Drs. Kelekian and Bearing, representing the worlds of medicine and literature respectively, equally fussing over the meaning of an unclear word:

Kelekian: You present with a growth that, unfortunately, went undetected in stages one, two, and three. Now it is an insidious adenocarcinoma, which has spread *from* the - primary adnexal mass

Vivian: "Insidious"?

Kelekian: "Insidious" means undetectable at an

Vivian: "Insidious" means treacherous.

Kelekian: Shall I continue?

Vivian: By all means.

In the world of each, the meaning each has provided for the word is correct, but that correctness does little to help them to communicate with each other. Medical and poetic language are connected, notes Vivian: "I receive chemotherapy, throw up, am subjected to countless indignities, feel better, go home. Eight cycles. Eight neat little strophes. Oh, there have been the usual variations, subplots, red herrings: hepatotoxicity (liver poison), neuropathy (nerve death." (Righteously.) They are medical terms. I look them up. It has always been my custom to treat words with respect." (35).

Language has the capacity to both help us to understand and to confuse us. Whether we understand or not seems to, in part, be a function of the craftsperson wielding the tool.

### Language and Humor

There are many examples of how language and humor combine to help Vivian, and us, deal with her situation. Right after her initial interview with Dr. Kelekian, Dr. Bearing ruminates with the audience, "I have stage-four metastatic ovarian cancer. There is no stage five." In a later scene, she is being interviewed by a technician who is talking to her but not communicating with her:

Technician 1: Name.

Vivian: Lucy, Countess of Bedford

Technician 1: I don't see it here.

Vivian: My name is Vivian Bearing. B-E-A-R-I-N-G. Dr. Kelekian is my doctor. (16)

Even in the medical interview with the inexperienced Dr. Posner, Bearing manages to inject humor, even if he doesn't seem to get it:

Jason: What do you do for exercise?

Vivian: Pace

Jason: Are you having sexual relations?

Vivian: Not at the moment (23-24)

In another notable scene, after we see her vomiting as the result of the chemotherapy, she turns to the audience and says, "You may remark that my vocabulary has taken a turn for the Anglo-Saxon." (28) Or, in commenting on what she has just expelled she notes, "I have to ring the bell to get someone to come and measure this emesis, and record the amount on a chart of my intake and output. This counts as output." (29)

As she begins to fail more precipitously, humor sustains her. At one point, she is waiting for an ultrasound procedure and, lying on the table, recites one of Donne's poems that begins, "This is my playes last scene. . . my minutes last point. . ." After finishing the poem, she turns to the audience and says, "John Donne. 1609. I have always particularly liked that poem. In the abstract Now I find the image of 'my minute's last point' a little too, shall we say, pointed." (43).

In the final scene in the present in which Vivian takes an active part, she and Susie have a laugh about the word *soporific*, the one over which Vivian and her father connected so long ago. After Susie injects her with morphine, Vivian lies down and then comments:

Vivian: I trust this will have a *soporific* effect.

Susie: Well, I don't know about that, but it sure makes you sleepy. (Vivian laughs. Susie doesn't get it.) What's so funny? What?

Vivian: Oh, It's that- '*Soporific*' means 'makes you sleepy.

Susie: It Does

Vivian: Yes. (Another fit of laughter.)

Susie: (Giggling). Well, that was pretty dumb

Vivian: No, No, no! It was funny!

Susie: (Starting to catch on). Yeah, I guess so. (Laughing) In a dumb sort of way (They both laugh). I never would have gotten it. I'm glad you explained it.

Vivian: (Simply). I'm a teacher. . (58)

In addition to seeing, in this scene, the way in which language fuels humor, we also see it tied to the theme of the power of naming. . Additionally, this scene forecasts the final area of discussion in this paper, namely the way language can be used to provide emotional comfort and connection.

## Language and Comfort/Connection

Although much of the play examines the tyranny of language and the inability of language to always do what it is asked to do, there are many examples that also demonstrate the power and value of language. As mentioned previously, Vivian's love of language began when she was a child, when she first connected with her somewhat distant father about the word "*soporific*." (35-37). In the HBO special, her memory of this scene brings a tear to her eye, the first time that we see her have a clearly emotional response to her situation. This love of words, from her perspective, now stands her in good stead: "Still, I want to know what the doctors mean when they. . . anatomize me. And I will grant that in this particular field of endeavor they possess a more potent arsenal of terminology than I. My only defense is the acquisition of vocabulary." (37)

Her lifelong work with Donne has exercised her mind so that she is able to see and to explain some of the paradoxes in her current life - and to see the humor in the situation:

"In isolation, I am isolated. For once I can use a term literally. The chemotherapeutic agents eradicating my cancer have also eradicated my immune system. In my present condition, every living thing is a health hazard to me (Jason comes in . . .) . . . particularly health-care professionals." (39)

Her one and only real connection with Dr. Jason Posner is when she questions him about his fascination with cancer. Lighting up, like she does when discussing Donne, Posner, with her help, is able to express himself:

Vivian: I was jus wondering: why cancer?

Jason: Why cancer? . . . Cancer's the only thing I ever wanted.

Vivian: Huh.

Jason: No, really, Cancer is (Searching.)

Vivian: (Helping). Awesome.

Jason: (Pause). Yeah, that's right. It is. It is awesome. (45-46)

Sadly, when Vivian tries to take the conversation one step further, Jason isn't capable of following:

Vivian: (With great difficulty). And what do you say when a patient is . . . apprehensive. . . frightened.

Jason: Of who?

Vivian: I just. . . Never mind. (47).

In addition to the comfort and connection that words can provide, Vivian finds words a comfort when she is alone in painful situations. For example, when she is taken for an ultrasound and then left alone in the room while the technician insensitively goes on break, she finds ironic comfort in the following words of Donne:

This is my play's 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 point,  
 And gluttonous death will instantly unjoynt  
 My body, 'and soule. (43)

In addition to being able to use words as companions in times of difficulty, the language also helps her to face her own impending death.

Ultimately, it is the physical and psychological and language connection that Vivian makes with her nurse Susie that helps her most in dealing with her lot. It is to Susie that she first admits that she is scared and unsure of herself. (52). Susie comforts her, offering her a popsicle to give her physical comfort and sitting with Vivian and talking to her, giving her psychological comfort. It is with Susie that she discusses the difficult issue of what to have done when the end finally arrives; with Susie's help, she decides to have a "Do Not Resuscitate" order issued; instead of making this discussion clinical and distant, Susie uses simple and direct vocabulary that gets the job done but is also understandable and comforting. And, in a final gesture that communicates much, Susie takes the hands-of Vivian who is virtually comatose and rubs lotion on them to help soothe her pain, a gesture understandable in any language.

In one of the final scenes with her former professor and mentor, E. M. Ashford, the woman who Vivian credits with moving her towards a life with Donne, is one of the few visitors, other than the poems in her head, that come to see Vivian. At this point, Vivian is close to death and the Ashford opts for simplicity and comfort, reading *The Runaway Bunny* to Vivian, who snuggles up to her to be comforted. Her professor once told Vivian that if she didn't get serious about Donne, she might as well pick Shakespeare as her subject area. Therefore, it is ironic that the professor's final words of comfort to Vivian are from Shakespeare, namely Laertes' speech over the body of Hamlet: "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." (63)

## Conclusion

The play and the HBO special both end rather differently. In the play, Vivian suffers a final potential indignity, when Jason Posner calls the Code Blue Team to come revive Vivian, not realizing she has a Do Not Resuscitate order. He and Susie have a telling interchange:

Susie: WHAT ARE YOU DOING?  
 Jason: A GODDAMN CODE. GET OVER HERE!  
 Susie: She's DNR! (She grabs him).  
 Jason: (He pushes Susie away). She's Research.  
 Susie: She's NO CODE!! (64).

As the team tries to resuscitate her and finally abides by the standing orders, we see Vivian walk away from the scene towards a light, where she takes off her cap, slips off her hospital bracelet, takes off the two hospital gowns, and transforms into a beautiful woman reaching for the light. At this point the lights go out and the play is over. (66).

The final scene of the play was altered for the HBO special, ending, perhaps appropriately so, with Vivian's reciting lines from John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud." It was Vivian's reading of this poem, without giving sufficient attention to the meaning of the punctuation, that first had E. M. Ashford challenging Vivian to think (13-15). Lines from the poem become a mantra when she is left alone, draped and in stirrups far too wide for comfort, while Dr. Posner searches for a "girl" to be in attendance, leaving the audience to ponder Vivian's indignity of being given a pelvic exam by a former student. In the final lines of the poem, according to Ashford, "Nothing but a breath-- a comma--separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause. . . . Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma." (14-15). In the end of the HBO special, as we view Vivian's dead face and hear her overvoice, as well as at the end of the play, we understand how the words have helped her to understand life and death. She is gone but not forgotten; she survives in the articles and words she created, in the people she has impacted, and in the impact she has had on us, the audience.

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