

Scientist, Scholar, Soul

Marc D. Guerra

So. The young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity.” With this concise remark, Dr. Vivian Bearing deftly reveals an unsettling truth about herself and, by extension, the kind of detached rationalism that the modern scientific researcher and the modern academic typically wield. Margaret Edson’s play *Wit* focuses on the final all-too-human hours of Vivian Bearing, a renowned scholar of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet John Donne. Set principally in Bearing’s research-university hospital room, *Wit* takes up an array of themes that are readily recognizable to contemporary audiences: the ordeal that cancer patients like Bearing experience; the courage or lack thereof that one can have when facing one’s own death; the role of empathy in the practice of medicine; the relationship between patient rights and medical ethics; and, of course, the place of suffering in human life. But this short play speaks to more than these concerns—even if reviewers and critics have sometimes had a difficult time seeing this. *Wit* shines a rather unflattering light on the methodological abstractness and frequently dehumanizing nature of a certain form of modern scientific reason. In the process, Edson’s play clearly and perceptively reminds its late modern audience of a simple truth: try as we might, we cannot hide forever from confronting certain elemental and enduring questions about God and the soul.

My Play’s Last Scene

Playwright Margaret Edson based *Wit* in part on observations she made while working as a clerk in the cancer and AIDS unit of a research hospital in her native Washington, D.C. The play was first staged in 1995 in California; another production, with Kathleen Chalfant in the lead role, opened off Broadway in 1998. Edson was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1999. *Wit* was then made into a movie by HBO in 2001; that version was directed by Mike Nichols and starred Emma Thompson, who together made only minor alterations to Edson’s script in adapting it into a screenplay. In 2012, the first Broadway production of *Wit* garnered two Tony nominations, one for best revival, and another for lead actress Cynthia Nixon.

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The play opens with fifty-year-old Vivian Bearing walking on stage, wearing only hospital gowns and a baseball cap on top of her bald head, pushing an IV pole. After commenting on the vapid and studied impersonal nature of the banter that fills chemo wards—exemplified by the ever-present utterance of “Hi. How are you feeling today?” by hurrying passersby or monotone medical messengers—Vivian recalls her initial diagnosis with Stage IV metastatic ovarian cancer. At the recommendation of her doctor, Harvey Kelekian, a driven research oncologist at the hospital affiliated with the university at which she teaches, Bearing agrees to undergo a harrowing eight-round, experimental chemotherapy treatment at “full dose.” Speaking directly to the audience, Vivian engagingly chronicles the events and conversations that shape her stay in the hospital—most memorably her exchanges with Kelekian and his young clinical oncology fellow, Dr. Jason Posner (who was a former student of Vivian’s); her experience serving as research material for grand rounds; and her conversations with her primary care nurse, Susie Monahan, in the Cancer Inpatient Unit.

Possessing a well-earned reputation for being unrelenting and unforgiving in the classroom, Vivian at times directly compares her suffering and struggles within the medicalized modern process of death to Donne’s poetry, particularly the most famous of Donne’s Holy Sonnets, “Death be not proud.” With the gradual exception of her nurse Susie, Donne is Vivian’s only real interlocutor during her time in the hospital. A highly ambitious and productive academic—for which she is rewarded with praise from her peers—Vivian has forged a rather solitary life for herself. Husbandless and childless, with parents who are now deceased, she has no one to serve as her emergency contact. Indeed, Vivian’s sole visitor, her graduate school mentor, the famed Donne scholar Professor Evelyn M. Ashford, visits only in Vivian’s final minutes—and even then only after Ashford has come to town to attend her great-grandson’s fifth birthday party.

Wit (1995 play)
By Margaret Edson
FSG ~ 1999 ~ 87 pp.
\$15 (paper)

Wit (2001 HBO movie adaptation)
Screenplay by
Emma Thompson and Mike Nichols
Directed by Mike Nichols



After a touching and honest conversation with Susie, Vivian, aware that she is not getting better, decides to mark her chart DNR—do not resuscitate. As Susie explains to a now self-reflective and vulnerable Vivian, researchers like Kelekian and Jason

like to save lives. So anything's okay, as long as life continues. It doesn't matter if you're hooked up to a million machines. Kelekian is a great researcher and everything. And the fellows, like Jason, they're really smart. It's really an honor for them to work with him. But they always... want to know more things.

Yet despite Vivian's DNR order, *Wit* concludes with the young Jason frantically attempting to resuscitate Vivian after she has flatlined. In the final moments of the play, we see the recently deceased Vivian stepping out of her bed, removing her gowns, and reaching for a small light as she stands naked on the stage.

The theme of scientific rationalism's methodological blindness to human beings and the human things runs through *Wit*. Vivian's doctors apparently "never expected" their experimental treatment, even at full dose, to knock the Stage IV ovarian cancer into remission. Rather, they saw Vivian as an opportunity to study the disease's reaction to a new treatment. Giving full-throated voice to this view, Jason jarringly and unapologetically shouts immediately upon Vivian's death that they cannot let her die: "She's Research!" By setting a carefully crafted stage and drawing its audience's attention to the speeches and deeds of its humanly recognizable characters, Edson's play confronts us with a paradox that lies at the heart of the kind of rationalism that Max Weber's "Science as a Vocation" lecture famously described and extolled: the sterility, specialization, and abstractness of modern science dogmatically prevents it from knowing anything substantive about the very being who practices it.

The scientific scholars that *Wit* brings to life, whether they are doctors or medical researchers or even professors of literature, have remarkably little to say about the human being as human being. As Vivian observes, to such practitioners of science,

What we have come to think of as *me* is, in fact, just the specimen jar, just the dust jacket, just the white piece of paper that bears the little black marks.

Lest her audience miss the point, Edson puts this particularly dehumanizing view of the human person on display in a scene depicting

Kelekian's team running grand rounds—a spectacle that Vivian, at this early point in the play, can only comment upon wittily. Surrounding Vivian's bed, Kelekian and his team of fellows studiously analyze her vital signs and test results without ever mentioning Vivian by name, in fact, without even using the cold, clinical, and depersonalized term “patient.” She drolly states that “in Grand Rounds, *they* read *me* like a book. Once I did the teaching, now I am taught.” Odd as this sight is, it is not completely foreign to Vivian: she remarks, “Full of subservience, hierarchy, gratuitous displays, sublimated rivalries—I feel right at home. It is just like a graduate seminar.”

For the kind of scientists that Kelekian and his team of eager young researchers represent, the unique and unrepeatable human being can only be seen as a collection of mathematized parts—measurable creatinine levels, calculable lymphocyte cells, quantifiable bilirubin secretions. Seeing universally and deeply, but still only narrowly, such scientists fail to see the forest for the trees; they remain methodologically unaware of the particular named human being who is the particular human patient whom they study and treat. Efforts to inculcate in young research doctors a sense of their patients as human beings, even if only to help them “converse intelligently with the clinicians” and to improve their bedside manner, are considered by the researchers to be a waste of time.



Grand rounds: Professor-turned-patient Vivian Bearing (Emma Thompson in the HBO movie) is examined by Dr. Kelekian (Christopher Lloyd, far right) and his medical fellows.

Her Last Debt to Nature

But Kelekian and his fellows are not alone in viewing Vivian's cancer cells in isolation from the person who is Vivian Bearing. For a long time, Vivian herself does this. Like her former student Jason, Vivian has difficulty thinking about the world as a whole, particularly "the part with the human beings." In fact, Vivian Bearing, the renowned Donne scholar, prided herself in looking at things this way. Critics have been wont to seize on *Wit's* at times withering indictment of the kind of biomedical science that Kelekian and Jason practice. But to Edson's credit, she does not simply identify this kind of dogmatic blindness exclusively with modern natural and medical science. Edson's poetic gaze focuses on the essentially monadic character of our modern understanding of scientific reason. That understanding of reason typically informs our view of science *tout court*—that is, it typically serves as our model for both the natural and human sciences.

Edson's play dramatically portrays the conception of science that animates Weber's vocation lecture. That view of science demands nothing short of single-minded dedication to a form of scientific specialization that knows only parts of a carefully, systematically deconstructed whole; as Weber memorably puts it, "anyone who lacks the ability to don blinkers for once and to convince himself that the destiny of his soul depends upon whether he is right to make precisely this conjecture and no other at this point in his manuscript should keep well away from science." Rooted in the new form of natural and philosophic science that Francis Bacon and René Descartes helped define and popularize, such science characteristically focuses on knowledge of mechanistic operations, not knowledge of given natures, purposes, and ends. From this perspective, the human being (or for that matter the God who reveals himself to human beings) can only be understood as a thing and not a person—as a collection of composite parts and not a living, loving, and thinking person who seeks to know and be known by other living, loving, and thinking persons. On this score, Kelekian and Vivian are one. Each scientist voluntarily dons blinkers. Each scientist systematically misunderstands the complex and composite being that is the human being.

No moment in *Wit* illustrates this problem more clearly than a flashback scene early in the play. Vivian here recounts a meeting in E. M. Ashford's office where a twenty-two-year-old Vivian discusses one of her early papers on Donne with her professor, who at the time is in her academic prime. Ashford informs Vivian that her recent treatment of Donne's



Just a comma: Vivian Bearing (Cynthia Nixon in the 2012 Broadway production) recalls a grad-school encounter with her mentor, Professor E. M. Ashford (Suzanne Bertish).

“Death be not proud” was something of “a melodrama.” Vivian’s misreading of Donne’s sonnet was partly, but only partly, due to the fact that she had used a version of the poem’s text that was incorrectly punctuated. To be more precise, according to Ashford, the edition Vivian used was marred by “hysterical” punctuation: “And Death—*capital D*—shall be no more—*semicolon!* Death—*capital D*—*comma*—thou shalt die—*exclamation point!*” As Ashford points out, the text should read: “And death shall be no more, *comma*. Death thou shalt die.” (The stage directions here note that, “as she recites this line, she makes a little gesture at the comma.”) The renowned Donne scholar authoritatively explains to her young student that by replacing the lowercase Ds with uppercase Ds and replacing the comma and period with a semicolon and an exclamation point the intrusive editor has fundamentally distorted the meaning, that is, the essential point, of Donne’s poem. In its original form, Ashford says, Donne’s text intimates that

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.

This way, the *uncompromising* way, one learns something from this poem, wouldn’t you say? Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma.

However, the young grad student Vivian, like the established Donne scholar Vivian, is incapable of understanding what E. M. Ashford is saying. To Vivian, the original and proper formulation is nothing more than “a metaphysical conceit. It’s wit!” Donne’s words are simply playthings, elaborately constructed formulations that put the poet’s superior acumen on display. The sonnet has nothing to teach us about (to use Ashford’s words) life and life everlasting, about the soul and God.

Professor Ashford pushes back: “It is *not wit*, Miss Bearing. It is truth.” Ashford then takes a good look at Vivian, pauses, and—as if to punctuate her point about what Donne has to teach us—tenderly tells Vivian to not go back to the library, but instead go out and enjoy herself with her friends. But at this point, impervious to either what Donne or Ashford has to teach her about the variegated richness of human life, Vivian promptly ducks back into the library.

Vivian’s successful academic career flows from this first apparent insight—from the notion that Donne’s Holy Sonnets are (as she tells the audience and, in a flashback, a classroom of students) exercises in “the outstanding human faculty” of the early seventeenth century, “namely *wit*”:

In the Holy Sonnets, Donne applied his capacious, agile wit to the larger aspects of the human experience: life, death, and God.

In his poems, metaphysical quandaries are addressed, but never resolved. Ingenuity, virtuosity, and a vigorous intellect that jousts with the most exalted concepts: these are the tools of wit. . . .

So we have another instance of John Donne’s agile wit at work: not so much *resolving* the issues of life and God as *reveling* in their complexity.

Thus understood, Donne’s poetry is, at best, as Vivian says to the audience, ornate fodder for the scientifically trained scholar “to see how good you really are.” And, having scrupulously devoted herself to studying “the subtleties of seventeenth-century vocabulary, versification, and theological, historical, geographical, political, and mythological allusions,” Vivian, “with confidence,” can now say at fifty, “no one is quite as good as I.” Her students left the class—if Jason’s case is representative—impressed by her intellect and convinced that the Holy Sonnets were “like a game” or “puzzle.” “If there’s one thing we learned” in Vivian’s class, Jason says, “it’s that you can forget about that sentimental stuff,” what he calls “that *meaning-of-life* garbage.”

Vivian never explicitly repudiates her scholarly interpretation of Donne’s sonnets. But her time in the hospital clearly coincides with a recognition that there may be more at stake in Donne’s poetry than mere

witty games jousting with metaphysical matters. It is only after the cancer has progressed and the chemotherapy treatments have gotten more and more brutal that she begins to speak of herself, body and soul, as a whole person. Vivian can no longer avail herself of the detachment and distance, scholarly and personal, she once found in wit. “Now is not the time for verbal swordplay, for unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphysical conceit, for wit,” she tells the audience. As she recognizes her mortality—“My cancer is not being cured, is it.”—she also begins to see that what she had once called “the issues of life and God” are not things to revel in, nor even to resolve, but rather permanent things with which human beings must live.

Be Not Proud

In contrast to the blinkered vision of scientific researchers like Kelekian and Jason and modern scientific academic researchers like Vivian, one might argue that the poet Donne—and if we allow ourselves to step beyond the text of the play, the poet Margaret Edson—help us to see more about ourselves, God, and the world. Edson’s play reminds us of the distinctive pedagogical power of literature and poetry, for the play speaks not just of a common human nature or a universally conceived human being or, even, a variety of human types. It paints particular human characters with particular names and particular lives. Edson, the poet, can create a world, and, in so doing, depict the role that chance plays in the lives



Not being cured: Vivian (Emma Thompson) splits a two-stick Popsicle with nurse Susie Monahan (Audra McDonald) as they discuss Vivian’s Do Not Resuscitate order.

of the characters who inhabit that world. But she is also able to depict chance in a way that is not really chance (at least as we commonsensically think about chance's place in human life). For the poet controls what role chance plays in her work: *Wit* creates a world where Vivian happens to develop ovarian cancer; where Vivian happens to meet Kelekian and her former student Jason; and, most importantly, where E. M. Ashford just happens to be in town for her great-grandson's birthday.

As poet, Edson is able to form fully thought-out characters, select a series of events and a series of deliberate human actions, and arrange these characters, events, and actions in such a way that her intended point gradually becomes clear. *Wit* offers us a carefully crafted world that cannot be mathematized, a world in which chance and human freedom are seen to be essential features.

Yet the play's pedagogical power does not stop here. Edson uses her art to show us something about that mysterious, unquantifiable thing that is the human soul. The only character to use the word "soul" (other than when reciting Donne or quoting the Shakespearean quip about brevity being the soul of wit) is the trained scientific scholar who is really able to see people, E. M. Ashford. The first time Ashford uses the word occurs in the passage quoted above, when she is discussing Vivian's melodramatic treatment of "Death be not proud." The second time occurs very shortly before Vivian dies. Crawling into bed with a weeping and moaning Vivian, Ashford puts her arm around her former student. As Vivian nestles into her, Ashford begins to read to Vivian from a children's book she has bought for her great-grandson, Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*. It is the story of a small bunny who repeatedly asks his mother what she would do if he were to run away. "If you run away," the mother bunny says, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny." To each place he proposes to flee, his mother explains how she will find him. "I will be a bird and fly away from you," the little bunny says. "If you become a bird and fly away from me," his mother responds, "I will be a tree that you come home to." After reading some of the little bunny's half-hearted proposals, Ashford remarks, "Look at that. A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it. See, Vivian?" Ashford, the scientist who reads Donne in order to learn what he has to say about "Soul, God," has no problem talking about the soul, and about God and the soul. By contrast, the concept of science that Kelekian, Jason, and Vivian share is constitutionally incapable of talking about the soul.

As a work of literature that is infused with wisdom and poetic insight, *Wit* has much to teach us—particularly those of us who have chosen to



I will run after you: Retired professor E. M. Ashford (Eileen Atkins in the HBO movie) reads to Vivian (Emma Thompson) from the book The Runaway Bunny.

live a life of rational inquiry and who have made the further choice to bring that life to bear on the education of others. Edson's tightly knit play conveys deep human truths that are worthy of philosophic pondering. Perhaps we might even say that the play borders on the philosophic.

But, in the end, this claim is not quite right, either. For while *Wit* raises questions that philosophers should ponder, it does so in a way that is, at least in some instances, clearly theological. Edson herself tells us this. Remarking on her work in a 1999 interview, she notes that 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.”

Edson understands her play to be not only about human freedom and chance, but also about human freedom and grace. The God that Ashford speaks of, the God she finds in both Donne and Margaret Wise Brown, is not a god of emanations or a prime mover or a geometer or a god of nature and nature's laws or a postulate of pure reason. He is a providential God. He is a God who hunts people down and offers them grace and salvation in spite of themselves.

Such a God undoubtedly is difficult for the self-described “extremely smart” Professor Bearing to accept. The description she offers of the speaker of one of Donne's Holy Sonnets eventually comes to apply just

as well to herself: “The speaker of the sonnet has a brilliant mind, and he plays the part convincingly; but in the end he finds God’s *forgiveness* hard to believe, so he crawls under a rock to *hide*. . . . When the speaker considers his own *sins*, and the inevitability of God’s *judgment*, he can conceive of but one resolution: to *disappear*.” (Reflecting this understandable human tendency, Vivian, shortly after deciding on her Do Not Resuscitate order, declares “Oh, God. I want . . . I want . . . No. I want to hide. I just want to curl up in a little ball.” The stage directions have her then dive under the covers.) Thus, the God who writes straight with crooked letters ultimately may or may not be Vivian’s God; the play leaves this question open. Vivian’s redemption—especially given the play’s final scene where Vivian rises naked from the bed in which she died and moves serenely towards a light with her arms outstretched—could be a form of Christian redemption. Or her redemption may have come earlier: it could consist in the fact that after having been laid low by her cancer and the grueling treatments and the manifold indignities she has suffered, the formerly boastful and prideful Vivian feels in her final days a first true prick of genuine awareness of herself as a whole person.

Wit does not just raise the philosophic question about God and the soul, then. It presents, in both poetic speech and deed, an answer, partial to be sure, but an answer nevertheless, about God and the soul. Undoubtedly, this answer too is something that a philosopher—or students of philosophy—could (and should) ponder. However, it is not something that a philosopher can fully understand *as a philosopher*. For it is an answer that is necessarily rooted in and informed by an understanding of a personal God and the human person that is made in the image of this God and gratuitously redeemed by this God. As such, it is an answer that, in the decisive respect, lies beyond the grasp of both wit and philosophy.