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THE ANATOMY OF WIT: COGNITION AND EMBODIMENT IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The definition of wit that is used in the 21st century is lacking, because it does not consider the richness of meaning inherent in definitions from Renaissance English. This thesis provides an in-depth presentation of the varied meanings of wit, and an exploration of theories surrounding the brain and body in the Renaissance. Overall, the thesis shows that the range of wit is extensive, stretching from a bodily sense to an apt expression. In order to illustrate more fully the ways in which wit functions within poetry, this work examines John Donne, a poet from the Renaissance noted for his wit. Donne uses both conventional definitions of wit and invents new meanings, which enrich the definition of wit in his time period.

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Chapter 1: The Anatomy of Wit in the Renaissance

In his essay on the metaphysical poets, Samuel Johnson writes, "wit, like all other things subject by their nature to the choice of man, has its changes and fashions, and at different times takes different forms" (193). Today, we describe people, TV shows, and quick turns of phrase as being "witty," with an understanding that "wit" encompasses only those things that are clever and spoken with the purpose of eliciting laughter.

However, if we travel back to a much earlier period in history, a time of rebirth of expression in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we find definitions of wit much richer than its common usage today. Wit's depth of meaning allowed poets and playwrights to develop a multi-dimensional picture of the idea in their works. The varied meanings of wit are enhanced through a discussion of the work of John Donne, a poet known for his contribution to wit in the seventeenth century. Donne, in particular, used conventional meanings of wit in his poetry, but he also invented new strategies to challenge and delight his readers, strategies uniquely his. These strategies use wit in a way that goes beyond the standard dictionary definitions. Their novelty resides in the fact that they make the reader think about two seemingly separate ideas in new, unexpected ways. One example of this is Donne's use of the conceit, which is a poetic device that makes a comparison of two unlike things, in a way that may appear to be exaggerated. I have classified Donne's new methods of wit into the following categories: synthetic wit, emotive wit, comparative wit, and antagonistic wit. These methods will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

In order to understand wit as used in the English Renaissance (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), it is helpful to explore many of the specific meanings listed in the

Oxford English Dictionary. The first is “the faculty of thinking and reasoning in general; mental capacity, understanding, intellect, reason.” An example of this definition of wit can be found in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1600), “I haue had a dreame, past the wit of man, to say; what dreame it was. Man is but an ass, if he go about t' expound this dream” (4.1.203). In this case, wit is defined as the mental capacity of a human, because Bottom describes his dream as beyond the grasp of any reasonable man.

The second definition of wit is “any one of certain particular faculties of perception, classified as *outer* (*outward*) or *bodily*, and *inner* (*inward*) or *ghostly*, and commonly reckoned as five of each kind” (OED). This definition is used in 1541 in Robert Copland’s *Guy de Chauliac’s Questyonary Cyrurgyens*, “In whiche of the ventricles is the wyt of smellynge founded?” In this case, Copland is identifying wit with one of the five outward senses, particularly that of smell. Shakespeare’s Mercutio employs two definitions of wit: “thou hast more of the goose in one of thy wits, than I haue in al my fiue” (2.3.68). In this scene, Romeo is using wit in the modern sense, in the way of lighthearted wordplay. Mercutio is speaking about his five wits as his five senses, joking that Romeo has more wit, meaning cleverness, in one of his senses than Mercutio has in all of his. Although the OED specifies that there are five inward wits, there is disagreement about this number among scholars. E. Ruth Harvey indicates that there are three, which are those featured in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, appearing in Book 2, Canto 9. I will return to this subject in the second half of the chapter, when discussing the inward wits.

Next, the Oxford English Dictionary defines wit as “good or great mental capacity; intellectual ability; genius, talent, cleverness; mental quickness or sharpness,

acumen." This definition is different from the first in that wit is not simply the measure of mental capacity, it denotes "good or great" mental ability. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare's Escalus says, "are there not men in your ward sufficient to serve it?" while Elbow replies, "faith, sir, few of any wit in such matters" (2.1.257-8). This means that few people have the talent or cleverness to serve as he does.

The fourth definition of wit is "practical talent or cleverness; constructive or mechanical ability; ingenuity, skill" (OED). In the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser describes a palace: "it was a goodly heape for to behould, / And spake the praises of the workmans wit" (1.4.37-8). This palace was constructed with a great deal of practical wit, as it "cunningly was without morter laid" (1.4.29). The palace even has a sort of clock, "and on the top a Diall told the timely howres" (1.4.36). The association with wit as practical skill extends to the building of a poem, in a way similar to the building of a house. George Puttenham writes about the creation of poetry in his *Art of Englishe Poesie*: "a poet is as much to say as a maker" (1). Puttenham details the process of creating poetry and the attitudes poets should have toward their work in order for it to be received best by the audience. In this way, writing is seen more as a practical science than an esoteric art. Rhetorically, wit is used to amplify and ornament a composition, as the practical nature of wit allows it to be used formulaically.

The fifth definition of wit is, "quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, especially in an amusing way" (OED). This is the first of the definitions to give wit a funny twist. The dictionary notes that this definition presents wit as sometimes opposite to wisdom or judgment, and distinguishes it from humor. Richard McCabe points out that in Lyly's

Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit, Euphues is a young man “of more wit than wealth, and yet of more wealth than wisdom” (303). Euphues delights in indulging in wit in the form of jests, taunts, and quips, but does so freely, without any consideration of proper timing or purpose. Here, wit contrasts with wisdom, because a wise person would carefully consider his words before speaking, rather than glibly throwing them about.

In Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing,* Beatrice and Benedick are described as employing the liveliness of fancy that makes up wit, because “they neuer meet but there’s a skirmish of wit between them” (1.1.60). This couple’s verbal ingeniousness delights the reader for the “sharpness of mind and the playfulness of spirit which it betokens” (Dennis 225). This sort of wit is attractive to audiences because it plays on the meanings of words and makes the characters seem brilliant without even trying. The ability to display talent while making it appear natural and effortless is known as *sprezzatura*, and was a highly valued ability in the Renaissance.

The last definition of wit is one most often seen in Donne, “that quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness” (OED). James Biester explores the way in which Renaissance poets captivated their audiences with “stylistic sources of wonder” (290) including unusual diction, metaphor, hyperbole, and riddles. These poets were successfully witty because they used language in unique ways to challenge and surprise their readers. John Donne’s work is full of puns, paradoxes, and metaphysical conceits, an example of which is found in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," as two lovers are compared to the legs of a compass.

It is apparent that these different meanings of wit grew out of a history of

conceptions of the body, mind, and soul, which were very different from our modern notions. What the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of wit does not make plain is that there were humoral, psychological, and rhetorical theories that shaped the meanings of wit in the Renaissance. The humoral theory tied inward, bodily processes with outward manifestations of mood, as psychological theory surrounding the inward wits sought to explain the workings of mental faculties. Rhetorical theories understood wit as a means to amplify and ornament a piece of writing. It is vital to understand this background information because it provides a basis for the varied meanings and subtleties of wit to emerge.

When considering the concept of wit in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is important to examine the Renaissance conception of the humors. At that time, people believed that there were four humors present in the human body: blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm. The balance of these humors was understood to determine the precise nature of a person's temperament or "complexion." An excess of blood led to a "sanguine," or passionate personality, an excess of black bile to a "melancholic," or introspective personality, yellow bile to a "choleric," or short-tempered personality, and phlegm to a "phlegmatic," or sluggish temperament. When all of the humors were in balance, the "perfect temperament" resulted (Hanley). This theory led to humor being defined as a mood, and eventually to being associated with laughter.

Gail Kern Paster explains the humoral body in the following way: "the porous and volatile humoral body, with its faulty borders and penetrable stuff, interacts differently with the world than the 'static, solid' modern bodily container" (Paster 23). The idea of the human body as a separate, impermeable holder of all the things that make

up a person is a modern conception. In the Renaissance, the body was in a constant state of flux, able to be penetrated and changed. This happened with a person's environment: the air and climate could be taken into the body, affecting the humoral balance. Also, as Nancy Selleck describes it, "humoral theory posits no Cartesian split between mind and body, so that these susceptibilities and assimilations are psychological as well as physical" (59). Instead of separating the workings of the mind from the workings of the body, the Renaissance picture of selfhood allowed the two to function together.

Expanding outward from the self, we can see that the humoral theory combines "cosmic, social, and bodily elements in an indivisible whole," which presents the body "not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal" (Bakhtin 18). The body, mind, and soul were conceived to be intimately connected to the universe as a whole. Instead of being individualized, the self was seen as connected with other people and objects throughout the world. This connectedness motivated poets like John Donne to choose conceits, or comparisons between two things, that involved very dissimilar objects, like a compass to a lover. Critics considered these comparisons to be harsh, discordant, and forced, but this is because they were not, like Donne, operating under the assumption that everything in the universe is connected. Through an appreciation of the idea that the body was universal in Renaissance theory, we can understand how the wit of a conceit functions in Donne's work.

Connected to temperament and mood, which are the result of the interaction of the humors, are the passions, which make up the equivalent of what are known today as emotions. In antiquity, Cicero identified four passions—fear, desire, distress, and pleasure. However, later writers modified and expanded upon Cicero's formulation.

Thomas Aquinas indentified eleven passions, including the concupiscible passions: love, hate, desire, aversion, pleasure, and sadness, in addition to the irascible passions: hope, despair, fear, courage, and anger (Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson 13)

In addition to the humoral theory, there existed in the Renaissance the idea of the "inward wits," which composed the psychological theory of the time. These inward wits were in contrast with the outer wits, or senses. As E. Ruth Harvey describes them, the inward wits were "the human powers which occupy the area between the body and the soul" (2). The three inward wits that she describes are imagination (*phantasia*), reason (*cogitatio*), and memory (*memoria*). To expand this abstract idea, in the second book of the *Faerie Queene*, Spenser details Sir Guyon's visit to the house of Alma, which serves as a metaphor for the body. Guyon is led to the tower, where Alma's three counselors live, each in a separate room. First is Phantastes, whose room is in constant motion with the buzzing of flies:

> All those were idle thoughts and fantasies,
>
> Deuices, dreames, opinions vnsound,
>
> Shewes, visions, sooth-sayes, and prophesies;
>
> And all that fained is, as leasings, tales, and lies. (Spenser 10.9.51)

The next man (who is not given a name) lived in a room whose walls were painted:

> Of lawes, of iudgements, and of decretals; All artes, all science, all
>
> Philosophy, And all that in the world was aye thought wittily. (10.9.53)

Third, and finally, Alma led him into the chamber of an old man, Eumnestes:

> This man of infinite remembrance was,
>
> And things foregone through many ages held,

> Which he recorded still, as they did pas,
>
> Ne suffred them to perish through long eld,
>
> As all things else, the which this world doth weld,
>
> But laid them vp in his immortall scrine. (10.9.56)

These three men advise Alma in the best way to run her castle, and according to E. Ruth Harvey, can be called "*phantasia*, *cogitatio*, and *memoria*; they are the 'inward wits'" (2). The ruling power of the brain includes these three wits, with *phantasia* located in the front ventricles, *cogitatio* in the middle ventricle, and *memoria* in the rear ventricle. *Phantasia* is the imagination, and its purpose is to form things and prepare them for *cogitatio*, which examines these matters critically, and forms a judgment about them. *Memoria* is considered to be the guardian of thoughts:

> *Memoria* is the guardian, who preserves those things which the cogitation of the intellect has ordered and formed, and impressed in its places. Therefore they remain firm and stable until the time when there is a need for them to be brought from potential to act. (Harvey 17)

Cogitatio is then the inward wit that allows thoughts to be brought to action, if necessary. Both *phantasia* and *memoria* are subordinate to *cogitatio*, or reason.

In addition to the humoral and psychological theories of the Renaissance, a driving force behind thought was rhetoric. Wit was understood as a literary skill, and there was a "close association, especially in the latter half of the sixteenth century, between wit and rhetoric. In that day, both rhetoric and wit depended heavily upon certain means of development and ornamentation" (Crane 1). In this case, wit is presented as the means of adding to a composition both in content and in decoration.

According to scholar Richard McCabe, the association of wit with rhetoric was due to Renaissance teaching methods:

> which insisted upon the composition of short essays or 'themes' for which vast quantities of quotable material had to be painstakingly amassed and arranged under elaborate indices in commonplace-books. (305)

Students gathered philosophers' comparisons and similes and recorded them in their journals, classifying these techniques into groups. The ways a composition could be amplified or ornamented were considered to fall under the heading of "style." There were three groups into which devices of wit could be classified: 1) figures of thought or logical investigation; 2) appeal to emotions, including exclamation, interrogation, or vivid description; 3) figures of words and syntax (5). All of these groups were part of rhetorical style, although William Crane believes the first two to be the most noteworthy, because the third group is usually accessory to the first group, figures of thought. An important aspect of logical investigation is that the argument progress in a sequential manner; the facts of the argument should first be laid out, until a conclusion can be drawn. Considering the second group, an example of vivid description being part of a rhetorical style can be found in Spenser, whose "profuse and vivid imagery accounts in large part for the association of his writings with wit" (Crane 12). As we saw above, Spenser contributes a vivid, descriptive style, which contributed to the wit of his work. In Book 2, Canto 9, Stanza 51 of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser writes:

> And all the chamber filled was with flyes,
>
> Which buzzed all about, and made such sound,
>
> That they encombred all mens eares and eyes,

Like many swarmes of Bees assembled round,

After their hiues with honny do abound.

Here, the mental imagery conjured by the swarming, buzzing thought-flies is rich and vivid. This description is part of a rhetorical style that is considered a device of wit. Last, in his description of the relationship between wit and rhetoric, Crane lists everything that is *not* wit, including: “tales, jests, florid talk, lifeless verses, adornment and gilding, puns, anagrams, acrostics, bawdy jokes, and tall metaphors” (13). As Crane discusses, Abraham Cowley considers these items to represent a “degenerate form of wit” (13).

In this chapter, I have explored six of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of wit, illustrated through examples of their use in various Renaissance works. These definitions of wit arose out of a background of humoral, psychological, and rhetorical theories prevalent in this time period. In the next chapter, I will present and discuss specific examples of how John Donne uses both conventional definitions of wit, and expands upon them to create a strain of wit that challenges the reader to give fresh thought to the way objects/ideas interact, the function of poetry, and the relationship between reason and morality.

Chapter 2: John Donne's Famous Wit

John Donne was a poet who was famous for his distinctive wit. This is not to say that he was not influenced by other writers; in fact, according to William Crane, Donne took an active part in the meeting of the famous wits of his time, including Thomas Nashe, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Sir John Davies (3). He differed from his contemporaries in that he wished for his poetry to be understood only by the select few friends for whom he wrote. In 1614, when he decided to publish his poetry, he did so in the form of a few copies, rather than producing enough to circulate to the public (Lojo 1). He stands out from others in his use of wit because, as E. Ruth Harvey observed, for Elizabethan poets, wit is decorative, the result of "light-hearted fancy" (which can be observed in Shakespeare's work), while in Donne it is the result of "weighty thought and brooding imagination" (Harvey 5). However, Donne is not always serious, but is often witty in a playful, tongue-in-cheek manner. In fact, he is both a brooding and playful wit: in "The Triple Fool," he considers the grief of losing his beloved while poking fun at his foolishness.

In the first half of this chapter, I will discuss some of the ways in which Donne uses the definitions of wit found in the OED. The selected poems showcase his ability to use wit in a way that is encapsulated by existing definitions. However, Donne is unique in that while he uses conventional definitions of wit, he also creates his own meanings. In the second half of this chapter, I will survey some of the distinctive conceptions of wit that Donne creates. The first original technique that Donne uses is found in the poem, "The Cross," where he uses images present throughout the world to craft a convincing argument. Next, in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" and "The Good Morrow,"

Donne creates a new meaning of wit through his poetry, which is connectedness of two seemingly dissimilar things. In “The Triple Fool,” Donne sees wit as a way to regulate emotions as well as a link to the contagion of emotion. Last, in “The Flea,” Donne uses wit to invent an argument that puts a strain between reason and morality, two virtues meant to be bound together.

Overall, Donne, in some instances, draws upon the definitions laid out in the Oxford English Dictionary, while in other cases, he expands upon these definitions, creating his own models. The works that I will explore in the following sections range from carefree love poetry to heavy holy sonnets, showing the breadth of Donne’s literary ability.

Part 1: Donne's Conventional Use of Wit

"To Sir Henry Wotton"

In this verse letter to a dear friend, Donne uses comparisons, riddles, medical theory, and puns to make his correspondence memorable. He begins by considering which is worst: the country, the city, or the court. Donne throws a riddle into the mix, "cities are worst of all three: Of all three / (O knotty riddle) each is worst equally" (54). This riddle does not seem terribly hard to solve, since we can infer that all three are equally bad, but cities marginally take the crown, as they are "sepulchers," with the people dwelling in them "carcasses." Courts are compared to theatres, with some people acting the part of princes, and some as slaves. The country causes people to become beasts, for nothing but "desert" exists there. These comparisons, although pessimistic, are apt, and lead Donne to the point he wants to make, with yet another comparison to a snail:

> And seeing the snail, which everywhere doth roam,
> Carrying his own house still, still is at home;
> Follow (for he is easy pac'd) this snail;
> Be thine own palace, or the world's thy jail (55).

Rather than living in the country, the city, or at court, it is best to make one's own home, in imitation of the snail, making a castle within the self. Instead of allowing himself to be polluted by lingering too long in any established location, Donne is advocating that his friend travel, finding solace in his identity rather than others. Donne even adds in some humor, as he recommends following the snail metaphorically, commenting on its physically slow pace.

Donne shows his more progressive medical views when he advises Wotton not to "make Courts' hot ambitions wholesome" by adding "a dram of country's dullness" (56). As described above, the general belief during this period was that disease was caused by an imbalance in the body's humors, and that by adding a cold quality, the hot could be tempered. In this case, Donne advises against following the humoral theory, because applying it to his friend's situation would not help him.

To close the letter, Donne puns on his own name, which is just what would be expected of him, since punning is a standard convention of wit, "but if myself I'have won / To know my rules, I have, and you have / Donne" (56). This letter is a good example of the range of Donne's wit, because it shows his more sophisticated wit of comparison, his skepticism of current physiological theory, and his quick and clever punning.

"The Sun Rising"

Traditionally, poets used the sun's rising as an image of an effulgent, basking god or goddess kissing the world with his or her presence. Instead, Donne addresses the sun as, "busy old fool, unruly Sun" and "saucy pedantic wretch" (74). This shows his skill in using language in a surprising, playful way that is calculated to delight in its unexpectedness. Like Euphues, the speaker indulges in his wit, rather than using it to serious, noble ends. Although his tone is playful, Donne still employs wit to his advantage. He uses wit to establish a rational process to set up the argument that the sun has better places to be than bothering the lovers. The sun could "chide / Late schoolboys and sour 'prentices," or inform "court-huntsmen that the kill will ride," which are all suggestions that seem more important than visiting the couple in bed. Donne's argument is successful because, in personifying the sun, he reduces it to being able to be in only one place at one time, flitting from task to task, instead of serving its purpose everywhere at once.

Progressing forward from his original argument that the sun should bother someone else, Donne uses the microcosm of the lovers in their bedroom to serve as the macrocosm of the universe: "she's all states, and all princes I" (75). Together, the couple makes up the entire world, and the entire world is found in them. In this case, it does not matter that the sun is shining on the couple; actually, it is fitting, because they make up the entire world, so the sun must shine upon them. Donne goes as far as to say that their room is the center of the universe, by allowing the sun to shine across the walls, as its "sphere." If the sun shines "here to us," he is "everywhere" (75). Donne's wit in this poem is expressed through playful use of language, as well as the rational construction of

argument. For the most part, these applications of wit fit within the standard dictionary definition, so they represent Donne's use of the conventional meanings of the word.

"Elegy 10: The Anagram"

This poem, about a not-so-attractive woman, departs from the traditional model that exaggerates and praises female beauty. It begins with a blason, in which the speaker comments on each of the woman's body parts. He seeks to make the point that this woman has all the features of a beautiful woman, but that they are somehow not arranged in the correct way, "though her eyes be small, her mouth is great, / Though they be ivory, yet her teeth are jet" (37). According to the speaker, the woman has beautiful qualities, although they are applied to the wrong features. If, for example, her eyes were large, but her mouth were small, she would be attractive, but as her features are in their mixed-up state, she is left lacking.

The blason continues until Donne reaches the conclusion that she has "an anagram of a good face," so that if he could rearrange the features, she would be lovely. His musings lead him to arrive at a syllogism: "all love is wonder; if we justly do / Accompt her wonderful, why not lovely too?" (38). Donne's meshing of love and logic leads to witty conclusions: there is nothing humorous about love or logic, but when combined, they result in wit. The fact that he is using the blason technique in a way that is opposite from conventions also makes him witty, because he is writing to surprise the reader with something unexpected. Changing conventions was a mark of the other wits of the period, as Shakespeare created a similar sort of reverse blason in his Sonnet 130 ("my mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). In this poem, Donne's use of reason in the form of syllogism shows his application of the first definition of wit. Also, his poetry is grounded in physicality, as his description of the woman is made from his analysis of her outward features.

"Holy Sonnet 10"

In this sonnet, Donne takes abstract spiritual concerns and gives them concrete shape through the use of metaphor. Here, Donne uses a comparison of two unlike objects, as he likens his heart to a fortress occupied by Satan: "I like an usurp'd town t'another due, / Labor t'admit you, but oh, to no end" (140). This comparison creates a picture where God must batter down the door of the fortress of the speaker's heart in order to save him. Donne uses the metaphor of marriage, "but I am betroth'd unto your enemy: / Divorce me, untie or break that knot again" (140). He yearns to be free of his imprisonment by the "enemy," or Satan.

Donne also mentions reason, which is in this sense, wit in its oldest definition, "mental capacity." In this poem, he states "reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captiv'd and proves weak or untrue" (140). Reason should be able to defend him from evil attacks, but it is too powerless to do so, and becomes fickle and is captured by evil. As Tina Skouen explains, "From a rhetorical point of view, the sonnet represents a highly successful attempt to present a striking and memorable variation on a common theme, the theme of an internal struggle between passion and reason" (167). In this poem, we can see that Donne's passions, or emotions, have been stolen from him and put to evil use. His heart is the "usurp'd town," (140) which indicates that he is not in possession of his passions, and the fact that he is "betroth'd" to his enemy suggests that this capture of his heart is not good. Donne's reason is unable to take back his passions, because it is too weak to do so. Therefore, Donne is imploring God to do the work of breaking down his heart, where the passions were thought to be located, in order to free him from sin. Here, Donne is using the practical skill of wit as rhetoric to advance his ideas.

"Meditation 17"

This meditation, written when Donne was struggling with an illness near the end of his life, is lacking the playful wit that was present in his earlier writings; it is replaced instead with deep philosophical themes and analogies. He begins with the famous line, "perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not it tolls for him" (Donne, "Devotions" 61). The conceit present in this poem is that the whole human race is part of one continent, of one body. Donne writes, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." He continues to reason that if a part of the land is washed away, the continent is harmed because of it, and since everyone is part of the same body, another person's death knell is your death knell. Donne follows this line of reasoning with the chilling advice, "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee" (62).

Donne ends his meditation with an appeal for others to put security in God, "our only security." The sickness that he feels is tangible from his vivid description, "this affliction may lie in his bowels, as gold in a mine" (63). Even as he believes that he is near the end of his life, Donne uses his reasonable wit to shape and give interest to his writing.

In this first part of the analysis of Donne's poetry, we have seen that Donne uses standard meanings of wit to accomplish his rhetorical objectives. In the next section, we will see Donne's creativity unfold, as he expands upon the existing definitions in order to use wit to make his poetry unique.

Part 2: Distinctively Donnean Wit: Expansions of OED's Definitions

In this section, I examine five of Donne's poems, all of which showcase types of wit that Donne invents. I have termed these unique manifestations of wit: synthetic wit, emotive wit, comparative wit, and antagonistic wit.

"The Cross"

This poem, about the historical controversy in Christianity over whether or not to abolish the icon of the cross, is rich in wit, in the sense that it makes the reader quickly make many mental associations about unrelated things. A. S. Byatt describes this poem in her essay, "Donne and the embodied mind." She writes:

> Theologically, [the poem] is about the omnipresence of the Crucified God in the macrocosm and the microcosm. Poetically it uses perceptual frames and bodily imaginings, as well as linguistic patterning and punning, to make a graph of the world which demonstrates the pervasive presence of crosses. (253)

Donne begins the poem with a logical question, "since Christ embrac'd the cross itself, dare I / His image, th'image of his cross, deny?" (145). He says that since he is made in Christ's image, it does not make sense to deny His image of the cross, as those who are interested in abolishing the icon of the cross would have him do. Donne furthers his case by stating that the emblem of the cross is present all across nature, first within himself: "to stretch mine arms, and mine own cross to be?" (145). The images crop up everywhere, from "birds rais'd on crossed wings" to "meridians crossing parallels."

As the poem progresses, the puns reach a crescendo, as he writes, "cross thy heart," "cross no man else, but cross thyself in all" (146). Donne adds a clever

observation:

> And as thy brain through bony walls doth vent
> By sutures, which a cross's form present,
> So when thy brain works, ere thou utter it,
> Cross and correct concupiscence of wit. (146)

Here he points out that in order to look out from inside the skull, the brain must view the world through the cross of the fissures in the bone, so when a person is thinking of indulging in wit as a concupiscent passion to show how intelligent he is, he should first "cross," or correct this display of wit.

This poem marks a use of wit that is uniquely Donne's, which I have termed synthetic wit. His connections unite and synthesize the occurrences of the cross in nature and in culture. Donne's poem takes natural images of crosses, found even in mundane circumstances that most people would never notice, and combines them in a way that makes an argument to keep the icon of the cross. Donne's perspicacity about the way nature, maps, and words function through "crosses," or intersections, is witty in a way that goes beyond the dictionary's definitions. Wit is both observational and creative in that it brings together natural and cultural phenomena in a novel way. The thoughts swirling around in his mind are embodied in all these things: birds, skulls, lines of latitude and longitude, language. His creative wit in this poem arises from drawing connections between so many aspects of the world and making his argument, which is to keep the symbol of the cross, totally self-evident.

"The Triple Fool"

In "The Triple Fool," Donne combines the wit of logic with the precise wit of rhetoric. He uses tightly controlled reason throughout the poem, beginning with, "I am two fools, I know, / For loving, and for saying so / In whining poetry" (79). First, he counts himself foolish for loving at all, which is a cynical opening to the poem, but alas, it is one tally for the "fool" column. The second reason that he is a fool is that he writes poetry about this love—whining poetry, no less. He reveals that this object of his affections denies him, which causes him grief. Logic leads him to his next conclusion, which is set up as a syllogism: if, according to scientific beliefs of the time, salt water is able to be filtered as it passes through trenches in the earth, then if he could draw his miseries, "Through rhyme's vexation, I should them allay. / Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce, / For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse" (79). The comparison of grief to saltwater is fitting, because the salinity evokes the image of tears. If the speaker is able to capture his grief in "numbers," or lines of verse, then he will be able to contain and tame it.

His attempt to stifle his pain in a poem backfires, as people read this poem and rehearse Donne's grief, freeing it again. The speaker realizes that both love and grief "are increased by such songs." He wraps up his logic in the final couplet: "and I, which was two fools, do so grow three. / Who are a little wise, the best fools be" (79). Through careful logic, Donne proves that he is counted as a fool three times: first for being in love, second, for writing a poem about that love, and third, for writing another poem about the pains of unrequited love. In addition to logic, his wit is rhetorical, because he uses the flow and style of the poem to display his skill, coming to a conclusion in a sequential

manner. To Donne, wit as poetry is effective because it captures the emotions within verse, fettering them in a way that keeps them from surrounding and overwhelming him. However, as emotions are increased through their placement within poetry, they are viral in their spread from person to person, which means that they will eventually break from their lines, coming back to haunt the poet. In this poem, Donne's original style of wit is emotive wit, as it uses poetry to control the handling of emotions. In "The Triple Fool," we can see both conventional definitions of wit as rhetoric and argument, and fresh expansions of wit through Donne's meditation on wit as poetry.

"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"

In this poem, Donne uses the meaning of wit as "apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness" (OED). Written to a lover who is separated from him by distance, "A Valediction" provides the reader with two outstanding metaphors. The first compares the two souls of the lovers to gold:

> Our two souls, therefore, which are one,
>
> Though I must go, endure not yet
>
> A breach, but an expansion,
>
> Like gold to aery thinness beat (21-24).

Donne was familiar with the properties of gold, as he wrote elsewhere that gold is able to expand 10,000 times better than other metals (Dickson 72). The comparison of souls to gold is clever, because it takes two very dissimilar concepts and combines them to create a fitting picture. Like gold, the lovers' combined soul will not break apart with distance, but rather grow wider.

The poem progresses to a new conceit, which marks Donne's unique comparative wit. This conceit is the famous metaphor of the lovers as feet of a compass. Instead of their souls being combined into one, they are now two, apart but still part of one body:

> As stiff twin compasses are two;
>
> Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
>
> To move, but doth, if th'other do. (26-28)

According to scholar Laura Lojo, compasses in the Renaissance were a standard symbol of "constancy in change" (172). Donne takes this idea and applies it to his love: his lover is the "fix'd foot," who does not move unless the other does, but stays in the middle of

the page.

When Donne, as the outside foot, goes to move farther away, the lover, as the fixed foot "leans, and hearkens after it, / And grows erect, as it comes home" (31-32). Donne neatly ties up the analogy in his last stanza:

> Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
>
> Like th'other foot, obliquely run;
>
> Thy firmness makes my circle just,
>
> And makes me end where I begun. (33-36)

The speaker is complimenting his lover by telling her that she is what keeps his circle perfect, and what brings him back to his beginning place. She allows him to travel the correct path, just as the fixed leg of a compass allows the other leg to make a complete circle.

The conceits described above, especially that of the compass, have been criticized as being comparisons that are too harsh, violent, or unnatural. The images of a beloved person and a cold compass do not naturally lend themselves to being blended together. In Samuel Johnson's essay "The Metaphysical Poets," he considers the type of wit Donne uses to be "*discordia concors*," which is described as "the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together" (194). This statement implies that the comparison of the soul to gold or a compass is completely unnatural and contrived. However, as Lojo points out, "the Metaphysical poets, on the other hand, considered the Universe to be a network of universal correspondence which unites all the apparent dissimilar elements of experience and so, disparity of elements would be thus justifiable" (172). In Donne's view of the world, bringing together dissimilar elements would show that everything is

connected, that different concepts can be joined and successfully compared.

Even if there is controversy over whether Donne's ideas are joined violently, it is clear that they are unexpected and aptly placed together. This allows the reader to be "surprised" and "delighted" by the unexpectedness of the poem, which shows that Donne uses this definition of wit successfully. He also expands upon this definition, creating new meaning. Donne accomplishes this through revealing that even objects/ideas that seem very different can be joined and compared in a way that is insightful. "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" provides another example of the way in which Donne forces the reader to consider new applications and rearrangements about the way the world is supposed to function. Typically, a person would have a category for love and a category for office supplies; he would never dream of mixing or comparing the two worlds. Donne disregards this notion, joining the two realms in a conceit that is effective and marvelous.

"The Good Morrow"

This poem is written from the perspective of a lover waking from sleep and saying good morning to his beloved. He is extending this aubade, or morning song, to the couple's souls, as each is experiencing a new discovery of the other, like an explorer of a new world. Generally, wit functions in this poem through a comparison of the couple to a globe. Again, we see Donne's comparative wit come into play. As mentioned previously, Donne believed in the universal nature of the body, that everything in the universe is connected, so his metaphor for the lovers as worlds unto themselves fits within this paradigm. The second stanza includes:

> For love all love of other sights controls,
> And makes one little room an everywhere.
> Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone;
> Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown;
> Let us possess our world: each hath one, and is one. (73)

For the lovers, the entire world is made up of the bedroom in which they wake upb. To them, that room is "everywhere." They are so engrossed in each other that even the adventurous call to discover new worlds does not entice them, for they are each other's universe. Unlike in "The Sun Rising," Donne takes the idea that the couple encompasses the entire world and expands it to actually compare them to the globe. The novel idea of this poem is that the two bodies are reduced to one, then expanded to the entire world, and are in fact "better" than the geographical world. Donne asks, "where can we find two better hemispheres / Without sharp north, without declining west?" (73). In comparing the lovers to the earth, he elevates them to a higher status, in that they are more perfect

halves to a whole, because they do not turn sharply to the north or west, as the maps current to the time period did. Like Donne's conceit considering the compass, his joining of dissimilar ideas for a new effect is what makes him stand out among other poets.

The last few lines of this poem hint at humoral theory, since this theory held that if a body's humors were not in equilibrium, the person would not be perfectly incorruptible. Donne writes, "whatever dies, was not mix'd equally; / If our two loves be one, or thou and I / Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die" (73). Their loves are made of the same substance, equally mixed, so that there is no chance that they will undergo change or decay. These lines show that Donne possesses the talent of using grand, abstract ideas, like love, and relating them to concrete, bodily knowledge, like that of the humors.

"The Flea"

In Donne's poem "The Flea," he employs the first definition of wit, that of thinking and reasoning. Using an actual flea to spur him on, the speaker argues that if this creature has bitten both him and the young woman, then it is mingling their blood, which is the equivalent of marriage. With this argument, he hopes to get the hesitant girl to sleep with him. Donne's first line of reasoning goes as follows:

> It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
>
> And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
>
> Thou know'st this cannot be said
>
> A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
>
> Yet this enjoys before it woo
>
> And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two. (3-9)

His first appeal to her logic includes the fact that this flea, an innocent being, contains a mixture of both of their bloods, which is not sinful or shameful. If this is so, then, the flea is "enjoy[ing] before it woo[s]." The speaker implies that if the flea can enjoy the fruits of wooing or marriage before those steps are taken, so can the two of them.

Next, the speaker takes the argument to the next level, by saying, "Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare / Where we almost, nay more than, married are" (10-11). As the young woman is about to rid herself of the flea and Donne's pestering, Donne steps up his game, crying, in effect, "wait! Because the flea has combined our blood in the same way that sex, as part of marriage, does, we are practically married already, so it's fine if we get together!" Here, Donne shows his wit in his ability to use reason to craft an argument that stands up within the bounds of pure logic.

He continues to raise the stakes by comparing the girl's intended squashing of the flea to murder, suicide, and sacrilege. The speaker considers these, "three sins in killing three" (18). Not only is she refusing to acknowledge their marriage covenant, she is now committing three crimes in removing a parasite/ refusing to agree to his propositions. The theological wit that Donne is using can be traced to the debate about the Eucharist that was going on in the Renaissance: did "this is my body" literally refer to Christ's broken body and blood, or was it symbolic? Donne is capitalizing on this debate by making the argument that, like the Eucharist, the mingling of blood in the flea is literally the couple's blood. Thus, by bringing in a religious element, Donne is heightening her crime to include "sacrilege" at destroying the flea, and destroying their "marriage." Also at work here is the idea of coverture, which is that, "marriage made husband and wife one person in the eyes of the law; that person was the husband" (Dolan 26). The husband was legally responsible for both himself and his wife, as they were "one flesh." However, Donne plays with this idea by making the flea this one body.

In the end, Donne's persuasion is not successful, as it is clear that the young woman has killed the flea, "cruel and sudden, hast thou since / Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?" (19-20). Realizing that his argument, although witty, was not persuasive enough to convince her to disregard her morals, Donne concludes with, "just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me, / Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee" (26-27). Here, instead of making her action seem egregious, he is playing it cool, and suggesting that she will not taint her honor by giving in to him, just as the flea did not remove any life from her.

Donne's use of wit is evident in this poem, as he uses reason to construct an

argument. The unsettling part of this argument is that reason and morality are meant to be bound together, but the speaker of the poem, through his wit, crafts an argument that puts a strain on the relationship between the two. Morality exists because it is logical; it is a reasoned response to a situation; it dictates a proper course of action because it has been determined good and reasonable. In the case of "The Flea," wit climbs between the bonds of reason and morality and seeks to wrench them apart. This is because the speaker's proposition to the young woman uses the flea to make a reasonable argument, but the argument is also immoral, in that is asks her to do something that is out of the bounds of her moral code. In this case, Donne's new use of wit is in the form of antagonistic wit, because it attempts to overturn the way reason and morality function together. Here, we see manifest the brilliance but also insidiousness of wit.

Conclusion

Ode: Of Wit

A thousand different shapes it bears
Comely in a thousand shapes appears.
--Abraham Cowley

John Donne is a fitting example of a great wit from the Renaissance, because, as seen in the writings discussed above, he has at his disposal a bouquet of varied conceptions of wit, which allow him to give depth to the word. His poem, "To Sir Henry Wotton" is a good example of Donne's use of conventional wit, in the form of wordplay and puns. However, he goes beyond simply using these definitions in his work—in some cases, he expands on the dictionary's definition of wit to create meanings all his own. Donne uses the structures available to him to create new methods of argument, compares unrelated things in masterful conceits, and contributes to the idea that wit is poetry, with the ability to constrain or amplify emotion. He is so talented that he has the ability to take conventional notions, such as the idea that reason and morality are bound to together, and stretch them, turning them around so that the reader is not sure what is true. Through his wit, he is persuasive, as in his seduction attempts in "The Flea," unusual, as in his compass conceit in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," and deep, as in his grappling with death in "Meditation 17." He makes the most of wit, both conventionally and unconventionally, and because of this, I would call John Donne a "Renaissance Man."

Even beyond their influence on Donne specifically, Renaissance notions of the body and psychological theory helped to shape other writers of the period. The association of wit with rhetoric put an emphasis on style of writing. The metaphysical poets' fascination with all things as universal impacted the connections and analogies

they were willing to make. These underlying influences contributed to cognition and embodiment in the period.

For a word only three letters long, wit conceals an expanse of meaning. This depth of meaning was at its height in the English Renaissance, but by 2011, it only carries a shadow of its original complexity. We still carry part of its old definition when we warn someone to “have your wits about you” when going down a dark alley. But for the most part, our definition stops with the cleverly humorous. In the end, I hope that you, reader, have enjoyed my short overview of wit in the Renaissance, as I close, taking my cue from Shakespeare, ever mindful that “brevity is the soul of wit.”

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