

# *Donne's Humour and Wilson's "Arte of Rhetorique"*

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SINCE THE REVIVAL and subsequent enthronement of the metaphysical poets early in our century, John Donne's poetry has been subjected to extensive and solemn scrutiny. Admirers of the metaphysicals, while citing as one of the virtues of these poets their ability never to take a subject too seriously, have not emulated what they have admired, and the result has been a great deal of very solemn criticism. J. B. Leishman<sup>1</sup> has been one of the few to emphasize Donne's witty and skylarking cleverness. Most critics have not shared his opinion of Donne as a poet not so much serious and sincere as wittily ingenious. But Mr. Leishman has backed up his interpretation of Donne as a poet consciously striving to be clever with the solid evidence of Donne's reliance on the rhetorical tradition, that tradition which viewed poetry as the wit of the intellect rather than as the outpouring of the heart. Leishman has reviewed Donne's poetry in the light of the traditional rhetorical conventions and figures, and has concluded that much of this poetry is an attempt to make a mountain out of a molehill for the sheer intellectual pleasure of the thing. It will be the purpose of this paper to take Mr. Leishman's thesis one step further, and to show by reference to standard rhetorical devices for rousing "mirth" that Donne was not only trying to be clever, but was often trying to be funny. The conclusion that might be drawn is that far too much of Donne's poetry has been taken too seriously for too long.

The Renaissance, with the help of the classical writers, had managed by Donne's time to reduce to a science all things rhetorical and literary. The art of rousing "mirth" or "plesaunt-nesse" both in oratory and writing was no exception to this trend.

As long ago as Cicero it had been decided that there were deliberate and conscious ways and means of being funny, that there were rhetorical devices that would cause mirth, and through several centuries they had been faithfully catalogued. The orator, and by extension the writer, was expected to possess the art of moving the affections of his audience and of provoking them to delight and laughter. This art was considered an essential part of oratory. Thus, most rhetorical treatises after Cicero's *De Oratore* carefully laid down its rules. The art of jesting had thus been treated in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, in that medieval handbook of rhetoric, the *Ad Herennium*, and finally in Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*.<sup>2</sup> What I shall attempt to show is that in his poetry, especially in the *Songs and Sonets* and the elegies, Donne was very much aware of this tradition, that he knew the devices for rousing laughter well, and that he used them freely. No attempt will be made to prove that Donne used any particular one of the treatises mentioned. Most likely he knew all of them, for all were standard Renaissance textbooks. But using Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* as a guide to the conventional laughter provoking devices, I shall show that Donne used these standard devices in a deliberate attempt to rouse laughter in his readers. He incorporated into his poetry those devices which Wilson declares to be the occasion of "witte," "mirth," or "plesauntnesse," and the result is a good deal of poetry which is a conscious and delightful *jeu d'esprit*.

Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*, written in 1553 as a handbook for public speakers, gained immediate popularity, and between 1553 and 1585 it ran through two editions and eight printings. A recent commentator on Wilson's treatise has called it "the first attempt in English to enunciate a full, rounded set of principles for artistic prose composition, in particular for those engaged in public, oral communication in the vernacular."<sup>3</sup> And though Wilson intended the work primarily for speakers, many of his remarks on style and composition were obviously aimed at writers as well. The result was that the treatise became a handy reference book of rhetoric for all engaged in either oral or written composition.

Wilson's treatise is in the traditional mode and relies heavily on the rhetorics which preceded it. The section pertinent to our purpose is that section in Book II, "Of delighting the hearers, and stirring them to laughter,"<sup>4</sup> (pp. 134-56) which Wilson derived from Cicero's *De Oratore* by way of Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*. Here, under the general heading of *amplificatio*, Wilson enumerates those devices which occasion mirth and illustrates them by examples. Though he admits quite frankly that to "tell you in plaine words what laughter is . . . passeth my cunning" (p. 135), and also admits that "surely fewe there be that have this gift, in due time to cheare men" (p. 134), yet in his treatise Wilson proceeds quite confidently (and perhaps contradictorily) on the assumption that the art of rousing mirth can be taught, and that laughter can be provoked if the writer only follows the prescribed rules and uses the proper figures. He then goes on to list and illustrate the time-honoured rhetorical devices for stirring laughter. Mimicking, overstatement or exaggeration, punning, paradox, irony, and the thwarting of the reader's expectation — these are the most important of the mirth provoking devices found in Wilson. When they are sought in Donne, it is discovered that they are present in ample measure.

Wilson heads his list of devices for rousing laughter with what might be termed mimicking or the flair for dramatic impersonation. He counts as a major comic device the ability to counterfeit in dramatic fashion the nature and actions of men. The connection here with Donne's poetry is immediately apparent for the dramatic quality of much of Donne's verse has long been recognized as one of its distinctive characteristics. But it has not been generally recognized that this dramatic quality is used to fine comic advantage. However, when we read in Wilson that "when some mans nature (whereof the tale is tolde) is so set forth, his countenance so counterfeited, and all his jesture so resembled that the hearers might judge the thing to be then lively done . . . and few shall be able to forbear laughter" (p. 138), then it might be suspected that in many instances Donne has set up the dramatic situation as a deliberately humorous device. In a good many of his love poems Donne has taken Wilson's hint and has so "set forth" and "counterfeited" lovers in various guises that

readers think their actions "lively done" indeed, and few can "forbear laughter" at the folly of those actions. Many of the characters in the *Songs and Sonets* have a way of standing out from the page, of coming alive in brief vignette. There is a fine dramatic portrait in "Love's Usury" of a blackguard who haggles and bargains with Love for all he can get, and who is caught and fixed in the reader's memory as he steals toward a midnight assignation with his lady and then stops by the way to seduce her maid. The dramatic impersonation is vivid and is evoked by the tone of the seducer-speaker and by sharp visual touches like that in the three line description of double assignation (ll. 10-12).<sup>5</sup> The fellow is a cynical opportunist, but we mistake if we take him too seriously and find in his attitude toward love the attitude of Donne himself. It should be recognized that Donne is here using a standard rhetorical device. His contemporary audience would have responded to it with a laugh. We are on safe critical ground only if we also respond with laughter.

Another obvious example of the humorous use of dramatic impersonation is found in "The Apparition." Within only seventeen lines there are sharply etched portraits of both the vindictive lover and the "fain'd vestall" (l. 5). But surely we are not meant to take seriously the Marleyesque vision which will turn the unfaithful mistress into a "poore Aspen wretch" (l. 11). The dramatic scene is indeed "lively done"; every gesture of the quaking mistress is sharp and clear. But the effect of the whole is one of comedy not of terror. Donne has carefully used the old device of mimicking, and to achieve the old effect — laughter.

But perhaps the finest example in Donne of this technique of comical dramatic impersonation is found in *Elegy IV*, that elegy which Leishman has called "the most brilliantly, vividly, and concentratedly imagined"<sup>6</sup> of all Donne's dramatic poems. "The Perfume" abounds in vivid characters. There is its immortal, ever-waking, ever-watching, slyly examining mother, its "Hydroptique father" (l. 6), its skipping "Faiery Sprights" of little brothers (l. 27), and its unforgettable "grim eight-foot-high iron-bound serving-man" (l. 31). But above all there is its dapper, cynical young lover who unabashedly admits he cares not about love, but about "food of our love, / Hope of his goods" (ll.

10-11), and whose chagrin at being betrayed out of a fortune by the perfume he wore is fine comedy. The whole dramatic situation is brilliantly executed, and its function is to produce comic enjoyment. The device of mimicking is used here according to Wilson's prescription in such a way that very few are able to "forbear laughter."

Along with dramatization, exaggeration is another favourite trick of Donne's. And we learn from Wilson that overstatement or exaggeration was considered a specifically comic device. For he writes that "in augmenting or diminishing without all reason, we give good cause of much pastime" (p. 146). Such augmenting or exaggeration overruns Donne's poems. The elegies and the *Songs and Sonets* offer numerous examples, and the epithalamia, and even the "Prince Henry" and some of the verse letters are not exempt from it. Donne seems to delight in "augmenting . . . without all reason", or rather, in augmenting beyond all reason until the results are ridiculously comic. In what is perhaps the best known of all his poems, the "Goe and catche a falling starre", this trick of overstatement is the device upon which the whole rests. Exaggeration is its essence. Donne spends twenty lines proving that it is utterly impossible that anywhere there should live a woman true and fair, and then, just when the reader feels that hyperbole has been exhausted and nothing more can be said, he has an even more audacious exaggeration in store. For in the last stanza he declares that even if by some miracle one such woman should be found, and even should she live next door, he doesn't care to know for:

Though shée were true, when you met her  
And last, till you write your letter,  
    Yet shée  
    Will bee  
False, ere I come, to two, or three. (ll. 23-27)

A good part of Donne's wit consists in this ability to augment beyond all reason. He knew well what Wilson had stated, that "mirth is moved, when upon a trifle or a word spoken, an unknowne matter and weightie affaire is opened" (p. 146). So many of the *Songs and Sonets* are built upon this device. "The Flea," "The Curse," and "The Will" are all fine examples of the

technique. Upon a trifle such as a flea bite a monstrous superstructure of argument is reared. In "The Flea," which Donne's contemporaries admired precisely because of its ingenious piling of argument upon argument, a trivial flea bite becomes the vehicle for three stanzas of intricate debate involving a defence of illicit love, a conceit which transforms the flea not only into the lovers themselves but into their marriage bed and their marriage temple as well, a declaration that the death of the flea is suicide, murder, and sacrilege, and a discussion of the respective guilts of the flea and his murderess. It is indeed a case of building upon a trifle a very weightie affaire.

"The Will" uses somewhat the same method, as Donne allows the lover's last will and testament to grow into a highly complicated legal document. On his last breath, the lover manages to gasp out some fifty-four lines of carefully syllogistic legacy, and to apportion his effects most precisely among those who least need, least want, and are least able to appreciate them. And in "The Curse" the same cumulative technique is used, this time for heaping fantastic vituperation upon the head of any poor, beleaguered soul who so much as "guesses, thinks, or dreames he knows / Who is my mistris" (ll. 1-2). Upon any such unfortunate and for so slight a crime, Donne pours out thirty lines of imprecation of the most horribly exaggerated sort. The punishment in no way fits the crime; the effect is far out of proportion to the cause. A trifle has been blown up to ridiculous size, consciously and deliberately, in order to stir laughter. And the technique works, just as Wilson had declared it would.

Word play in its various forms is another of the devices designated by Wilson as sources of mirth. Declaring that "the interpretation of a word, doth oft declare a witte" (p. 142), and that "wordes doubtfully spoken, give often just occasion of much laughter" (p. 141), he goes on to discuss and illustrate by example the various forms of ambiguous speech, and particularly the punning which Donne so favours. Puns are, of course, numerous in Donne, and they appear in abundance especially in the *Songs and Sonets* and in the elegies where examples can be chosen at random, like this one from "Love's Alchymie":

I have lov'd, and got, and told,  
 But should I love, get, tell, till I were old,  
 I should not finde that hidden mysterie. (ll. 3-5)

Here the pun is fairly obvious as Donne puns upon the word "tell" (and "told") which means both to relate his experiences in love and to count up his past love affairs. Punning also appears in "The Prohibition" which in the word "die" contains one of the many puns in Donne that has sexual overtones: "Love mee, that I may die the gentler way" (l. 19). "The Indifferent" also offers puns with sexual connotations as Donne urges women "to do as your mothers did" (l. 11), intimating that they "did" promiscuously, and declares his intent to "travaile" in the lady's love and bed, and then to "travel" through her on to another mistress (l. 17).

Such puns are liberally sprinkled through Donne's poems, but perhaps the most extensive example of his punning is found in "The Bracelet" where the lengthy argument of the poem owes its very existence to the pun upon "angel" as both celestial being and Elizabethan coin. The pun is here worked for all it is worth as Donne plays upon the "twelve righteous Angels" (l. 9) who are his guides, comfort, and dearest friends, and who must now in their innocence be punished in the jeweller's furnace for his loss of his mistress's bracelet. The pun here is so important a device that if there were no pun, there would be no poem. This is perhaps the most extreme example, but less essential puns are numerous in Donne, and most often they appear in that role to which Wilson assigned them, as "the just occasion of much laughter" (p. 141).

Wilson also includes in his discussion of humorous devices one which had become very popular in the Renaissance, the paradox. He declares that "it is a plesaunt dissembling, when we speake one thing merily and thinke another earnestly: or els when wee praise that which otherwise deserveth dispraise" (p. 146). He seems to have had great admiration for those who could stretch their wit so far as to praise convincingly things not commonly considered worthy of eulogy. The Renaissance had produced much such paradoxical encomia and had wittily defended a host of things unworthy of praise. Paradoxes were written in praise of

poverty, ugliness, blindness, baldness, beds, beans, salads, and chamber pots, while the superiority of ignorance to knowledge, folly to wisdom, drunkenness to sobriety, and banishment to liberty was also defended.<sup>7</sup> Italian writers like Berni, Casa, and Mauro had popularized the form; Erasmus had used it in his *The Praise of Folly*; and it had come early to England, for Wilson writes that Latimer was adept at it and "did set out the Devill for his diligence wonderfully, and preferred him for that purpose, before all the bishops in England" (p. 146).

Donne also seems early to have learned the form, for his youthful paradoxes and problems show him skilful in its use. His defence of inconstancy and of painting by women, and his praise of the gifts of the body as superior to those of the mind were written according to the tradition. But Donne also tried his hand at the same kind of thing in verse. And the result was not only "The Anagram" which is immediately obvious as a formal paradox, but also such pieces as "Communitie" and "Confined Love" in which Donne wittily sets out to defend outright promiscuity.

"The Anagram" is a fine comic piece which argues gaily in favour of an ugly over a beautiful face, and brings to the defence a large collection of logical fallacies as well as sly rhetorical tricks. Leishman finds that in it Donne is playing the popular encomia game, but with added rules, the far more strict and difficult rules of scholastic disputation which he himself added to tighten and point his argument. And Leishman also notes that "no one in his senses would regard it as serious evidence that Donne preferred ugliness to beauty."<sup>8</sup> But when we turn to "Communitie" and "Confined Love," we find that although Donne has used the same form, that of the paradox or comic encomium, the conclusion drawn by readers has not always been the same. These poems have not always been read in the light of the paradox tradition. They have not always been seen as obviously specious arguments in defence of an indefensible position. Donne's argument in favour of promiscuity, of the use of all by all, is to be taken no more seriously than his argument in defence of an ugly face or Erasmus's vote in favour of folly. Donne is not seriously suggesting that man, like bird and beast, may enjoy love where he finds it; he is not claiming this privilege on the grounds that



man should have equal rights with the animals. It is precisely because Donne and his contemporaries were so sure that man had rights and privileges far superior to those of the animals that he could wittily complain that man is not allowed to live and love as animals do. Rather than defending promiscuity, through the indirect method of paradox, he is affirming the constancy which is its opposite.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it should be recognized that Donne is treating promiscuity in the same spirit of wit and learned fun in which writers before him had treated baldness, hypocondria, and boiled eggs. And his praise of it should be read with as much seriousness as the eulogy on a bald head. Only when read in this way, in the light of the tradition which mocked what it most deplored, can these poems be rightly interpreted.

Something which might be termed irony is another of the devices discussed by Wilson. He describes this kind of humour as those bitter jests "which have a hid understanding in them, whereof a man also may gather much more than is spoken" (p. 151). The paradoxes and encomia are in part this kind of jest in that they do have a kind of "hid understanding in them." We may gather from them more than is spoken, and in their specious praise of the unworthy we are meant to detect left-handed admiration for the truly valuable and good. Thus, "Confined Love" and "Communitie" are actually compliments to constancy while "The Anagram" is an indirect eulogy on beauty. But there are other examples also in Donne of jests whose comic exterior conceals a serious inner meaning. Donne often injects seriousness into the comic substance of a poem. One instance of this occurs in the "Song" when in the midst of fantastic directives to catch a falling star and get with child a mandrake root, he suddenly commands:

And fine  
What winde  
Serves to advance an honest minde. (ll. 7-9)

The reader is jostled into wondering whether to catch a falling star might not be the easier task after all. A sharp criticism of society is injected into the generally comic substance of the poem.

The same technique is used often by Donne in the *Songs and*

*Sonets* to make truly shrewd and serious observations on the nature of love. In "Love's Diet," a generally fanciful prescription for ridding oneself of the troublesome passion includes this pointed advice:

Give it a diet, make it feed upon  
That which love worst endures, discretion. (ll. 5-6)

The choice of discretion as the prime antidote to the exaggerated love recommended by the romance tradition shows a shrewd awareness on Donne's part of the nature of that love, and also serves as an apt criticism.

Donne makes an equally shrewd observation on another aspect of the love which poets had so long sung when in "Love's Growth" he dryly remarks:

Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use  
To say, which have no Mistress but their Muse. (ll. 11-12)

The lines bring a smile, but they also effectively point out, if not the falsity, at least the impracticality, of that platonic love tradition which conceived of human love in purely angelic terms. The brief but pointed couplet, while eliciting laughter, also provokes serious thought about the nature of love between human beings. Donne has successfully used Wilson's device of irony. He has incorporated more than immediately meets the eye, and has disguised a serious idea under the sugar-coating of a jest.

But there is one last device to be considered, the one which Wilson found best calculated to stir laughter, and which Donne also found the chief source of wit or mirth. Wilson writes: "But among all other kindes of delite, there is none that so much comforteth and gladdeth the hearer, as a thing spoken contrary to the expectation" (p. 153). And Donne in his first prose paradox asks: "Are not your wits pleased with those jests, which cozen your expectation?" (p. 280).

Both Wilson and Donne knew the comic value of a retort or conclusion completely contrary to what the audience had been led to expect. Wilson offers several examples of jests which please the hearers because "when they looke for one answe . . . we make them a clean contrary" (p. 139). And Donne again and

again surprises his readers with a conclusion which was in no way foreseen. He is a master at cozening the expectation. The reader who comes to the *Songs and Sonets* expecting conventional love poetry is cozened in several ways. Sometimes the surprise comes from the language or mode of thought employed by the dramatic speaker. Lovers are not generally presumed to talk like scholastic disputants. But Donne's lovers do, and that they do comes as a comic surprise to the reader. Or frequently, Donne begins a poem in the conventional Petrarchan or pastoral manner only to bring the reader up sharply as he suddenly shatters the prettiness with some highly unconventional element. One example of this is "The Apparition" which begins, as innumerable love poems before it had begun, with the complaint of a lover against the murderous scorn of his lady. But then it refuses to fall into the usual pattern of wheedling compliment. Instead, it turns into a gruesomely comic picture of the vengeance which will overtake such scorn. The highly unconventional development of the conventional opening delights through the thwarting of the reader's expectation.

"The Message" employs exactly the same technique. Its opening lines are pure Petrarchan:

Send home my long strayd eyes to mee,  
Which (Oh) too long have dwelt on thee;

But almost immediately the unexpected twist occurs:

Yet since there they have learned such ill . . .  
Fit for no good sight, keep them still. (ll. 1-3; 8)

Donne often does such a neat about-face, particularly in the last lines of a poem. Having built up an intricate argument, he suddenly sidesteps the whole issue, or does a complete turnabout. Thus, in "Love's Deitie," after complaining at length of the torments he suffers from unrequited love, he unexpectedly concludes:

Rebell and atheist too, why murmure I,  
As though I felt the worst that love could do?  
Love might make me leave loving, or might trie  
A deeper plague, to make her love me too. (ll. 22-25)

And in "Women's Constancy," after reviling his mistress for supposedly thinking to end their love on various specious pretexts, he suddenly declares:

Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could  
 Dispute and conquer, if I would,  
 Which I abstain to doe,  
 For by tomorrow, I may think so too. (ll. 14-17)

Donne has here not only successfully frustrated all retort from his mistress, but has also successfully thwarted the reader's expectation and produced a delightful comic surprise. He has cozened us, but pleasingly, and has used masterfully the device designed by Wilson as that which better than any other "comforteth and gladdeth the hearer."

The humorous devices to be found in Donne's poetry have not been exhausted by this brief survey. The most that could be attempted here was a summary review of the chief rhetorical devices for stirring laughter as discussed by Wilson and used by Donne. That Donne consciously and liberally used such devices is quite obvious. What the recognition of this fact means for the interpretation of his poetry is, I think, equally obvious. Donne's use of such conscious rhetorical tricks should serve as fair warning to those who would read all of his poems as serious and sincere expressions of his attitudes and philosophy. In a slightly different context John F. Moore has declared that to affirm "sincerity" of Donne's poetry is to involve oneself in "complex inconsistency."<sup>10</sup> But there is no problem of inconsistency if many of the poems are rightly read as jests, as deliberately comic pieces. Such a reading spares one the difficult, if not impossible, task of formulating a consistent love philosophy for Donne from the highly diverse and contradictory *Songs and Sonets*. Such a reading teaches that "actually, there is a surprising amount of pure, good-natured comedy in Donne," and that "in his lightness of touch and urbanity Donne is the spiritual relative of the great English comic masters, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Burns, and Byron."<sup>11</sup> In short, such a reading teaches that Donne had something of the comedian in him and as a result produced some fine comic writing. And it serves as a lesson to those who take Donne's poetry

"too seriously, too solemnly, and consequently are taken in by it."<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 *The Metaphysical Poets: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963); *Monarch of Wit* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1951); "Was John Donne a Metaphysician?" *The Listener*, XLII (1950), 747-48.
- 2 For a brief discussion of the relationship among these treatises see William G. Crane, *Wit and Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1937), pp. 19-20.
- 3 Russell H. Wagner, "Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*," *Speech Monographs*, XXVII (1960), 2.
- 4 Citations from Wilson in my text are to *The Arte of Rhetorique*, ed. G. H. Mair (Oxford: Tudor & Stuart Library, 1909).
- 5 Citations from Donne in my text are to *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: Modern Library, 1952).
- 6 Leishman, *Monarch*, p. 63.
- 7 For further discussion of Donne's relation to the paradox and encomium tradition see Leishman, *Monarch*, pp. 77-85.
- 8 Leishman, *Monarch*, p. 85.
- 9 This becomes even more apparent when cognizance is taken of the similarity between "Communitie" and Paradox IV, "That Good is More Common than Evil," and between "Confined Love" and Paradox I, "A Defense of Women's Inconstancy." In both these prose paradoxes the conventional view of constancy is quite clearly defended, though the method is, of course, the usual one employed by paradox — indirection.
- 10 John F. Moore, "Scholasticism, Donne and the Metaphysical Conceit," *Revue Anglo-Américaine*, XIII (1936), 289.
- 11 Arnold Stein, "Donne and the Satiric Spirit," *ELH*, XI (1944), 270.
- 12 Leishman, "Donne a Metaphysician?" p. 748.