

Paronomasia in the Quip Modest: From Sidney to Herbert

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There is a form of wit that explains itself quite readily to the modern reader. I refer to the so-called metaphysical conceit, the *discordia concors*,¹ which has affinities to our contemporary taste for the yoking together of unlike things through metaphor or simile. Less well understood is the attachment of such a poet as George Herbert, noted for his devotional simplicity, to patterns of sound that were deemed particularly witty. One of these, the figure *paronomasia*, bears a certain resemblance to the *discordia concors* of the metaphysical conceit in that it connects unlike things through similarity of sound. Beyond the goal of witty expression, however, both these forms of connection are designed to lead the reader toward a new understanding of the subject. Before turning to specific examples of *paronomasia* in Herbert's poetry, let us consider briefly the rhetorical purpose of this figure and the use to which it was put in the poetry of someone from whom Herbert learned a good deal about constructing a poem: Sir Philip Sidney.²

Instead of using a single word in a double sense, as the "pun" does,³ *paronomasia*, using two words, emphasizes a resemblance but not identity of sound, as in the "O fate, O fault" of Sidney's sonnet 93. The effect is partly musical in somewhat the way that assonance is. Indeed, Cicero refers to *paronomasia* as what "the Greeks call 'assonance,' when the variation is in a letter or two."⁴ Among the possible variations are the adding of letters, the omitting of letters, the transposing of letters, or the changing of letters. What is crucial is that "similar words express dissimilar things."⁵

The usefulness of this figure in repartee or retorts is explained, in guarded fashion, by Quintilian: "It does, however, sometimes happen

that a bold and vigorous conception may derive a certain charm from the contrast between two words, not dissimilar in sound. . . .⁶ Citing one example that he finds worthy of commendation, he notes that "the sense is forcible and the sound of the two words, which are so very different in meaning, is pleasant, more especially since the assonance is not far fetched, but presents itself quite naturally, one word being of the speaker's own selection, while the other is supplied by his opponent."⁷

Sidney is fond of using this figure in passages of argumentation in his *Arcadia*. An example cited both by Abraham Fraunce in *The Arcadian Rhetorike* and by John Hoskins in *Directions for Speech and Style* occurs in Musidorus' plea to Pamela to understand his love for her: "But alas, what can *saying* make them believe whom *seeing* cannot persuade?"⁸ Ironies abound in such echoes. Pyrochles reflects on his predicament of receiving the unwanted love of Basilius and Gynecia while loving Philoclea: "Truly, Love, I must needs say thus much on my behalf, thou hast employed my love there where all love is *deserved*, and for recompense hast sent me more love than ever I *desired*."⁹ Later, speaking to Musidorus, he seems again to challenge or complain to the gods: ". . . methinks the gods be too unequal to mankind if they suffer not good to come from one kinsman to another by a secret *infusion*, as we find daily evil doth by a manifest *infection*."¹⁰ Satisfying both logically and musically, such sentences attest not only to the rhetorical skill of the speaker but to his moral convictions.

In the pastoral world of Sidney's shepherds, *paronomasia* proves useful for singing matches, where there is a direct need for answering back. Lalus, for example, in the first eclogues of the *Arcadia*, challenging Dorus to a contest of praise for each one's lady, asks: "Can I be *poor* that her gold hair *procure* myself?"¹¹ The contrast of meaning in "poor" and "procure" is pointed by the similarity of sound; the effect is of paradox. Another example from the eclogues that is cited by Abraham Fraunce is: "But *nameless* he, for *blameless* he shall be."¹² It is sometimes hard to say whether such echoes are reflective of real debate; the musical context gives priority to the repetition of sounds. As Cicero notes, "there is sometimes force and in other cases charm in iteration of words, in slightly changing and altering a word."¹³

But Sidney's use of the figure for musical and witty effect perfectly exemplifies what rhetoricians of the late sixteenth century had to say on the subject. Both Peacham and Puttenham cite him. Puttenham, for example, noting the "pretty sport" of playing with similar words, says: "Sir Philip Sidney in a dittie plaide very pretily with these two words, *Loue and liue*, thus. *And all my life I will confesse, / The lesse I loue, I liue the lesse.*"¹⁴ Quoting also an anonymous poet who used the words "prove" and "reprove," "excuse" and "accuse," Puttenham says that these words "do pleasantly encounter, and (as it were) mock one another by their much resemblance."¹⁵

Since such repetitions are consciously and deliberately used, all the rhetoricians warn against falling into affectation. John Hoskins notes Sidney's care not to overdo the figure and cites *Astrophil and Stella* for the sonnet in which Sidney refers to "'dictionary method' and the verses so made 'rhymes running in rattling rows,' which is an example of it."¹⁶ If Sidney implicitly criticizes John Lyly, Hoskins is more direct in remarking that Lyly, "seeing the dotage of the time upon this small ornament, invented varieties of it; for he disposed the agnominations in as many fashions as repetitions are distinguished. . . . But Lyly himself hath outlived this style and breaks well from it."¹⁷

Interestingly, Scaliger says that this figure is "not to be used in serious poetry," that it is "appropriate for epigrams, satires, comedy, and is at its most graceful when from one word by a slight alteration, we extract the contrary."¹⁸ Henry Peacham similarly refers to it as a "light and illuding [or mocking] forme" and says that it "ought to be sparingly used, and especially in grave and weightie causes."¹⁹ How Herbert takes this "light and illuding forme" and makes it expressive of his religious faith is the immediate question before us.

The way *paronomasia* lends itself to argument makes it a figure that Herbert could use in his debates with God—a method of structuring his poems that may or may not be a revelation of personal conflict but that certainly bears a resemblance to Sidney's own fictitious debates in *Astrophil and Stella*, as in the already cited "O fate, O fault" of Sonnet 93. In his representation of a conflict between the claims of the world and the claims of the spirit, Herbert has a subject for which *paronomasia* is admirably suited, since it draws together opposed ideas through a

likeness of sound. He has deliberately chosen to put his wit in the service of his faith: "If thou shalt give me wit, it shall appeare, / If thou hast giv'n it me, 'tis here."²⁰

Herbert's self-imposed requirement that his wit should serve his faith and should have the effect of humbling the speaker, as well as the reader, creates a tension stronger than Sidney's contexts assume. In using two words similar in sound but opposite in meaning, Herbert underlines the two perspectives of his poetry, that of man and that of God.²¹ This doubling back on what he appears to be saying, this criticism of his and all human desires, turns his answering back to God into God's answering back to him.²² His poem "The Quip,"²³ a title that epitomizes the theme of answering back in a clever fashion, has several examples of *paronomasia*; here are some of them:

The merrie world did on a day
With his train-bands and *mates agree*
To *meet* together, where I lay,
And all in sport to *geere* at me.

First, Beautie crept into a rose,
Which when I pluckt not, Sir, said she,
Tell me, I pray, *Whose* hands are *those*?
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

...

Then came quick Wit and Conversation,
And he would needs a *comfort* be,
And to be *short*, make an *oration*.
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

In the last stanza quoted, the refrain gathers new force from the repetition of the "or" syllable that precedes it. Of course, "came," "Con-," "com-," and "make" are also related through *paronomasia*. Then, in the final stanza, another sound proclaims the triumphant conclusion:

Yet when the houre of thy *designe*
To answer these *fine* things shall come;
Speak not at large, say, I am *thine*:
And then they have their answer home.

The words themselves answer back, as “designe” and “thine” sweep away “fine.”

The pattern of quipping by means of the repetition of sounds is used to great effect in Herbert’s poem “The Sacrifice.”²⁴ Word-play in religious contexts has, of course, a long history.²⁵ To give just one instance, the Venerable Bede cites examples of *paronomasia* from the Psalms, such as “they *confided* in thee and were not *confounded*.”²⁶ When Christ in “The Sacrifice” retorts to his enemies, he often makes his point more emphatic and ironical by pairing words of similar sounds but opposite significance. Here is one of the most notable examples:

Some said, that I the Temple to the floore
In three dayes *raz’d*, and *raised* as before.
Why, he that built the world can do much more:
Was ever grief like mine? (65-68)

The effect is certainly witty, but the wit itself becomes an instrument of transformation.

It is a regular feature of Herbert’s style to correct one word by another, similar in sound, but more exact from the religious point of view. Often the humbling of the human being in the face of the divine is shocking: “Legs are but stumps, and Pharaohs wheels but *logs*” (“Praise III”). The echo of the word “legs” by the word “logs” reduces human pride in physical attributes as well as in accomplishments, just as the man who “digs” for gold “falls in the ditch” (“Avarice”).

Some of the contexts in which Herbert uses one word to mock another are more complex. He may even separate his pair of words so that the reader must be alert to sounds that reinforce meaning. But the very unobtrusiveness of the echo delights as well as teaches. His short poem “The Foil” has a play on “foil”/“foul”:

God hath made starres the *foil*
To set off vertues; griefs to set off sinning:
Yet in this wretched world we toil,
As if grief were not *foul*, nor vertue winning.

Though grief is at first quietly described as the “foil” of sinning, when this particular foil attracts the adjective “foul,” the point is brought home.

Used in this manner, *paronomasia* readily juxtaposes the values of two worlds, pitting one against the other and using the retorts of profane poetry in a contest already decided in God's favor. In fact, Herbert's presentation of rebellion is a rhetorical figure to dramatize two sets of values. The language of warfare fills such poems as "The Reprisall" and "Artillerie." In the former poem, the crossed parallels of "confession" and "conquest," "come" and "overcome" not only describe his going over to God's side but underline it by means of the reiterated syllables:

Yet by *confession* will I *come*
 Into the *conquest*. Though I *can* do nought
 Against thee, in thee I will *overcome*
 The man, who once against thee fought. (13-16)

The syllable "con" moves from the "with" of "confession" to the "completely" of "conquest," as well as to the implicit confession that only thanks to these two "con-s" the word *can* makes sense for man, just as in the other pair, "come" turns victoriously, but gently, to "overcome."

But even in a poem so void of military imagery (though "striking" in its description of the Passion) as "The Thanksgiving," Herbert plays with the idea of threatening God. I cite a stanza here, not because it uses *paronomasia* but because it exemplifies his habit of representing himself as locked in a struggle with God, like Jacob wrestling with the angel:

Nay, I will reade thy book, and never move
 Till I have found therein thy love;
 Thy art of love, which I'll turn back on thee,
 O my deare Saviour, Victorie! (45-48)

In the beginning, God, not Ovid, wrote *The Art of Love*,²⁷ a method of conquest now used by the speaker-reader against the author himself. But both win when God wins, and the language of conflict is nothing if not factitious.

Pre-determined as the outcome of the battle with God is, Herbert, in "An Offering," gives a vivid portrayal of the divided heart:

But all I fear is lest thy heart displease,

As neither good nor *one*: so oft divisions
 Thy lusts have made, and not thy lusts alone;
 Thy *passions* also have their set *partitions*.
 These *parcell* out thy heart; recover these,
 And thou mayst offer many gifts in *one*. (13-18)

By relating the words “passions,” “partitions,” and “parcell,” he draws our attention to divisions in the heart and the need to recover wholeness or rather “one”-ness.

Following the example of religious writers from the earliest times, Herbert chooses this “light and illuding forme” to describe the drama of sin and salvation as it is fought out in the human heart. Essentially, *paronomasia* allows him to mock human pretensions through a figure of deliberate ambiguity and irony. Thus, in “The Crosse,” he judges himself as he complains to God: “These contrarities *crush* me; these *crosse* actions / Doe winde a rope about and cut my heart.” By relating the word “crush” of his lament to the word “crosse”—the cause of his lament—he finds, by means of a pun on “crosse,” the answer to his problem. An apparent conflict reveals the action of divine grace:

And yet since these thy contradictions
 Are properly a crosse felt by thy sonne,
 With but foure words, my words, *Thy will be done*. (34-36)

The “corrosive” has turned into a “cordiall,” to use the paired words of “Sighs and Grones.” It can be no accident that both these words contain the syllable “cor,” the Latin for “heart,” though “corrosive” of course has a different root. In the echo of the syllable, Herbert represents the essence of salvation as experienced by the revived heart.

Fittingly, if at first glance, surprisingly, Puttenham gives *paronomasia* the playful name of “The Nicknamer,” or one could say, “The Mis-caller.”²⁸ Certainly Herbert likes to distinguish, as Sidney did, between the true name for something and the nickname. This is a rhetorical device that may simply use alliteration to contrast two things, as when the Princess in *Love’s Labor’s Lost* rebukes her suitor, the King of Navarre, for paying her the compliment of saying: “Rebuke me not for that which you provoke: / The virtue of your eye must break my oath” (5.2.347-50).

She retorts: "You nickname virtue; vice you should have spoke, / For virtue's office never breaks men's troth." But when Herbert contrasts like-sounding words, he calls attention even more forcibly to "nicking-naming."

In his poem "The Rose," he doubles back on himself as he defines the pleasures of this world, represented by one kind of rose, in the light of the eternal, represented by another kind of rose.²⁹ To make the distinction clear, he proceeds to substitute the word "deceits" for the word "delights":

Or if such *deceits* there be,
Such *delights* I meant to say;
There are no such things to me,
Who have pass'd my right away. (9-12)

Answering an imaginary wordly friend, he then puts his choice more positively but with a rhyming *paronomasia* that carries its own message.³⁰

But I will not much *oppose*
Unto what you now advise:
Onely take this gentle *rose*,
And therein my answer lies. (13-16)

Though recognizing that embracing the rose of this world brings its own scourge in the form of thorns, followed by repentance, the poet chooses another path to redemption. So important to the very invention of the poem is the pair "oppose"/"rose" that he repeats it in the final stanza, along with a new pair, "choose"/"refuse":

But I health, not physick *choose*:
Onely though I you *oppose*,
Say that fairly I *refuse*,
For my answer is a *rose*. (29-32)

Gathering up all the associations in literature with a heavenly rose, including Christ and his Church as the Rose of Sharon, Herbert speaks in such simple words that, appearing almost to set aside the logic of

rebuttal, he makes one highly symbolic flower, in its contrasted significance, do the work for him.

Throughout *The Temple*, Herbert's quips become more pointed through the pairing of words of similar sound. But, like the old faith in etymology as enshrining the essence of what is named, his *paronomasia* brings to our attention resemblances in words that could be seen as a key to the truths of our existence.³¹ What Puttenham, in his description of rhetorical figures, had treated under the rubric of ornament has, in Herbert's poetry, not only the appearance of everyday speech, but also the force of revelation: "heav'n" becomes the sinner's "haven" ("The Size"). Is there, after all, a divine *paronomasia*, with a consistent mocking of this world by the other? Such at least seems to be implied in Herbert's use of the figure. A passage in his poem "Assurance" may serve to sum up the place of *paronomasia* in his rebuttal of his "enemies'" arguments:

But I will to my Father,
Who *heard* thee say it. O most gracious Lord,
If all the hope and *comfort* that I gather,
Were from myself, I had not half a *word*,
Not half a letter to *oppose*
What is objected by my *foes*. (20-24)

It is the same kind of answer as "The Rose" offers but here stated in terms of language itself.³²

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NOTES

¹Samuel Johnson's definition of the wit of the metaphysical poets: "a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images; or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" ("The Life of Cowley," in *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. Peter Cunningham, vol. 1 [London: John Muray, 1854] 20).

²See, for example, Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1962) 266.

³See *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). See also Walter Redfern, *Puns* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

⁴Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton, trans. and introd. H. Rackham, vol. 1 (London: Heinemann, 1942) II.lxiii.256.

⁵*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (London: Heinemann, 1954) IV.xci.29-31. For anagrams and repetition of syllables in classical poetry, see Frederick Ahl, *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).

⁶Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, vol. 3 (London: Heinemann, 1921) IX.iii.72.

⁷*Institutio Oratoria* IX.iii.73.

⁸Sir Philip Sidney, *The Old Arcadia*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 92. I have italicized the paired words here and throughout this essay. For Abraham Fraunce's citation, see *The Arcadian Rhetorike* (1588), ed. Ethel Seaton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950) Bk. 1, chap. 24; for John Hoskins' citation, see his *Directions for Speech and Style*, ed. Hoyt H. Hudson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1935) 15.

⁹*Old Arcadia* 85.

¹⁰*Old Arcadia* 149.

¹¹*Old Arcadia* 53.

¹²*Old Arcadia* 217. For Fraunce's citation of the passage, see n8 above.

¹³Cicero, *De Oratore*, vol. 2, III.liv.206.

¹⁴George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, eds. G. D. Willcock and A. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1936) 203.

¹⁵*The Arte of English Poesie* 203.

¹⁶Hoskins 15; he cites *Astrophil and Stella* 15.

¹⁷Hoskins 15.

¹⁸Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetices* IV.xxxiii, cited in Lee Ann Sonnino, *A Handbook to Sixteenth-Century Rhetoric* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) 26.

¹⁹Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593) (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1954) 56.

²⁰"The Thanksgiving" ll. 43-44. All quotations from Herbert's poems are taken from *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974). In two articles, I discuss the relationship between Herbert's wit and his faith. See "Levity and Grace: The Poetry of Sacred Wit," *YES* 2 (1972): 93-102; "All Things are Bigge with Jest: Wit as A Means of Grace," *New Perspectives on the English Religious Lyric of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. John R. Roberts (Columbia: U of Missouri P, forthcoming 1993).

²¹For discussion of the relation between man and God as it finds expression in language, see Heather A. R. Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981).

²²For the place of retorts in Herbert's poetry, see Harold Skulsky, *Language Recreated* (Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1992) chap. 6.

²³According to the *OED*, the word "quip" may derive from the Latin *quippe*: 'indeed,' 'forsooth.'

²⁴Though Rosemond Tuve does not refer specifically to the figure *paronomasia*, she emphasizes the "method of poignant but wittily sharp antithesis, of act set against act in the neat ironic balance of phrase with phrase" (*A Reading of George Herbert* [London: Faber & Faber, 1953] 81).

²⁵For some examples from the Church Fathers, see Ruth Wallerstein, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1950) chap. 2.

²⁶"In te confisi sunt, et non sunt confusi." See Gussie Hecht Tanenhaus, "Bede's *De Schematibus et Tropis*—A Translation," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 48 (1962): 242.

²⁷The allusion in "thy art of love" is to Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.

²⁸Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie* 202.

²⁹On the two roses of the poem, see Don Cameron Allen, "George Herbert, 'The Rose,'" in his *Image and Meaning: Metaphoric Traditions in Renaissance Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1960) 67-79.

³⁰For further discussion of the relationship between rhymes and puns, see Debra Fried, "Rhyme Puns," in Culler, *On Puns* 83-99.

³¹See Ernst Robert Curtius, "Etymology as a Category of Thought," in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953) 495-500. See also K. K. Ruthven, "The Poet as Etymologist," *CQ* 11 (1969): 9-37.

³²This essay had its origins in a paper read at a symposium on *Paronomasia*, Münster, July 6-8, 1992. It has benefited greatly from Professor Inge Leimberg's criticism.