

A Response to Debra Fried*

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Debra Fried has nicely supplemented what I said in my article. As a matter of fact, I have since explored a little more fully the idea that in *The Temple* Herbert followed the old "etymological" rule that words related in sound must be related in meaning.¹ The very fact that this relationship is often obscured, especially in Herbert's poetry, sets up a subliminal echo that moves the reader to contemplate a mystery or paradox. This is why Aristotle links puns and metaphors as both having an element of riddle,² which in turn incites the reader or listener to an act of learning. I not for a moment imagine that Herbert adhered strictly to a mystical theory of language, but, as Debra Fried points out, poets have always posited the notion that there is wisdom in the sounds of words quite apart from their ordinary denotative meaning. Rhyme and reason can go their separate ways, as nursery rhymes remind us, but in a poem like "The Rose," Herbert seems to set rhyme above reason. In his case, the pleasures of pattern are validated by the pleasure of a perceived higher meaning: "A verse may find him that a sermon flies, / And turn delight into a sacrifice."³ There is something equivocal in this linking of words that share a syllable, like a visible demonstration that one thing may turn into another—a linguistic anamorphosis.

In exploring the subject of Sidney's puns in more detail,⁴ I have found that in his secular writings he makes use of the same fiction that Herbert does: that paronomastic relationships constitute a pattern of significance and can therefore serve to represent the truth of human experience. It is not only the contrarities of love that may be encompassed in this

*Reference: Debra Fried, "A Response to Judith Dundas, 'Paronomasia in the Quip Modest,'" *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 115-17.

quasi-oxymoronic way but the whole human condition in which apparent opposites are joined at a level too deep for analysis. Instead of producing an idle "jingle of words," as Sidney's use of syllabic repetition has been called,⁵ the *Arcadia* demonstrates the union of rhetorical elegance and experiential truth. To give one example that will suggest a similarity to Herbert's practice, a sentence that appears in one of the singing matches of the *Arcadia* says: "The heart well set doth never *shun* confession." The words "shun" and "confession" point to an opposition of meaning, but a possible resolution is indicated in the echo of a syllable. That is to say, "The heart well set" bows to the necessity implied by the verbal repetition. The verbal pattern, indeed, suggests no less than an act of conversion, secular though the context is.

It is apparent that Sidney's statements are couched in terms compatible with the humanistic tradition of rational argument. His echo poem (sung by Philisides in the *Old Arcadia*), like Herbert's "Heaven," uses the figure of Echo as a teller of truth, but Sidney keeps his eye on the good life in this world. It is only in the translations of the Psalms that he moves into the anagogical use of *paronomasia*. In the *Arcadia*, as in *Astrophil and Stella*, one word answers another in the humanly ethical sphere, with little reference to the greater riddle of the spiritual life.

Debra Fried asks, "How can one reason in a world where 'raise' sounds just like 'raze'?" Perhaps the answer lies in the wit that is so much wiser than discursive reason. These poets delight in paradox, "the Wondrer," as Puttenham calls it,⁶ that gives a double perspective. *Paronomasia* equivocates in order to suggest the truly "univocal" meaning, like the "grass" and "grace" of Herbert's poem "Grace." But even if the figure is not necessarily religious in its nicknaming, it represents, in its more serious use, a counter-intelligence designed to find out and bring to light the unacknowledged other half of our experience.

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NOTES

¹Judith Dundas, "George Herbert and Divine Paronomasia," forthcoming in *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Richard Todd, and Alasdair Macdonald (Amsterdam: VU University P, 1995).

²*The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1932) 3.11, p. 213.

³"The Church-porch" 5-6.

⁴"A Light and Illuding form': Sidney's Use of Puns," paper read at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, Toronto, October 27-29, 1994.

⁵J. W. H. Atkins, "Elizabethan Prose Fiction," *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, vol. 3 (Cambridge: CUP, 1930) 354.

⁶George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: CUP, 1936) 226.