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Literary Criticism

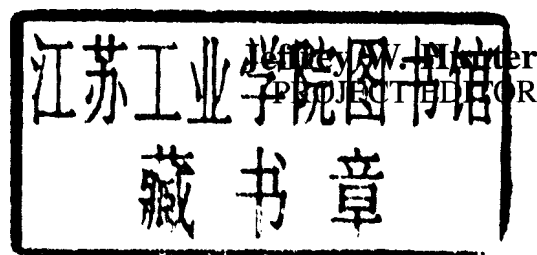
CLC

199

Volume 199

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wit

Margaret Edson

(Full name Margaret Ann Edson) American dramatist.

The following entry presents criticism of Edson's play *Wit* (1995) through 2003.

INTRODUCTION

Edson's *Wit*, the 1999 Pulitzer Prize winner for drama, has been hailed as one of the most emotionally evocative works to be produced by a first-time dramatist. Combining the seemingly incongruous elements of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* with a stark rendering of cancer treatment, *Wit* became one of the top-grossing and most discussed plays of the 1999 theater season. The play continues to garner positive reviews for its realism and powerful depiction of Vivian Bearing, an English professor forced to confront the reality of her imminent death. Addressing issues of mortality, religion, medicine, and academics, Edson's work is a forceful and direct expression of the personal reflections forced on a character facing the end of her life.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Edson was born July 4, 1961, in Washington, D.C., the second child of Peter Edson, a newspaper columnist, and Joyce Winnifred Edson, a medical social worker. Like the protagonist in *Wit*, Edson is well acquainted with academia. A graduate of the Sidwell Friends School in Washington where she had been active in the drama program, Edson enrolled at Smith College in Massachusetts in 1979, earning a degree in Renaissance history in 1983. After graduation Edson moved to Iowa City, Iowa, where her sister lived, and took a job selling hot dogs during the day and tending bar at night. Edson had developed an interest in monastic asceticism in college and she spent the following year at a French Dominican convent in Rome. After a year among nuns, she returned to her hometown of Washington and acquired a job as unit clerk in the AIDS and cancer wing of a research hospital. Subsequently she moved to the St. Francis Center (now the Wendt Center for Loss and Healing), where she worked on producing grant proposals. At this point Edson decided to pursue a doctorate in literature, but first wished to write a story



she formulated during her time at the hospital. Encouraged by friends, Edson worked at a bicycle store in Washington and spent the summer writing the first draft of *Wit*. Her stated objective with *Wit* was to tell a single story and move on to other career goals. Drawing upon her diverse background in religious education, history, medicine, and the academic world, Edson felt that her story fit best within the genre of a play and she completed an initial version before enrolling in the graduate program of Georgetown University in the fall of 1991.

While in graduate school, Edson volunteered as part of her Episcopal church's outreach program, teaching English as a second language. She left school after earning her master's degree and was admitted to a program seeking to bring professionals from other fields into public education, bypassing the standard teacher certification process. Production of *Wit* remained a prominent goal, and Edson sought a venue to stage her

play. After she submitted the work to theater companies across the country, it was finally accepted in 1995 by the South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California. Condensing her two act play into one long emotionally draining act, the revised *Wit* enjoyed a successful run and won several Los Angeles Drama Critics Awards. Edson initially disliked the editorial cuts, but has since acquiesced that the revisions strengthen the pace of the play by underscoring the emotional shifts and highlighting the ongoing stress that the protagonist experiences. Despite her success in Los Angeles, Edson discovered there was little interest from other companies who deemed the play overly intellectual and difficult to produce. A close friend, Derek Anson Jones, was eventually able to convince the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, to produce the play with Jones as director. *Wit* opened on the East Coast in October 1997, earning strong word-of-mouth reviews before winning three Connecticut Drama Critics Circle Awards, including best play. Championed by its lead actress, Kathleen Chalfont, the play secured a spot with the Manhattan Class Company in New York before premiering to a flurry of positive reviews at the Union Square Theatre in January of 1999. Under Jones's direction the play won awards from the New York Drama Critics' Circle, Drama Desk, Drama League, Dramatists Guild, and Outer Critics' Circle. Edson was presented with the John Gossner and George Oppenheimer Playwriting Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Despite her notoriety and critical acclaim for her writing, Edson continues to maintain that she has no desire to write professionally again. She works as a kindergarten teacher in a school in Atlanta, although she continues to campaign on behalf of *Wit*, occasionally attending readings, participating in after-show discussions with audiences, and promoting the causes *Wit* was intended to help advocate—for example, she donated her Pulitzer Prize money to create a foundation to teach medical students how to interact with their patients in a more humane manner. Edson maintains a quiet life with her partner, Linda Merrill, and their child, Timothy Edson Merrill.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Wit opens with Vivian Bearing addressing the audience in a hospital gown, her gaunt body ravaged by chemotherapy and her bald head covered by a red baseball cap emblazoned with the letter 'C'—possibly a reference to her cancer. She explains that she has "stage four metastatic ovarian cancer" ("there is no stage five" she ominously informs them) and that she's been given two hours to tell her story, a fact that leads her to believe that she will probably die before the show is played out. Over the course of the play the audience is exposed to Vivian's treatment for her cancer. Aside from two brief appearances by important mentors, the only other cast members are her students, whom we see in

flashbacks, and the medical staff—both played by the same actors to subtly demonstrate the shift of power taking place as her dominant position as a ruler in her classroom is transformed to one of passivity in her hospital bed. Three members of the medical staff stand out: her primary oncologist, Dr. Harvey Kelekian; his medical research assistant, Dr. Jason Posner (who is also a former student); and her nurse, the empathetic but intellectually slow Susie Monahan. Events are dramatized over the course of two hours without breaks or intermissions, thereby accentuating the unrelenting emotional impact of Vivian's suffering. Her diagnosis, early treatments, and eventual chemotherapy sessions are shown with grim realism. While her bodily pain caused by the cancer is clearly evident, the extremity of Dr. Kelekian's experimental treatments, which produce little apparent benefit, is called into question by implication.

Vivian's torment is not limited to physical pain. She observes that she has become merely an object to be examined, justifying the indifferent treatment she receives from the hospital staff. Only Nurse Monahan provides comfort when the pain becomes unbearable. Nurse Monahan also provides an emotional anchor when Vivian acknowledges the fact that she is really going to die. With Monahan's guidance, Vivian signs a "do not resuscitate" order. She is also prompted to re-examine her life, ultimately judging that it falls well short of what she dreamed and wanted. During this internal search, Vivian revisits two important figures in her own life. The first is her father; the second, her mentor, fellow John Donne expert Dr. E. M. Ashford. The former, having passed away, is revisited in a flashback in which he passes along his love of knowledge to his young daughter. The latter is introduced in a late scene in which Ashford demonstrates how the proper placement of a comma—as opposed to the semicolon that is typeset in Vivian's edition of Donne's sonnets—can change the entire meaning of a poem. Ashford tells her protégé: "Nothing but a breath—a comma—separates life from death everlasting. It is very simple really." (Edson has emphasized this point by often rendering the play's title as *W;t* on theater playbills.) On the eve of Vivian's death her beloved mentor pays her a visit, becoming the first and only person from her personal life to do so. In the penultimate scene, as Ashford tenderly holds the dying Vivian, they read together from a book Ashford has brought as a gift for her grandson. The next morning, Vivian's body succumbs to the rigors of Kelekian's regimes and she undergoes cardiac arrest. Despite Vivian's earlier request to die peacefully, Posner calls for a resuscitation team, claiming that he needs her to live so he can continue to study her. A small scuffle follows as Monahan blocks him from the body, reminding him of Vivian's final wishes. Realizing that Monahan is correct, Posner collapses in front of the resuscitation team and begins to sob. In direct contrast to the tense scene at

stage forward, a now-deceased Vivian peacefully sheds her gown and moves to center stage to ascend into the spiritual realm.

MAJOR THEMES

Critics have observed three major thematic threads in Edson's work: an indictment of both the medical and academic fields' devotion to intellect at a cost of the human soul; the power of language to shape our understanding of life; and finally, the redemptive dimension of self-examination. Vivian is revealed to have been ignorant of her students' emotional needs and unable to see them as individuals; similarly, her doctors can only see Vivian as a vessel for the cancer that is killing her. The very devotion to her studies that has left her without family or friends also makes her an ideal candidate for experimental chemotherapy for there are no friends or relatives to object to her painful treatment. The irony is not lost on Vivian. Where once she taught bodies of text, her own body has become the text Kelekian and Posner study, prompting her to note that "*they read me like a book.*" Edson heightens this comparison by showcasing the surprising similarity in language between the two fields: words like 'subject,' 'exam,' 'test results,' and 'course' thread through the lexicon of both the M.D. and the Ph.D. Vivian's former student, Posner, particularly comes to embody the empty rationality to which Vivian once held claim. He credits her with sharpening his intellectual prowess, enabling him to think in purely rational terms about his cancer research, but it also enables him to view Vivian purely as a body with no individual characteristics.

Near the beginning of the play, Vivian claims to be well-versed in matters of life and death, as she is a scholar of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, "which explore mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in the English language." Sonnets like "Hymn to God, My God in My Sickness" and "Death Be Not Proud" represent Donne's personal explorations of the nature of sin and the redemptive power of discovering God's love. Dr. Ashford tries to use Donne's language to express to Vivian the necessity of life experience as well as intellectual curiosity in order to fully understand his poetry. Vivian accepts the truth of this idea only at the very end of life. While God is rarely invoked in *Wit*, audiences have viewed the scene in which Vivian strips off her gown and opens her arms in acceptance of death as an acknowledgment of a divine presence.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Wit has become enormously popular among critics and general theatergoers alike. For a time the play reached the level of a cultural phenomenon, showing to packed

houses and enjoying a wide level of critical support. Other commentators have observed a growing backlash from critics who feel the play has been over-praised. While most reviews commend both the level of writing and the play's emotional power, some maintain that Edson's inexperience as a writer is evident and debate the value of the work's growing legacy. Such critics point out evident weaknesses, including a reliance on the stereotypes of the dying intellectual who sees her life as wasted; doctors who lack compassion for their subjects; and vague religious allusions. Several feminists have objected to what they regard as Edson's presentation of Vivian's cancer as the result of a misguided philosophy, her punishment for a life misspent. Mary K. DeShaver has written that "neither cancer patients nor feminist theater was helped by the stereotypical representations of culpable dying women." Further concerns have been raised by several Donne experts who believe that Edson misappropriates his themes—a religious examination of the struggle between the flesh's attempts to betray the soul and God's ability to love and redeem; *Wit* appears almost entirely secular. Whether the play is truly secular, however, remains a point of debate and many critics argue that Edson intended her work to be a subtle invitation to redemption, a so-called "anonymous Christianity" as John Sykes, Jr. termed it. The play's ability to inspire dialogue about the state of medical care in America has been roundly praised. While some members of the medical profession have objected to Edson's portrayal of doctors as inhumane and cold, Edson has tried to counter such concerns by encouraging all productions of *Wit* to actively engage with audiences in a series of weekly post-production forums. Most reviewers agree that Edson's emphasis on compassion is evident in all aspects of *Wit*. This opinion is echoed by Dr. Abraham Phillips, who noted that Edson has created a play whose "transformative power should be provocative and enlightening for those of us who must make life-and-death decisions for our patients."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Wit [also rendered on playbills as *W;t*] (play) 1995

CRITICISM

Laurie Winer (review date 30 January 1995)

SOURCE: Winer, Laurie. "Wit Probes Bleak Poetry of Death at South Coast." *Los Angeles Times* (30 January 1995): 3.

[In the following review of the *Los Angeles* production of *Wit*, Winer states that the play is "a little short of reaching its full potential."]

[In Edson's *Wit*,] Vivian Bearing, Ph.D., believes she understands life and death. She is, after all, the country's foremost scholar on the 17th-century poet John Donne, who, she says, explored mortality "better than any other writer in the English language."

The trouble is, Dr. Bearing has stage-four ovarian cancer and "there is no stage five." The doctors with whom she consults don't have time to debate the fine points of metaphysical poetry. Adrift in awful, uncharted territory, she begins to sense that though Donne gave her a way to live, he is going to be almost no use at all in helping her find a way to die.

Theater of the hospital room is by now a familiar genre: *The Shadow Box*, *The Normal Heart*, *Marvin's Room* and many others have all shown that there can be drama in a character's acceptance of the place where there is no drama.

Margaret Edson makes a notable and graphic contribution to the genre in her first play, *Wit*, in its world premiere at South Coast Repertory.

Megan Cole gives a beautiful and valiant performance as Vivian Bearing, a character who shares every vomitive, degrading agony brought on by intensive chemotherapy. She also suffers from dispassionate treatment at the hands of doctors who—like the scholar she once was when "I had shoes, eyebrows"—are more interested in the theoretical than in the emotional.

If the audience must avert its eyes at some points, at others it is glued to this exacting woman whose love affair with the work of Donne and his "capacious, agile wit" has been the reigning passion of her life. Dying at 50 and without any visitors, she amuses herself by baiting the jaded nurses and technicians, by inventing her epitaph ("She published and perished.") and by reliving scenes from her life—her intellectual life, that is.

Wearing only a hospital gown, her shaved head covered in a blue baseball cap emblazoned with the letter "C," Cole's strong-boned face and kind eyes stare hard into anyone who talks to her. Her Vivian is an intense, almost scarily composed listener. Lips pursed, she always seems to hold on to the hope, however fragile, that the object of her stare will say something that is worthwhile.

Meanwhile, Vivian Bearing is quite certain that whatever she has to say is worthwhile. The play's chief flaw is that Dr. Bearing is not entirely credible as a Donne scholar because she describes the high quality of her own work with as much or more passion than she finds in the work of Donne himself.

"No one is quite as good as I!" she notes in one of many such endorsements. She bristles with pride: "My book was a great success. I summarize previous critical

interpretations of the text and offer my own analysis." For a scholar, that goes without saying. Edson puts too much emphasis on Bearing's opinion of herself and not enough on the proof of her excellence. Though Bearing gives an elegant (if abbreviated) lecture on one of Donne's many sonnets about death, the play is missing that blinding burst of insight on what makes Donne great and why the poet has fueled this character's life.

The case for Bearing's emotional deficiency is likewise a little threadbare. Edson gives us a cultured and curious 50-year-old woman who has no friends and no personal memories to speak of, except for those dealing with the development of her intellectual acuity.

Vivian's one hospital visitor is an old mentor, Dr. Ashford, the professor who taught her disdain for unscrupulously edited volumes of Donne that attributed to him melodramatic exclamation marks. In a writer as precise as Donne, Dr. Ashford taught, a single comma can signify something as profound as the breath between living and dying.

Vivian comes to long for those melodramatic exclamation points she long ago excised from her life. She learns, a little late, that there was a place for them all along. But even a hospital ward can be a place for learning. At first, Vivian winces at the touch of a kind nurse. She soon learns to crave it and then, how to wheedle it, and finally how to earn it.

Under director Martin Benson, the set and blocking are simple, keeping the focus on impressive performances from all three actresses. As a brisk older doctor and his smug young counterpart, Richard Doyle and Brian Drillinger have far less shading to play.

A tough play with a riveting central character, *Wit* seems a little short of reaching its full potential. Vivian Bearing would probably give it one more rewrite.

John Simon (review date 28 September 1998)

SOURCE: Simon, John. "Well Donne." *New York* 31, no. 37 (28 September 1998): 78.

[In the following review, Simon praises the diverse subject matter presented in *Wit*, believing the play is a tremendous contribution by a first-time playwright.]

Can a play be made out of the last hours of a professor of literature dying of ovarian cancer? A play that hinges on a close reading of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*? That, without slighting its seriousness, sees the comedy in dying? No? Think again: Margaret Edson, with her firstling *Wit*, has managed it, and more.

Vivian Bearing, Ph.D., is a tough, brilliant, and witty professor of English at an unnamed university. Diagnosed with ovarian cancer in its final stage, she becomes a prized patient at the University Hospital. She is given eight months of intensive chemotherapy, a slim chance of reprieve, and an excellent opportunity to provide medicos with ruthless experimentation. The play is a battle of wits: the dubious know-how of the physicians against the wit (in both the modern sense and the old one of *wisdom*) of Vivian supported by Donne's metaphysical poetry.

We meet Vivian Bearing as an inpatient, her hairless head in a red baseball cap, her body in a hospital gown, her feet bare. In and out of bed, she enacts or narrates the battle for life, and the scarcely less scary battle of the Ph.D. vs. the M.D. There is head doctor Kelekian, who might as well be Dr. Overbearing, to whom Vivian Bearing is just a guinea pig. There is his assistant, young Dr. Posner, who once took a course on Donne with Bearing and obtained a hard-won A-minus. But the humanities have left him with scant respect for humanity, buried under the inhumanities of medicine. And then there is nurse Susie Monahan, a well-meaning airhead. Asked whether a shot is a soporific, she replies, "I don't know about that, but it sure makes you sleep." Yet it is she who redeems the hospital gang from total lack of empathy.

For example, inpatient Bearing is routinely questioned by Dr. Posner: "What do you do for exercise?" Answer, "Pace." "Are you having sexual relations?" Answer, "Not at the moment." And so on. She reflects, "Having a former student give you a pelvic exam was thoroughly degrading." And further: "I wish I had given him an A." But *Wit* is about a lot more. About academia, both students and teachers, including such purblind scholars as Dr. Ashford, whose research assistant Vivian once was. About fathers and daughters. About the profound difference between having and not having a sense of humor. About the not unprofound one between *can* and *may*. About the consolations of a life dedicated to the study of poetry.

And about something greater yet. In his *Fifth Prebend Sermon*, Donne says, "Though there be a difference between *timor* and *terror* [fear and terror], yet the difference is not so great but that both may befall a good man." *Wit* may not provide an airtight answer to the fear of dying, but it does arm you against the terror of hospitals and their torturers. It is a dazzling and humane play you will remember till your dying day, and especially then, thanks also to a near-flawless production.

First, Kathleen Chalfant, a Vivian of power and vulnerability, commanding intelligence and compelling irony. Visualize the dedication of an actress shaving her head

for a role, not to mention further heroism I won't reveal here. Imagine overwhelming effects by the subtlest vocal emphases or a roll of the eyeballs. Picture a perfect amalgam of armored intellect and naked feeling. When Chalfant gallantly removes her cap, her glabrous head radiates a glorious halo. And, last but not least, she does not, like most people, mispronounce the word *joust*.

Add a supporting-cast in which all, and Alec Phoenix in particular, shine; lighting by Michael Chybowski to stir the soul; sparing but bone-chilling sound by David Van Tieghem; capital direction by Derek Anson Jones, etc., etc. And don't miss the final irony: Margaret Edson teaches elementary school in Atlanta. For this play alone, she should be handed the Harvard English department.

Stefan Kanfer (review date 5 October 1998)

SOURCE: Kanfer, Stefan. "Leaps of Faith." *New Leader* 81, no. 11 (5 October 1998): 22-3.

[In the following review of *Wit*, Kanfer commends the power and intent of Edson's writing, but believes her inexperience as a playwright causes her to render the details of the play overly "neat."]

The Academy and the cancer ward share many of the same terms: "exam," "study," "test results," "research," "analysis," "course." Yet as playwright Margaret Edson demonstrates in her new drama, *Wit*, context is everything. In one arena the words concern illumination and explication; in another, they are a matter of life and death.

Vivian Bearing, PhD (Kathleen Chalfant), is familiar with both the university and the hospital. A professor of English Lit. specializing in the poetry of John Donne, she comes to an unnamed clinic suffering from advanced ovarian cancer. With great calm she addresses the audience, telling us what we will see, from the first phases of her treatment to her final day on earth. "It's highly educational," she says dispassionately. "I am learning how to suffer." Forewarned, we still cannot look away as she is slowly robbed of her independence, her dignity and, finally, her formidable intelligence.

Dressed in one of those hospital gowns designed for maximum humiliation, and hiding her chemotherapy-caused baldness beneath a red baseball cap, Bearing is the very essence of valor. Her specialist, Dr. Harvey Kelekian (Walter Charles), intends to treat the malignancy in an aggressive manner, armed with every surgical, chemical, biological, and radiological means at his command. In this battle he is aided by a brilliant young adjutant, intern Jason Posner (Alec Phoenix). Neither

man is cruel by intent. But as they go about their business Bearing ceases to be an individual to them. She becomes, instead, a subject for experimentation. Under the onslaught she makes an effort to remain indomitable, taking comfort in the verse of her beloved 17th century sonneteers:

Death be not proud, though some
have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art
not so,
For those whom thou think'st thou
dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst
thou kill me.

As the treatments grow more drastic, Bearing's thoughts slip back to a childhood of reading to her distracted father. From there she wanders to undergraduate days when a college professor (Helen Stenborg) explicated a text—and pointed her life in a new direction:

PROFESSOR ASHFORD:

In the edition you chose, this profoundly simple meaning is sacrificed to hysterical punctuation:

And death—capital D—comma—shall be no more—semicolon!

Death—capital D—comma—thou shalt die—exclamation point!

If you go in for this sort of thing, I suggest you take up Shakespeare. Gardner's edition of the Holy sonnets reads: *And death shall be no more comma. Death thou shall not die.* Nothing but a breath—a comma—separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple, really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause. This way, the uncompromising way, one learns something from this poem, wouldn't you say? Life, death, Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma.

BEARING:

Life, death . . . I see. It's a metaphysical conceit. It's wit!

So it is, and so is much of Edson's absorbing play. Within its intermissionless two hours ironies appear at every turn. Kelekian is an MD, Bearing is a PhD; one doctor seeks the newest facts, the other, the oldest verities. The intern was once the professor's student. He is proud of having received an A- in the Donne course—although when Posner went on to medical school he left his humanity back in the Humanities department. (After one particularly agonizing test Bearing wails, "I wish I had given him an A!") The hospital claims to alleviate suffering, but the only mercy in evidence comes from an ill-educated nurse, Susie Monahan (Paula Pizzi). She at least keeps the hospital from using so-called "heroic"

measures to save Bearing for a few more heartbeats, another procedure, an additional entry in the doctors' notes about terminal illness.

In the role of a lifetime, Chalfant (last seen in a variety of personae in *Angels in America*) holds the stage of the small MCC Theater off Broadway, vulnerable and exposed in every sense of the words. Her support could not be bettered; each performer is wholly convincing in medical and/or university roles. Derek Anson Jones has directed with sensitivity and scrupulous attention to detail, moving his cast in and out of rooms with the crispness of real Intensive Care Unit personnel. Myung Hee Cho's set shrewdly utilizes the curtains around hospital beds to effect scene changes. Ilona Somogyi's costumes are all too accurate, as is Michael Chybowski's pitiless lighting.

This is not a perfect evening. Edson is a new playwright and she seems anxious to include all she has experienced as a hospital worker in an oncological unit, and as a teacher in Atlanta. Everything is a bit too neat. Bearing, for example, is exactly a half-century old—not 49, not 51. She has no family to clutter up her life, and not a single friend visits her. In the end, en route to visit a great-grandchild, the aged Professor Ashford drops by to read a children's book. *The Runaway Bunny* may indeed have home truths as valuable as those in Donne's sonnets, but the scene is too contrived for credibility. Still, these are the forgivable mistakes of a tyro. With all its flaws, *Wit* is a distinguished debut, and a promising beginning for the '98-'99 season. Webster's defines wit as (1) "intellectual and perceptive powers"; and (2) "the ability to make lively, clever remarks in a sharp, amusing way." Edson gets an A- on both counts.

Robert Brustein (review date 2 November 1998)

SOURCE: Brustein, Robert. "Way to Break the Silence." *New Republic* 219, no. 18 (2 November 1998): 28-9.

[In the following review of Edson's *Wit* and theater troupe De La Guarda's *Villa Villa*, Brustein contends that such plays have helped restore eloquence in American theater.]

For a number of years now, critics have been complaining that language is no longer a key element of the theater, having been displaced by music, spectacle, and special effects. But as a matter of fact, words have rarely been the most important component of contemporary drama—or of classical drama before Shakespeare. (Analyzing the elements of tragedy, Aristotle didn't rate language at the very top of his list either.) Ibsen's famous contribution to modernism was to sacrifice verse altogether, though he was a master poet, in favor of