Paronomasia celata
in Donne’s “A Valediction: forbidding mourning”

Provided that it is given a little paronomastic twist, the beginning of Donne’s verse-letter “To Sir Henry Wotton” serves to illuminate a central idea of his famous “Valediction” poem: “Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle Soules;/For, thus, friends absent speake.”1 In replacing kisses with letter-writing as a way of speaking, Donne implicitly refers to the lips forming sounds or letters, the elements of speech.2 (Such an ambiguous reference to “letters” does not come as a surprise in a poem that ends with a pun on the poet’s own name.) “A Valediction: forbidding mourning” is a poem about the mingling of souls; lovers have to part but, spiritually, they cannot be separated.3 At the same time, however, it is a poem about the “mingling” of letters, that is to say, the language of the poem, by means of paronomasia, reflects and realizes its theme of unity-in-separation. Just as the lovers, seemingly apart, are yet “Interassured of


2. Another example of Donne’s punning on letter may be found in “A Valediction: of the Booke”: “Study our manuscripts, those Myriades/Of letters, which have post twixt thee and me,/Thence write our Annals” (10–12). For the connotative potential of the word, see Inge Leimberg, “The Letter Lost in George Herbert’s ‘The Jews’,” Studies in Philology 90 (1993), 298–321.

3. In the words of an elegy numbered among the dubia by Gardner, their souls “are ty’d” for they “can love by letters still” (“His Parting from Her,” 70–71).
the mind” (l. 19), there are certain common sounds or letters which reveal the connection between two seemingly disparate words. Moreover, as the unity of the lovers is a secret that must not be broadcast to the crowd, the coherence of the words will remain hidden to the “layette,” to those who are insensible to or do not care for the more subtle interplay of sounds and letters.

A similar correspondence exists between theme and imagery. The pair of compasses as an image of the loving couple, for instance, is often cited as a typical example of the metaphysical conceit: the metaphor or comparison (compasses and lovers) may at first seem forced and even far-fetched, but once its point has been grasped, it turns out to be most illuminating and conclusive. But Donne has achieved even more than inventing (or adapting) a typical conceit. If the unexpected connection between remote points of comparison is the hallmark of the baroque conceit, then Donne’s famous compasses are an image not only of the lovers but also of the very nature of the conceit itself.

Paronomasia, I should like to suggest, plays an essential part in complementing and enriching this analogy. As will be shown, it serves to connect the very different and seemingly unrelated images of the poem by bringing together different but similar-sounding words. The rhetorical device of paronomasia, like the conceit of the commonplace, is typical of the metaphysical wit. Paronomasia, in other words, substantiates on the level of poetic language most appropriate not only for learned treatises but also, to a considerable extent, for poetry. On the one hand, Latin was the language of people who had at least some education (like the “understander” of Chapman’s Homer); it was not the language of the “layette” in a wider sense of the word. On the other hand, however, it was an international language, a means of communication for those who, far from England, “romed” about the Continent. Herbert and Milton are perhaps the most prominent examples of seventeenth-century poets writing Latin verse besides English; Donne himself wrote several Latin poems (and made ample use of the Vulgate in his sermons). It is not surprising, then, that in their English poetry many Renaissance writers take advantage of the opportunities for wordplay arising from the juxtaposition of the two languages. Alastair Fowler gives a delightful example from Spenser’s Amoretti. In Sonnet 64, “Elizabeth’s neck smells like [to] a bunch of columbines” because these are white—but also because collum means neck.”

As this example shows, Anglo-Latin puns may be characterized by two elements or stages: first, the sound of an English word resembles that of a Latin one (however different in meaning), while, secondly, the reader has to translate an English word in order to become aware of the hidden pun. A great amount of wit may be shown in combining and refining these two elements, as can be seen in an example from George Herbert. In “The Quidditie,” Herbert gives a series of (negative) answers to the question, “what is averse?” Now, this very question is expressed by the title of the poem: “quid” of course means “what,” and “dittie” is (or was, in Herbert’s time) just another word for “verse.” In his satirical Catalogus librorum aulicorum, Donne —


5. Donne’s image has been traced back to Guarini’s Madrigal 96 by Mario Praz, Scienza e marinismo in Inghilterra (Florence, 1923), p. 109, n. 1, Josef Lederer, “John Donne and the Emblematic Practice,” Review of English Studies, 22 (1941), 182-200, esp. p. 187, and D. C. Allen, “Donne’s Compass Figure,” Modern Language Notes, 71 (1956), 256-57. See Donald L. Guss, “Donne’s Conceit and Petrarchan Wit,” PMLA, 78 (1963), pp. 310-11, for the way in which Donne transforms the meaning of the image as he found it in his “source.”


8. K. K. Ruthven, in his discussion of etymological conceits (The Conceit [London, 1969], pp. 38-41), only takes into account familiar Latin words being used in an unfamiliar Latin sense. But “etymological” conceits involving Latin synonyms of English words are also quite common, as Fowler’s example shows.

9. OED 12b. I am indebted to Inge Leimberg for this example.
self—on a somewhat cruder level of wit—testifies to the currency of such interlinguistic puns when he credits the learned jurist Baldus with having written a treatise “in laudem Calvijii,” in praise of baldness.10 The example also shows that Anglo-Latin wordplay may have either language as its starting point.

The interplay of the two languages can be based on etymology or pseudo-etymology even when it has nothing to do with the derivation of an English word from a Latin one. In Herbert’s poem on “Hope,” which describes an exchange of gifts between the speaker and personified Hope, the speaker, for his “viall full of tears” is given only “a few green eares” in return. Why is this such an apt present for Hope to give? Of course green ears of corn symbolize future growth and the expectation of a rich harvest, but the first reason lies in the word itself, as Varro explains in his De lingua Latina (5.37): “from spes ‘hope’ comes spicae ‘ears of grain’.”11 The counterpart to this derivation, the homonymic “etymology” of spes, will be of further interest with regard to Donne’s poem. For the moment, suffice it to say that the example from Herbert’s “Hope” shows us that Latin wordplay may even be found in a poem without any English word sounding like the Latin one on which the pun is made. This is paronomasia celata indeed: the Latin synonym (spes) of an English word (hope) reads or sounds like another Latin word (spicae) which is represented by its English synonym (green ears). It is somewhat difficult to determine the place of this kind of device within the framework of classical or Renaissance rhetoric. Perhaps it is best described as a scheme analogous to the trope of metalepsis or transumptio, terms which refer to rhetorical figures consisting of two stages;12 as in our case paronomasia is based on (unspoken) synonymia. The implicit reference to several similar-sounding words in another language is a sophisticated form of the unspoken pun based on the synonymy of two or more English words and their various shades of meaning, which M. M. Mahood has shown to be a characteristic feature of Shakespeare’s wordplay.13

III

The first indication of this kind of intricate device in Donne’s “A Valediction: forbidding mourning” is given by the title, which functions as a signpost drawing attention to the Latin language as well as to homonymic wordplay. According to the OED, the word valediction is first documented in a letter by Donne addressed to Sir Henry Goodyer in 1614;14 Donne here speaks of his “valediction to the world” before taking orders. Especially if we take it for granted that his “Valediction” poems were written before 1614, there are good reasons to assume that it was Donne who newly formed this word out of Latin vale and dicere. Diction, in Donne’s time, simply meant “word” as well as “speech” (OED 14½,½), and vale is derived from valere, which means not only “to be well” but also “to mean, signify”—another reference to the fact that language itself becomes the theme and that the “Valediction” is indeed a case of veiled diction.

The very existence of the word valediction may be due to paronomasia, for there is another, very similar expression of Latin origin, which is much older. Donne links both words in his sermon on Psalm 6 (1623): “Discedite à me, Depart from me all ye workers of iniquity; here is then first... a valediction, with a malediction, with an imprecation of Gods Justice.”15 Both literally and homonymically, the title of our poem contains a malediction or imprecation, for the word forbid could mean “to lay under a ban, curse, interdict” (OED 2½,½).16 The Latin

13. Shakespeare’s Wordplay (London, 1937; rpt. 1988), pp. 24–26. One of Mahood’s most forceful examples, however, is Herbert’s “Love (III),” which “is built upon the ordinary and the Eucharistic meanings of the word host which nowhere occurs in the poem” (pp. 24–25). Mahood also points out that Shakespeare’s puns often add strength to the connection between his poetic images (see, e.g., pp. 22, 25).
16. For the near-synonyms “forbidding” and “malediction” see Simon PEGEOROMUS, SYNOMYNOUS SYLVA, second ed. (1603). Under “to Curse, to Barne, to Excommunicate” he has “Interdicicio subjicie” [sic] and under “to curse, to Wish ill” he gives “Male dicere” (p. 81); one also finds “Malediction” listed under “Cursings” (p. 82) and “Interdicere” under “to Forbid” (p. 157).
word _interdictio_ refers to what is cursed and what is forbidden. This meaning is still familiar to us from the witches’ curse in _Macbeth_ (1.3.21): “He shall live a man forbid.” Donne’s title, we conclude, implies _paronomasia_ and _synonymia_ in close connection.

But this is not all. Perhaps the most obvious pun occurs in the last word of the title. In one of the manuscripts of the poem17 the title reads “Valediction against Mourning,” which is even more ambiguous, since in the seventeenth century _against_ could have an explicitly temporal meaning.18 Izaak Walton, who quotes Donne’s poem shortly before the account of his spiritual conversion, deliberately precludes the ambiguity of “mo[u]nring” by changing the title into “A Valediction: forbidding to mourn.”19

The pun seems to have been disregarded by critics. For example, it does not even attract John Freccero’s attention, who points out that the poem “resembles the medieval _congé d’amour_, wherein a lover takes leave of his lady and consoles her by claiming that they are not really two individuals, but rather affirm that they are one.”20 In the context of Donne’s _Songs and Sonnets_, however, another closely related genre is knit up with the _congé_: the _aubade_ or _Tagelied_. “The Sunne rising,” for instance, in which the “Busie old foole, unruly Sunne” is chided (or cursed, or forbidden), does not openly allude to death like “A Valediction: forbidding mourning” but speaks about impending loss just as much as, conversely, our poem speaks about erotic love.21

The homonymic wordplay, _mourning_ and _morning_, may thus be regarded as a concealed allusion to the identity of love and death, of _l’amour_ and _la mort_, which is one of the classic, one might even say, inescapable themes of love poetry whenever it genuinely strives to express human experience.22 A well-known example is Romeo’s taking leave of Juliet (3.5), a scene in which forebodings of death

17. A. 25, see Gardner, p. 62.
18. See _OED_ 117. “Drawing towards, near the beginning of, close to.” _OED_ 18. is still current: “In view of; in anticipation of; in preparation for; in time for.”
21. Another example is “The Sunne Rising” with its mournful line, “Must to thy motions lovers seasons run” (4).

loom large. The lark, which in Romeo’s words is “the herald of the morn,” becomes the herald of mourning (cf. _OED_ _mourn_, n. Obs. “Sorrow, lamentation, grief, mourning”). The speaker of “A Valediction: forbidding mourning” describes the process of spiritual refinement which enables the lovers to “Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to mise” (20). But at the same time, as critics have pointed out, words like “go,” “melt,” “foot,” and “erect”23 homonymically refer to the bodily sphere characteristic of Donne’s _Elegies_ and _aubades_. Allan Tate even went so far as to say that the pun “to die,” implying ecstasy as well as final separation, is the “mover” of the poem, “its propeller, its efficient cause” (p. 80). It may be remarked that this word does not actually occur in the poem. Paronomasia is unobtrusive; it “make[s] no noise,” but nevertheless, as the title shows, its important function is asserted from the beginning.

In “A Valediction: forbidding mourning” Donne transposes, as Geoffrey Hartman has observed, the theme of duality, or of two-in-one, “onto the level of language as such,” blending “a Latinate dimension . . . still felt in the term ‘valediction’” with “a virtuoso use of the developing everyday language.”24 This blending of, as well as tension between, Latin and English is one of the verbal signals given by the title. Another one is the use of homonymic wordplay in each of its three main words.

IV

The combination of two rhetorical figures based on similarity or near-identity, however, is not confined to the title. It supplies, as it were, the linguistic bridge between the different fields of imagery which follow upon each other in the poem and which, at first sight, may appear so incoherent as to provoke the question whether they have

anything in common besides their reference to the loving couple. In the first stanza of the poem the reader is made aware that life and death depend upon a breath; like the sad friends assembled around the deathbed of a virtuous man we realize that a world of difference may lie between "now" and "no" (Hartman, p. 153), or that, in Donne's own words, "the transposing of words, or syllables, or letters," the shift of "an accent" or a "voice" must not "be thought little, where the consequence may prove great." And yet what seems worlds apart, like breath and death, may suddenly prove to be closely connected by the sound of the words.

"Breath" is an equivalent of Latin spiritus, and it is thus nearly synonymous with anima, "soul" (l. 2). But "breath" may also be expressed by the Latin (or rather, Greek) word aera; Varro, for instance, cites an example from Pacuvius: "Terra exhalat aera atque aurora humidam" (5.24), the land exhales a breeze (or a breath) and dawning damp. Aera atque aura—aurora of course is a metonym (and Latin synonym) of morning. The breath or spirit of the dying man is thus, however secretly and indirectly, connected with the "forbidding mourning." Lucas a non lucendo, one might say, the light of the morning, traditionally regarded as a sign of resurrection and the coming of Christ, is what truly forbids mourning. In addition, aura is the bride of the Song of Songs: "quae est ista quae procula sunt a me" (6.9), "she is the she that looketh forth as the morning" (6.10 in the Authorized Version).

Donne's theme, the spiritualization of love, is thus verbally linked to the religious sphere not just by means of expressions like "layetic" but also by a carefully designed pattern of Latin references. Aura is a slight movement of the air, in Isidore's words, "Aura ab aura dictum. id est ab splendore, eo quod repercusso aer plus splendore agere." (Etymologiae, ed. W. M. Ivins, Oxford, 1916) goes on to quote Vergil's Aeneid (6.204): "Discolor inde aurum per ramos aurum refulsit." Low noise and attentive listening are thus emphasized as an ongoing motif, which also turns up in the last image, the comparison of the lovers to a pair of compasses. The "fixt foot" (27) only apparently remains passive, while in fact it follows the other's movement: "It leans, and6 harkens after it" (31). The first meaning of to hearken given by the OED is "To apply the ears to hear," and in the specific sense implied here (OED 16. intr.) it means, "to then but motus lenis. Donne takes up this image again in the sixth stanza, in which the two souls of the lovers, "which are one," are compared to "gold to ayery thinnesse beate" (l. 24). If the gentle breath (of the virtuous men as well as the lovers) may be regarded as aura, here is its etymon, aer. But the fabric is woven even closer. What is the etymology of the Latin word for gold? Cassiodorus reports the traditional view that aurum is derived from aera because of its splendor; this derivation can also be found in Isidore: "Gold (aurum) comes from aura, that is, from the splendour, because through this reflected splendour it makes the air shine." The etymological (or homonymic) relationships come full circle when we realize that aera, also because of its splendor, is derived from aurum, gold: "aurora . . . qua hora aurae." 29 Still, this is not all. The lovers' parting from each other in the morning, their gentle breath, the faint breeze as opposed to "teare-floods" and "sight-tempests" (6)—all this is connected with the image of "gold to ayery thinnesse beate" not only through the verbal relation between aura, aurum, and aurum. The silence of the lovers' parting is stressed from the beginning. There is only a "whisper," they "make no noise," and, like the friends in stanza one, we must listen most attentively to the faint sounds uttered. In addition, unheard celestial "trepidation" is contrasted with the uproar of earthquakes. The image of the gold leaf continues this emphasis on silence, for it has traditionally been regarded as one of the most remarkable qualities of gold that it does not make a sound when beaten. 30

seek to hear tidings." "Eyes, lips, and hands," then, may be parted with, but not the ear. Donne hides quite a number of English ears in his text: there are (to name only the homographs) "teare-floods" (6), "th'earth" (9), "fears" (9), "spears" (11), and "hearkens." Less conspicuously, the Latin synonym fits into the pattern of homophones secretly at work in this poem. The circle of aurora, aura, aurum is completed by auras, the ear, that circular (or rather spiral) organ that must be applied if sense is to be made of ab-sence. Donne's wordplay is not without classical example. As Frederick Ahl has shown, the story of Cephalus and Procris in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* — a story of absence, return, and married constancy — is woven around homophones of aur- [9:6]; a syllable or sound which is also, beginning with the many variations on Laura's name, one of the hallmarks of love poetry in the Petrarchan tradition.

V

Intertwined with this pattern is a second strand of Latin homonyms that secretly connects the images of the poem. In the first two stanzas, we remember, both aura and spiritus come into play as Latin equivalents for the air or breath that moves almost imperceptibly. Spiritus is the Latin word for the breath of the dying man, which is identified with his soul leaving the body. The spirit of the dying man is evoked to underscore the spiritual nature of the lovers' union, an idea which informs expressions like "nor sigh-tempests," "refined," "35 "airy" love poetry in the Petrarchan tradition. 33


34. John Freccero discusses the concept of pneuma, or spiritus (pp. 157–63), "the mysterious substance which was connected to be the medium of the soul's action to the body, as well as the medium of the planetary soul's action on the heavenly body" (p. 357). On the identity of anima and spiritus, see Isidore 11.1.7–10.


(23) between the lovers. At the same time, biblical connotations must not be forgot: in the Sermon on the Mount, the *spiritus sanctus* is announced to those who mourn (Matthew 5.4). 36

The contrast between the sensual earth(ly) movement typical of "dull sublunary lovers love" and the refined love compared to "trepidation of the sphere" continues the idea of spiritualization. Again, a Latin pun provides the connection: *spiritus* is closely related to *spirare* (to breathe, live); and *spira-* and *sphaera* (from Greek speira) are nearly identical in sound. 37 *Spira* as a noun, however, means "spiral," and the spiral is the very movement of the compasses described in the last two stanzas of the poem. For their movement is both radial ("far doth rome" — "comes home") and circular ("makes my circle just"), a juxtaposition of geometrical images which, taken together, result in a spiral pattern. 38 Like the pair of compasses, the spiral is an emblem of two contrasting elements brought together, the radial movement being traditionally connected with the body and our physical nature, and the circle with the soul, with spiritual or divine perfection. 39

Lancelot Andrews, in one of his sermons on the sending of the Holy Ghost, describes the circular movement of the spirit in a paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 1.5–6: "it goeth forth, and . . . 'compasseth round about,' and then at last . . . it returneth per circuitus suis." 40

Returning once more from things to words, one may add that *spirare* means "to speak," as well as "to breathe, to live." In the Book

16. Cf. Isidore 7.3.11, who also quotes Matthew 9.15, a passage highly relevant to the theme of a lover's or husband's valediction: "Tune inquebunt filii sponsi, cum ab eis ablatus fuerit sponsus."

17. Cf. Isidore 7.3.2. The Song of Songs (2.17) provides an interesting connection between *spirare* and morning. Where the Authorized Version has "Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn my beloved," in the Vulgate the verse begins, "Donec desipier dies et incipiantur umbrae."

18. Cf. Freccero, p. 241, quoting a most pertinent passage from Chalcidius' Latin commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. Freccero's discussion of the spiral movement has been taken up again by Eileen Reeves, "John Donne and the Oblique Course," *Renaissance Studies*, 7 (1993), 168–83, who is mainly concerned with the mots oblique in contemporary navigation and cartography. Her interesting remarks on cartographic *translatio* (pp. 176–77) may have greater relevance to the poem in the light of Donne's Anglo-Latin wordplay.

19. See Marvin Motillo, "Donne's Compasses: Circles and Right Lines," *English Language Notes*, 3 (1966), 73–76, referring to Sir Thomas Browne's *Garden of Cyrus* and his discussion of "the circular motions of souls and the rectilinear 'motions of bodies'" in Plato's *Timaeus* (p. 176).

of Genesis, for example, the divine word that inspires creation is identified with life itself.\textsuperscript{41} "Spirare" also denotes poetic utterance, inspired speech,\textsuperscript{42} and we may sense here, as in "Valediction," a reference to the poetic word itself, in which the refined love finds expression and which is the medium of mental inter-assurance between the lovers. The assurance of a common language, which may even be unconscious to the lovers themselves ("our selves know not what it is," 18), warrants their hope of a final reunion.

How does the language of the poem represent this hope? Again, concealed paronomasia may be seen at work. Besides "sphære" or \textit{sphaera}, the \textit{spira} of the compasses and the spirit or breathing of the virtuous men and of the lovers, there is yet another, very similar Latin word which directly refers to the idea in question. A familiar punning device or motto, used by the contemporary publishers Thomas Creede and Richard Olive, for instance, points out the connection: "Dum spiro, spero," I am hopeful as long as I breathe (or speak, or make poetry).\textsuperscript{43} A similar pun provides the \textit{raison d'etre} for the emblem of "Good Hopes" from George Wither's \textit{Collection of Emblems}.\textsuperscript{44} The compasses signify the virtue of \textit{constantia}, assigned by Donne's speaker to his beloved who faithfully follows his course. But I am certain that the similarity between \textit{sphaera} or \textit{spira} and \textit{spes} (or \textit{spera}) is the reason why this image expresses hope in addition to labor and constancy. Isidore, once more, presents irrefutable evidence for this. We remember Varro's deriving \textit{spicae} (ears of corn) from \textit{spes}, which is alluded to in George Herbert's "Hope." Isidore, in turn, provides us with the etymology of \textit{spes} itself. This etymology is visualized by Donne's image of the compasses with the "f(ixt foot" giving direction to the "roaming" foot which proceeds upon its circular course. "Spes," writes Isidore, "vocata quod sit pes progradendi," because it is a foot with which to proceed, "quasi 'est pes' " (8.2.5). The foot, \textit{pes}, however, is a synonym as well as homonym of \textit{passus}; "compasses," a word that is related to \textit{compass}, as well as to \textit{passion}, thus contains the very word from which "hope" is derived.\textsuperscript{45}

Donne begins his poem with the \textit{passing away} of virtuous men and he ends it with the concept of a pair of \\textit{compasses}. Quite literally, then, he ends where he began; the circular movement of which he speaks is reflected by the language itself. Yet another indication of this self-reflective character of the poem is the number of lines, 36, which has been taken as a reference to the 360 degrees of the full circle or to the 36,000 years of the cosmic year.\textsuperscript{46}

The importance of letters in this context (the verbal reflection of beginning and end) is underlined by Jay Dean Divine's observation that the circle drawn by the compasses may be read as an \textit{O}, while the instrument itself resembles the letter A.\textsuperscript{47} Divine's point is confirmed by the fact that in a number of Renaissance picture alphabets the A is represented as a pair of compasses.\textsuperscript{48} The poem as a whole, so to speak, begins with a literal A (in the title and in the first line), and ends with a mental or imaginary A and O (the circle which is "just"). It begins with death and ends with an image of hope and eternity.\textsuperscript{49}
words, *morior* and *orior*, belong to the *aur/or* pattern to which the poem repeatedly alludes.

Moreover, the two Latin words referring to beginning and end, the one contained in the other (like *ave in vales*), make us aware of a secret allusion to a certain proper name. The current symbol for gold, *aurum*, as W. A. Murray has shown, was a circle with a central dot or point (or "prick") ○, clearly suggestive of the compass image. But it was also a musical symbol, known to all practitioners in Donne's time, denoting a "perfect" temporal relation, a semibreve measuring three minims. According to Morley's *Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music*, this was called the "More Prolation." Morior, *aurum*, More Prolation—Donne, I should say, with a twinkle in his eye hints at the name of his love, Ann More. This is confirmed by an anagram of "more" describing the speaker's motion: "More" remains constant and compassionate while "the other far doth romne" (30). But this is only a biographical sidelight, a finishing touch to a poem in which the union of souls is truly expressed by a mingling of letters.

**WESTFÄLISCHE WILHELMUS-UNIVERSITÄT, MÜNSTER**

56. It has often been noticed that Donne repeatedly puns on Ann More's name. The examples given by Harry Morris, "John Donne's Terrifying Pun," *Papers on Language and Literature* 9 (1973), 128-37, may be complemented by a witty line from "Love's Inconstancy": "Hee that hath all can have no more" (l. 24).
57. The anagrammatic play on *more* and *romne* was most common. Cf. George Herbert's "Roma, Angel," in his *Lucis* 25; see also Ail, p. 139 and *passim.*