

Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

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Feature Editor

Editor's Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

The Wisdom of *Wit* in the Teaching of Medical Students and Residents

Peter R. Lewis, MD

The film adaptation of Margaret Edson's Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Wit* should be required viewing for all stages of medical learners—students, residents, and practicing (“until we get it right” as the saying goes) physicians. Edson, a kindergarten teacher, composed her drama of “life and death” while working as a unit clerk at the National Cancer Institute, where she had the ears to hear stories from the patients' perspectives, which she has skillfully translated into the tale of Dr Vivian Bearing—a scholar of the 17th century metaphysical poet John Donne—who is afflicted by metastatic ovarian cancer and the toxic treatments (including that of a largely uncaring and unfeeling medical staff) that

follow. Whereas readings and stagings of the play will be invaluable in medical and community education, I will comment here on the Mike Nichols-directed film version in which Dr Bearing's character, in all of her tragic wit and suffering, is brilliantly played by Emma Thompson. Available in VHS and DVD formats, I recommend the DVD format for its chapter divisions that give one the flexibility to display discrete scenes or the entire film. The film represents an excellent resource for medical humanities teaching regarding doctor-patient relationship/communication, health care literacy, biopsychosocial model of health care, and ethics, including research ethics, medical mistakes, iatrogenesis, family dynamics, advance directives, and palliative and end-of-life care.

“You have cancer. Ms Bearing, you have advanced metastatic ovarian cancer” is the opening line to the film (chapter 1, “Diagnosis”) delivered by the paternalistic

oncology attending Dr Kelekian (superbly portrayed by Christopher Lloyd)—so impersonal and distant that Edson has not given him a first name. From this beginning, the film emphasizes the importance of words and their multiple meanings, conflicted emotions, contradictory truths, and related consequences. For whether it's Kelekian and his underling Jason Posner (a research-oriented oncology fellow so professionally inept and immature that he is never addressed by the title “Doctor,” keenly played by the relatively unknown Jonathan M. Woodward) who blind and bind Vivian with medical jargon and terminology or the mind-numbing, soul-tormented, and twisted *Holy Sonnets* of Donne (the “biochemistry” of poetry), which Vivian recites in a series of flashbacks, communication—between doctor and patient, professor and pupil, parent and child, or the artist and his or her audience—has the potential to heal or harm.

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Dr Kelekian and Jason are distant and adversarial in their relationship with Vivian and provide repeated lessons for medical learners of all stages regarding harmful doctor-patient communication. Returning to chapter 1 (“Diagnosis”), Kelekian fails to provide Vivian with any meaningful opportunity to question her diagnosis, provides no outlet for her emotions, has no inkling of her social history (other than her position as a university professor), takes no steps to assess her comprehension, and rushes Vivian through an uninformed consent process for an experimental chemotherapeutic treatment protocol.

“I should have asked more questions,” a now bald and gowned Vivian confides to the audience from the confinement of her hospital room as chapter 2 (“Standard Greetings”) commences. As Vivian observes (again it is only the audience who is willing to listen or with whom she’s willing to confide), “I’ve been asked how are you feeling today while throwing up into a plastic water basin . . . while emerging from a 4-hour operation with a tube in every orifice . . . I am waiting for the moment when someone asks me this question and I am dead. I’m a little sorry that I’ll miss that.”

Chapter 5 (“Question and Answer”) introduces the audience to Jason, who conducts a clinical interview of his former English professor that should be shared with first-year students as a prime example of how not to behave toward patients. (Later in the play, Jason offers his opinion of courses devoted to cultivating “bedside manner”—“Colossal waste of time for researchers.”) He commences with the play’s “standard greeting,” jumbles elements of the clinical interview, reads from a list of questions, fumbles his way through discussions of substance use and sexual history, and demonstrates no response to Vivian’s revelation

that her mother died slowly (and presumably painfully) from breast cancer.

The affront of Jason’s interview is but a prelude to the assault of his pelvic examination that follows (Chapter 6, “I Wish That I Had Given Him an A”). Jason leaves Vivian alone in the stirrups and then after returning with a dismayed nurse (Susie), commits the equivalent of a sexual assault with his examining hand. Palpating her tumor, he displays shock and revulsion. As abruptly and randomly as he enters, Jason exits and abandons Dr Bearing. For medical students learning the fundamentals of the physical examination and progressing to more-advanced and delicate skills such as a pelvic examination, Jason’s demonstration is the antithesis of what a model exam should be.

The abusive nature of Jason’s admission history and physical is magnified in the presence of the oncology “teaching service” (being woefully short on both accounts) in Chapter 9 (“Grand Rounds”). Without introduction (by name) or identification (by title or role), Jason recites the medical facts of Vivian’s presentation and treatment to an unenthusiastic assembly of students and residents where the goal of the game is to please the attending (Dr Kelekian) instead of caring for the patient. Words fly (“hexamethosphacil/Vinplatin,” “nephrotoxicity”) and hands (again without warning or permission) of multiple examiners simultaneously grope her scarred and distended abdomen. Dr Kelekian amuses himself, and even to some extent the professor in Vivian, by questioning—to use the vulgar slang—“pimping” his eager charges with disease-oriented queries. The only flicker of hope that any member of the “team” (another misnomer given the observation that everyone is out for themselves and least of all the patient) displays is to wonder aloud whether “psychological de-

pression” was included in the list of treatment-associated side effects to memorize. “No way!” is Jason’s immediate reply. Kelekian has no comment (or clue about the psychosocial dimensions of illness), and Vivian can only wish that the medical student who replied with what was truly the most visible of side effects had been listened to. This scene should be played for students entering their third year and replayed for residents and attendings at teaching hospitals to demonstrate the dehumanizing attributes of much of our bedside teaching from the perspective of the patient.

“Wasn’t that grand full of subservience, hierarchies, gratuitous displays, sublimated rivalries. I feel completely at home. It is just like a graduate seminar,” Vivian observes. A paradox (one of Donne’s preferred devices in his poems) is thus: that through the trappings of these and other mistreatments Vivian is finally free (forced?) to see the pretenses and errors of her own ways as a “doctor of philosophy.” With Jason as an impressionable undergraduate and her witness, Professor Bearing tied her students in knots with her recitations of Donne and then verbally flogged students for their lack of comprehension. When a student requests an extension on a paper due to the death of his grandmother, Vivian (like Jason, upon learning of the death of her mother) expresses no interest or sympathy but coldly remarks “The paper is due when it’s due.” Vivian recognizes that she, in part, has fostered Jason’s lack of “bedside manner.” “So. The young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity.” Lesson learned. We reap what we sow.

The foil to Kelekian, Professor Bearing in the classroom, and Jason is Susie, Vivian’s sole ally and advocate among the health care professionals (portrayed by the multitalented Audra McDonald). In Chapter 11 (“Isolation”), it is Susie

who at 4 am comforts a febrile teeth-chattering Vivian who has returned to the hospital by taxi (so alone in the world is she). Her vigilance and caring are in stark contrast to the bleary-eyed and numb-brained Jason who declares (between yawns), "Fever and neutropenia. It's a shake and bake." Jason mumbles orders without so much as eyeing or examining Vivian (though perhaps a relief given his prior mistreatment). Alarmed by her patient's condition, Susie speaks up on behalf of Vivian and implores Jason to talk to Kelekian "about lowering the dose for the next cycle." Jason, the advocate of the experiment and not the patient, offers the party line and sentiment, "Lower the dose? No way! Full dose. She's tough."

Later in the play (Chapter 15, "Popsicles"), Susie engages Vivian and addresses the existential aspects of her disease and educates the Donne scholar regarding end-of-life care options—topics Kelekian and Jason were unprepared and unwilling to address. "Let it stop," Vivian states. After Susie promises to communicate her wishes to Kelekian, Vivian asks, "You're still going to take care of me, aren't you?" "Course sweetheart. Don't you worry," Susie replies.

True to her words, Susie is Vivian's midwife who guides and supports her until she is delivered from the pain and suffering of her cancer and its treatments and given up to that crossroads of the soul between this life and the afterlife that Donne so passionately wrote about and Vivian so fervently studied. Susie lobbies Kelekian for patient-controlled analgesic. "The pain is killing her." The benevolence-impaired Dr Kelekian (who encouraged Vivian to think of isolation as "a vacation") gives his "standard greeting" to a visibly writhing Vivian, "Dr Bearing, are you in pain?" Kelekian opts for a morphine drip and exits stage left to be seen no more. As Susie begins to adminis-

ter the morphine, it represents the last conversation between nurse and patient. "I trust this will have a soporific effect," Vivian remarks (borrowing a word not from Donne but Beatrix Potter that her father [skillfully played by the renowned Harold Pinter] had introduced her to). Giving wit to their relationship as death approaches, Edson has Susie reply, "Well, I don't know about that, but it sure makes you sleepy." Word confusion for once in the patient's favor has Vivian and Susie laughing as the scene closes.

Chapter 18 ("Permission to Die") features an appearance from Vivian's mentor Professor Ashford (convincingly portrayed by Eileen Aitkins), in which the retired professor comforts her dying pupil by reading to her a bedtime story (*The Runaway Bunny*. "A little allegory of the soul . . . See, Vivian?") and then kissing her goodnight ("And flights of angels sing thee to rest.")

Before the angels can comfort her soul, there is one final assault on the flesh that Vivian must endure (Chapter 19, "Death Thou Shalt Die"). Jason fulfills his former professor's prophecy by offering the "standard greeting" to a dead patient and then compounds the errors of his ways by calling a code and initiating CPR. Fittingly, it is Susie who rescues Vivian from Jason's clutches. "She's research!" Jason demands. "She's no code!" Susie insists as she pushes Jason off of her patient. The code team, paged by Jason, arrives and manages to expose and shock Vivian before Susie can persuade them to cease their vain efforts and exit as well. It is Susie, the type of doctor we should encourage our students and residents to be like—genuine, respectful, and empathic—who covers Vivian for her final journey. The movie ends with Vivian reciting the words of Donne: "Death be not proud for some have called thee dreadful and mighty for thou are not so . . . nor yet can thou kill

me . . . one short sleep past and we wake eternally and death shall be no more, death thou shalt die"—as the Director Nichols casts an image of Vivian transformed to her former (pre-chemotherapy) glory and beauty.

What words (knowing how vital they were to Vivian in her struggles with Donne and cancer) would Vivian's epitaph contain? Sadly, she is without known immediate family, partner, or child to give voice to memories and celebrations of her life. What of her work colleagues? Other than Professor Ashford, they are absent too. In one early scene of her illness, Vivian remarks that were they to know of her demise they would "scramble for her position." Vivian foretells that Dr Kelekian and Jason will memorialize her ovaries and cancer in some distinguished peer-reviewed cancer journal, celebrating the victory of keeping her vital organs functioning through a record-breaking eight cycles of experimental chemotherapy. And Vivian, what would she compose to remember herself by? With wit and a grin she would pen (as she declares to the camera in the film): "published and perished." With more sober reflection and experience she would thusly summarize for teachers and physicians alike: "Nothing would be worse (for the novice student of Donne or the frightened cancer patient) than a detailed scholarly analysis. Now is the time for simplicity. Now is the time for, dare I say it, kindness."

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Related Web sites of interest:

1. HBO Films synopsis: www.hbo.com/films/wit/synopsis.html.
2. PBS interview of Margaret Edson. www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june99/edson_4-14.html.
3. John Donne's Holy Sonnets in Wit. faculty.smu.edu/tmayo/donne_essay.htm.