



# *WIT* DRAMATURGICAL STUDY GUIDE

BY BRADEN CLARK





# OUR PLAYWRIGHT, MARGARET EDSON

- NY Times described her as the “Harper Lee of playwrights” because this is her first and only play.
- She gained the experience to write *Wit* after working at a research hospital in Washington state as a Unit Clerk.
- *Wit* was originally an hour longer than it is now.
- *Wit* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1999.
- Ms. Edson believes that she and Professor Bearing have a lot in common. “We both argue with ourselves all the time,” she said. “The only difference is that I’ve figured myself out.”



The background is a deep blue gradient with a subtle pattern of white dots, resembling a starry night sky. Overlaid on this are several faint, light blue geometric shapes: concentric circles, arcs, and dashed lines, some of which form circular paths with arrows indicating direction. These elements are scattered across the frame, with a more complex circular structure visible in the upper right corner.

“I HAD TO DENY *KNOWLEDGE* IN ORDER TO MAKE  
ROOM FOR *FAITH*” – IMMANUEL KANT

“THE LAST ACT OF REASON IS TO ACCEPT THE LIMITS  
OF REASON.”

# JOHN DONNE AND 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY POETRY

- Donne is a member of the 17<sup>th</sup> century "metaphysical poets."
- Donne was a prolific member of the religious community.
- He reformed but did not completely abandon his Catholicism. That struggle is often seen in his poems, especially his most famous work *The Holy Sonnets*.
- His work was not widely published and truly wasn't seen favorably until it was rediscovered by poets in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Donne had a large family, but 4 of his children and his wife died before him. This caused his later works to become darker and filled with grief.



# DONNE AND HIS WIT

- What makes someone a metaphysical poet? It was a group of poets who attempted to bridge the gap between the metaphysical and the physical.
- *Discordia Concors* – Odd, extended metaphors in which opposites are set in contrast so that the difference between them is striking. These juxtapositions come in odd forms in Donne's work, especially in poems like *Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* and *The Flea*.
- The words metaphysical and wit themselves have lost meaning since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Metaphysical encompassed all things spiritual that we cannot comprehend, while "wit" encompassed someone's quick knowledge and their use of it rather than the modern day connotation of merely being "witty".
- *The Holy Sonnets* are Donne's most famous sonnets. His wrestling with his faith and humanity is portrayed through a number of Italian-style sonnets with very difficult extended metaphors.
- One reason for the appeal of Donne in modern times is that he confronts us with the complexity of our own natures.
- *Sonnet* means little song, just as cigarette means little cigar.

"WIT IS A TOUGH REASONABLENESS BENEATH A  
SLIGHT LYRIC GRACE." – T.S. ELIOT

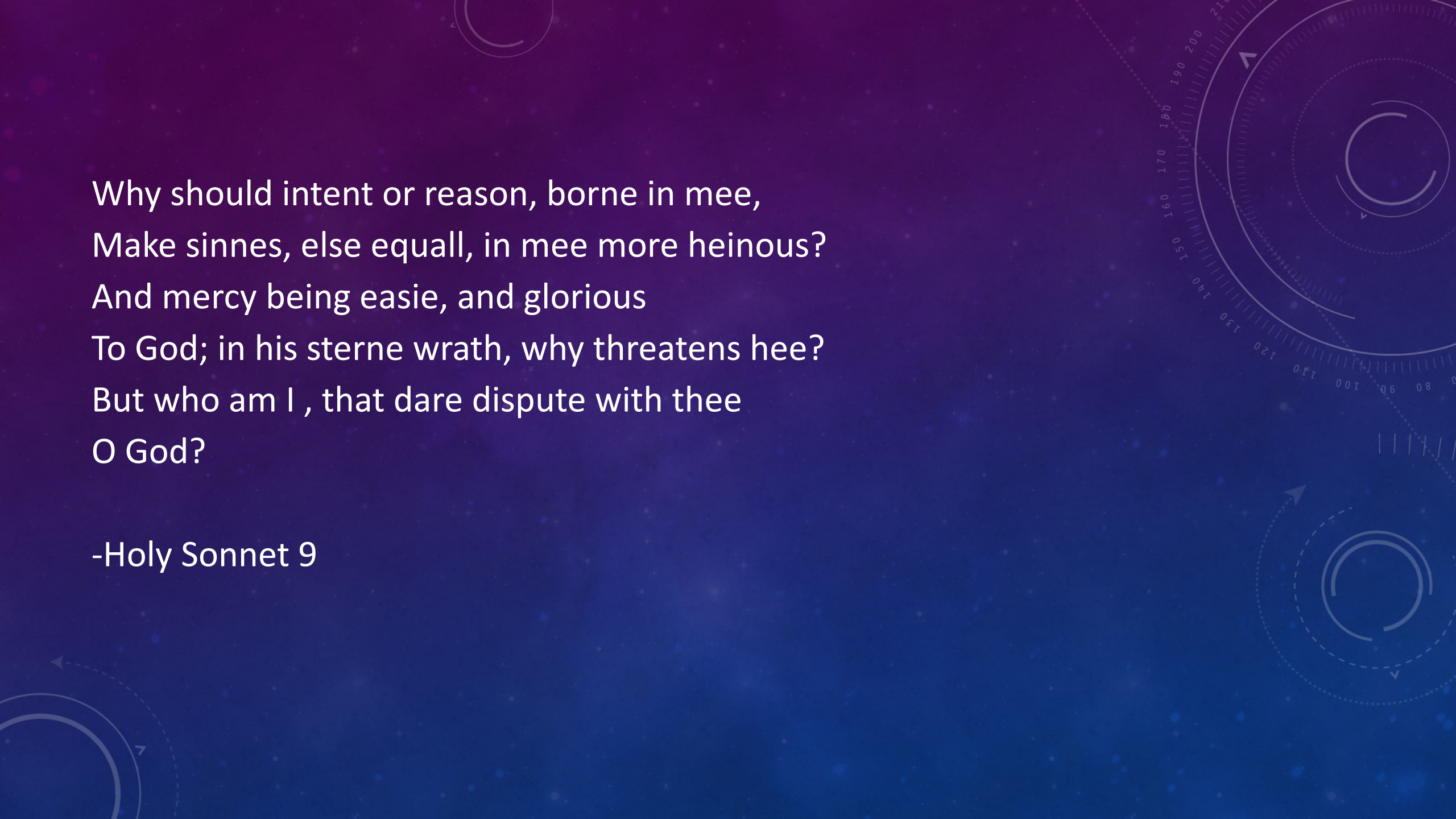




Then turne

O pensive soule, to God, for he knows best  
Thy true grieve, for he put it in my breast.

Holy Sonnet 2

The background is a deep blue gradient with faint, glowing white dots scattered across it, resembling a starry night sky. On the right side, there are large, faint, white circular patterns that look like celestial maps or constellations. These include concentric circles, arcs, and some numerical markings (like 100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210) along the edges of the circles. There are also some dashed lines and arrows indicating movement or direction.

Why should intent or reason, borne in mee,  
Make sinnes, else equall, in mee more heinous?  
And mercy being easie, and glorious  
To God; in his sterne wrath, why threatens hee?  
But who am I , that dare dispute with thee  
O God?

-Holy Sonnet 9



This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint  
My pilgramages last mile, and my race  
Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace,  
My spans last inch, my minutes last point  
And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt  
My body, and soule

Holy Sonnet 7

# A QUEST

- Donne's *Divine Meditations* make self-recognition a necessary means to grace. Self actualization, self knowledge and recognition is the true pursuit of truth and grace.
- Helen Gardner writes, "The image of a soul in meditation which the Holy Sonnets present is an image of a soul working out its salvation in fear and trembling."
- Ultimately, a massive theme in this play is enlightenment. Though knowledge is a noble pursuit, true enlightenment is the living out of what we learn in academia. As we soak up life experience, truth is revealed to us more clearly in the moments before our death.
- So much can be learned about death, but we do not understand it until we experience it. ("The last obscenity is death")
- "No man is an Island..." is from John Donne's *Meditation 17* and has us directly confront our desire to be alone, even though much worth can be found in the company of others.



# DONNE AND DEATH

- *Hymn to My God, My God, in My Sickness* is a poem by John Donne in which he was battling a deadly illness. He compared his body to a map that the doctor's were merely charting and exploring. This cold metaphor directly relates the impersonal experience Vivian has through her own battle with cancer.
- "Death be not proud" is the most talked about *Holy Sonnet* in *Wit*. The sonnet describes the power one can find in God late in life so that death has no power.

# OVARIAN CANCER AND “CANCERLAND”

From *Fractured Borders: Reading Women’s Cancer Literature* by Mary K. DeShazer

“Surely, words in “Cancerland” are often used to obfuscate rather than clarify, as Vivian is fully aware.”

Dr. Kelekian bombards Vivian with words she has never known in the opening scene because it is easier to do that than to display the uncomfortable truth. Vivian battles this with her love for the “acquisition of vocabulary”.



# THE EXPERIMENTAL DRUGS

In *Wit*, the cancer drugs being experimented are Hexamethosphacil and Vinplatin. These are fictional drugs, but many drugs were being experimented in the 90s for ovarian cancer treatment.

Drugs with the –platin ending are platinum-based drugs and many platinum based drugs are used for breast cancer and ovarian cancer.

# OVARIAN CANCER

- Ovarian cancer is a genius device for Edson.
- Ovaries are key to the female reproductive system. However, Vivian decided to dedicate her life to her work instead of having kids. This says much about her character.
- Also, in the 80s and 90s, ovarian cancer often went misdiagnosed. It was misunderstood as bowel obstructions, menstrual problems, etc.
- Because of this lack of proper diagnosis, it turns into what I have coined “Age and Stage”. Women would get ovarian cancer at Stage 1 in their 20s but it would not be discovered until Stage 4 in their 50s or 60s.
- 90 percent of women with ovarian cancer have epithelial cancer, the type Vivian has. The cancer affects the epithelial cells: the cells lining the ovaries.
- The survival rate for ovarian cancer was very poor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even into the 80s and 90s.



# HOSPITAL HIERARCHY

- Attending physician (Dr. Kelekian.)
- Fellows (Jason Posner and the other Fellows. These people still have an M.D. degree. They are now receiving specialty training under a physician of a certain type.)
- Resident
- Intern

Vivian often remarks how this hierarchy is not unlike the graduate students she teaches. They are fighting to be seen and heard.

# IN SUMMATION

- Here is an interview with our playwright, Margaret Edson, describing the heart of this play
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROfktB4u0PY>