

Delight in Disorder

by Robert Herrick

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness.
A lawn about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distraction;
An erring lace, which here and there
Enthrals the crimson stomacher;
A cuff neglectful, and thereby
Ribbons to flow confusedly;
A winning wave, deserving note,
In the tempestuous petticoat;
A careless shoestring, in whose tie
I see a wild civility:
Do more bewitch me than when art
Is too precise in every part.

Disorder

A recurring theme throughout history has been human's desire to achieve perfection. Yet ironically, despite this insatiable yearning, this very rightness may, in effect, be achieved through imperfection. This theme is described in Robert Herrick's "Delight in Disorder." Herrick has used many distinct structural devices and techniques to convey his interpretation of disorder, and how such a term may actually have a deeper connotative value than initially suspected.

This lyrical poem is written in iambic tetrameter. And although it is a sonnet, it has a unique rhyme scheme. This rhyme scheme was a decision made by Herrick on purpose, to further support his theme of disorder. To have employed a standard rhyme scheme throughout would instill order and a degree of conformity, undermining the entire purpose of the writing. The rhyme scheme in this poem is A, A, B, B, C, C, D, E, F, F, D, E, G, G, where the "disorder" comes in after the pair of C-rhymed lines. It is both true and slant, with "A sweet disorder in the dress/Kindles in clothes a wantonness" serving as an example of true, whereas "A lawn about the shoulders thrown/Into a fine distraction" depicts a slant rhyme. Also, the large majority of the poem's rhyme scheme consists of feminine rhymes, as most of them have more than one syllable. However, an example of the infrequent masculine rhyme is the last couplet: "Do more bewitch me than when art/Is too precise in every part" where "art" and "part" are both true and masculine. This unpredictable rhyme scheme, as well as an elision in the tenth line to preserve the meter of the poem, is yet a further testament to the perceived disorder of the poem. This type of meter and rhyme scheme – the overall sound of the poem – allows the poem to embody a light, "bouncy" feel. The words are neither overly powerful nor feeble, but balanced with an unstressed/stressed effect:

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ /
A sweet disorder in the dress

∪ / ∪ / ∪ / ∪ /
Kindles in clothes a wantonness.

Thus, just as the mood in the poem is somewhat mysterious, playful and teasing, the iambic meter allows the words to be read in that manner. And, as a result, the movement of the poem is also bouncy and upbeat, with a quick pace based on the sound that the rhythm, rhyme scheme, and meter establish.

Another important element of sound in the poem is consonance. In nearly every line of the poem, there is repetition of consonant sounds. For example, in the first line, the *s* sound is repeated: “A sweet disorder in the dress.” This precedent is continued throughout the poem. There are two instances of assonance, on the eighth line with the “o” sound, and on the twelfth line with the “i” sound. And so, while there is no real order in the use, strength, or frequency of consonance or assonance in the lines, they are nonetheless present and lend their auditory beauty to the poem. It is that very “delight in disorder” that best serves this poem.

Upon first sight of this poem, the notion elicited by the title is confirmed; it looks disorderly. To the blind eye, there is no organization to the length of each line, just as, within the poem’s contents, the persona describes a woman with the same unruly attributes. Herrick depicts the woman in a much different light than the norm for the 17th century. Just as the poem deliberately strays from syntactic and rhythmic order, it purposely deviates from the custom sonnet subjects. The persona portrays the woman as having, “A lawn about the shoulders thrown,” “An erring lace,” “A cuff neglectful,” “Ribbons to flow confusedly,” and “A careless shoestring,” all of which are described as “a fine distraction” and “wild civility.” These elements of disorder are established beyond just the content of the poem, but create a similar effect in the

visual arrangement, as well. As a result, there is a sense of appeal in the imperfect structure, just as there is a sense of charm in the woman represented.

Another major factor in the unique structure of this poem is the distinct enjambment. The content is expressed in one sole stanza. There is some punctuation, yet very few contrived breaks, caesuras, or voltas. Instead, many lines flow into the next, creating a more natural, conversational feeling. These techniques actually lend themselves to the poem, as there is nothing more natural, even expected, than a man's attraction for a woman; it is too ephemeral to be restrained by syntactic order and rules. Thus, this structural technique essentially creates more of a wholeness, a gestalt, as opposed to a more organized and superficial interpretation of a disorderly structure. Furthermore, lending itself to the naturalistic feel of the poem, the syntax is distinctive. The poem is split into essentially two sentences. The first is simply the first two lines, but the second sentence is a run-on sustained by four semi-colons, one colon, and five commas. Also, every first word on each line is capitalized, a grammatical error technically speaking, but in keeping with the spirit of the poem it actually adds a sense of necessary uniqueness.

This poem also relies on visual imagery for the reader to relate to the writer. Herrick is essentially describing the relationship between a woman's disorderly clothing – “A sweet disorder in the dress” – and how it causes his attraction to her – “Kindles in clothes a wantonness.” And so, he goes on to descriptively outline her attire. He focuses on specific aspects of her disorderliness – a lace, cuff, shoestring – which serves to emphasize his admiration. This is a most effective technique, as he affords the reader a more accurate perception of the woman by focusing on specific details rather than her whole outfit, for example. Furthermore, because this poem relates an instance of what is in effect a moment of physical lust, visual imagery is the most valuable tool in communicating this sentiment.

Following the motif of non-ambiguity, Herrick has also implemented an unusually clear, straightforward title. The title, “Delight in Disorder,” is especially important because it embodies many of the ideals of the poem. Thus, while the reader may initially be skeptical of the poet’s rationale, after reading the poem and relating to its content, the title is then understood and accepted with certainty.

Like the title, the poem itself is told in a straightforward manner. Yet while such denotative language is employed, the actual content is, ironically, all connotative of something suggestive of other, more erotic, pleasures. There are several suggestions of this underlying aspect, especially with the diction, in words such as “wantonness,” “fine distraction,” “enthalls,” “tempestuous,” and “bewitch.” Thus, while it would normally be uncommon for the phrase “An erring lace” to be considered sensual, in the context of this poem, its connotative value certainly lends itself to that notion.

Although the distinct structural devices and techniques of the poem may seem unfounded at first, the best solution is found within the readers’ own applicable emotions. The reader can unquestionably relate to the theme of love and attraction. In turn, then, the reader will recognize that all thoughts on this subject are never really “orderly” at all, but rather chaotic and irregular, just as they appear in the poem. Consequently, these thoughts do indeed display a degree of organization since the described feelings have a flow. The very fact that there can be no *correct* order to express these feelings – feelings of attraction and inexplicable lure – then makes this version, in effect, correct.