Delight in Disorder

POEM TEXT

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness.
A lawn about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distractión;
An erring lace, which here and there
Enthralls 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.

SUMMARY

A delicious messiness in the way a woman gets dressed gives her clothes a feeling of playful sexiness. A fine linen shawl tossed casually around someone's shoulders in a lovely, confused tangle; a wrongly threaded corset string, which wanders tantalizingly over the bright-red bodice of a dress; an unbuttoned cuff, which lets ribbons stream messily out; a charming, attention-grabbing wrinkle in the stormy billows of an underskirt; a neglected shoelace, in whose messy knot I see the wildness under a woman's civilized veneer: all of these things entrance me much more than when women's outfit are too neat and formal.

THEMES

THE ALLURE OF MESSINESS

In Robert Herrick's "Delight in Disorder," a speaker relishes the thought of women's messy, "disorder[ly]" clothes: untied laces, wrinkled skirts, and wild ribbons. That kind of disorder, the speaker says, "bewitch[es]" him more than when a woman's clothes are neat, elegant, and "precise"—not least because messy clothes make him think about the various sexy ways those clothes could have gotten messed up! Through his "delight in disorder," the speaker suggests that beauty and sexiness lie not in polished perfection, but in *imperfection*. The speaker prefers the way people look when they're enjoying their lives, not when they're presenting a perfect, pristine façade.

The speaker begins by imagining a bunch of disorderly clothes—not with disapproval, but with great pleasure. He envisions an "erring lace," a "tempestuous petticoat," and a "careless shoestring," among other bits of wild and messy women's clothing. And he sees them all as "winning," "fine," and "sweet." In other words, he finds their messiness charming.

In fact, these rumpled clothes aren't just charming, but sexy! That's because their messiness makes the speaker think of *how* they might have gotten messed up in the first place—that is, in the course of fooling around. Readers get a sense of the speaker's feelings on the matter thanks to the sexually-charged language he uses to approvingly describe all this messy clothing. "Wantonness," for example, can mean "playfulness," "naughtiness," and "promiscuity." And "erring," at the time the poem was written, could mean both "making a mistake" and "having illicit sex." These sexy words all suggest that these clothes got rumpled while their wearer was busy having a good time.

The speaker also pays special attention to the steps involved in getting naked. All those disorderly fastenings, like laces, cuffs, and shoestrings, hint at clothes that could be about to come off—or that have been hastily pulled back on. Looking at messy clothing, in other words, makes the speaker notice how easy it would be to remove it!

At the end of the poem, the speaker says it's this sexy "disorder" in women's clothing that truly "bewitch[es]" him—suggesting that he's also most excited by the kind of woman who allows herself to get messy (perhaps with a little help from someone like him). Sexiness, this poem suggests, doesn't come from perfect packaging, but in the kind of rumpled imperfection that speaks of a real enjoyment of sex, and of life in general.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A sweet disorder in the dress
Kindles in clothes a wantonness.

This poem is titled "Delight in Disorder," and the speaker lays out exactly what kind of "delight" and "disorder" he means in the first two lines. He's not talking about the disorder of a

messy room, but of *clothing*—and he finds "disorder in the dress" not frumpy or slovenly, but "sweet."

Why should disorderly dressing be so sweet, such a "delight"? Because it "Kindles in clothes a wantonness." In other words, it gives clothes a feeling of playfulness, naughtiness—and sexual promiscuity. The word "kindles" even suggests that disorder lights clothing up like a fire, making them smolder with passion.

This will be a poem about how imperfect, rumpled clothes suggest that their wearer has been having a lot of fun—and how the speaker finds the suggestion of that fun much sexier than a perfect, pristine exterior. In fact, the pleasure he takes from disorderly clothes is also about his delight in *another* kind of disorder: a wild sexual freedom that breaks out of 17th-century moral strictures.

The speaker's language already sets the tone of this more-than-a-little-lustful poem. Listen to the repeated sounds in this first couplet:

> A sweet disorder in the dress
> Kindles in clothes a wantonness.

Here, alliterative /d/ and /k/ sounds gives the poem a sing-songy bounce. That bounce fits in with the poem's couplet-driven rhyme scheme (here, "dress" rhymes with "wantonness") and with its pulse-like iambic tetrameter (that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet that follow a da-DUM syllable pattern). The sexy whisper of sibilant /s/ sounds and the delicious liquid consonance of /l/ and /z/ sounds only strengthens that sultry tone.

Take another look at how the meter works here. While the first line is in perfect iambic tetrameter, the second does something a little different:

> A sweet | disor- | der in | the dress
> Kindles | in clothes | a wan- | tonness.

The first foot of line 2 is called a trochee (a foot that goes DUM-da), and this gives the line some extra galloping energy. It also matches the poem's themes: that deviation from the poem's main meter is, like the clothes it describes, a little messy!

LINES 3-4

> *A lawn about the shoulders thrown*
> *Into a fine distractión;*

Having established his poem's big idea, the speaker begins a list of all the ways in which women's disorderly clothing can be sexy. His first image grounds readers in his time period: he's not imagining bustiers or fishnet stockings, but a "lawn," a fine linen shawl, tossed over a lady's shoulders in a "fine distractión."

The reader might wonder about the accent over the "o" in "distractión." It's a stress, a way of pointing out how the speaker is pronouncing this word. The iambic tetrameter (again, four da-DUM feet per line) the poem has already established means that the word distraction here has to be said with four whole syllables: dis-TRAC-see-own. It's as if the speaker is putting on a sexy French or Spanish accent, the better to fully relish the sight of this messy shawl.

And the word "distraction" in itself, pronounced differently or not, demands a little more attention. In the 17th century, "distraction" could mean "confusion" or "agitation"—and in fact, people today still say that crazy-making things "drive them to distraction."

If the shawl is in a "fine distractión," it's being personified as wild and agitated. Here, it seems to be a stand-in for its wearer, who, the speaker imagines, must also be wild and free. But perhaps it's also a stand-in for the *speaker*, who projects his own "distractión" onto this rumpled "lawn."

LINES 5-8

> *An erring lace, which here and there*
> *Enthralls the crimson stomacher;*
> *A cuff neglectful, and thereby*
> *Ribbons to flow confusedly;*

The speaker continues to build his catalog of sexily messy clothes in these next lines—and the shapes and sounds of his language reflect both "disorder" and "delight."

By now, the speaker has established a rhyme scheme of couplets. But very few of those couplets use perfect rhymes! Here, "there" is matched with "stomacher" (pronounced STUM-ah-ker), and "thereby" with "confusedly." These slightly mismatched slant rhymes resemble the things they describe: the almost-buttoned "cuff" and the almost-tightened "lace."

Also check out the /r/ consonance in lines 5-6:

> An erring lace, which here and there
> Enthralls the crimson stomacher;

That repeated /r/ suggests the speaker's relish of this sight, and draws attention to the passionate "crimson" (a deep bright red) of that "stomacher" (part of the bodice of a dress).

The reader may also be noticing that the speaker pays attention to certain articles of clothing more than others. Here, he's focusing on fastenings: laces and cuffs, the things that one uses to keep one's clothing on. Perhaps all these loose laces and unbuttoned cuffs make him think just how easy it would be to take these clothes *off*—or suggest that the ladies dressed this way have hurriedly pulled their clothes back on only a moment before!

Just as before, these bits of clothing are all personified. There's a "cuff neglectful" and an "erring lace," blamed for their own "disorder"! Once more, it seems like the speaker is reading the

personality of the wearer into the clothing.

LINES 9-12

A winning wave, deserving note,
In the tempestuous petticoat;
A careless shoestring, in whose tie
I see a wild civility;

By this point in the speaker's catalog of messy clothing, the reader might have noticed that he's working his way down the body, like a camera doing a slow pan. Starting up at the "shoulders," he's moved past the bodice and the wrists, and now comes to even more intimate territory.

Take a look at how he uses caesura to draw attention to this next memorable image:

> A winning wave, || deserving note,
> In the tempestuous petticoat;

That little break in the middle of the line makes extra-sure that the reader will "note" the "winning wave" (or charming wrinkle) in the "tempestuous petticoat"—which "deserv[es]" that attention, after all!

This image begins to get into slightly more dangerous territory. A "petticoat" is a voluminous underskirt, used to give mid-17th-century dresses their dramatic bell shape. (See the Resources section for some images.) If the speaker is noticing a "winning wave" in a petticoat, it's a little as if he's catching a flash of a lady's underwear! And that underwear is "tempestuous": it's as if the petticoat has become a billowy, stormy sea. The dense /eh/ assonance and /t/ consonance of "tempestuous petticoat" makes the image even more vivid. The speaker seems to be getting pretty worked up here.

His next couplet ends his listing of women's disorderly clothing down at the feet, with a personified "careless shoestring." Here, for the first time since the opening lines, the speaker says directly what he's seeing in all these messy images. Untied shoelaces make him think of a "wild civility"—that is, something both reckless and civilized, irrepressible and genteel. In other words, something of an oxymoron! But deep down, this makes sense. What he really finds sexy is the image of all this elaborate, civilized clothing getting all messed up. There has to be some kind of "civility" on a lady's surface for the "wild" part to really show in her disorder.

The enjambment here suggests just how excited all these images have made the speaker:

> A careless shoestring, in whose tie
> I see a wild civility;

Notice how these two lines make one continuous sentence. After the line break, that sentence stumbles over itself, putting two rhyming words right next to each other. The internal rhyme between "tie" and "I" makes it sound as if the speaker is tripping over his excitement—just as the lady might trip over her untied "careless shoestring."

LINES 13-14

Do more bewitch me than when art
Is too precise in every part.

The poem closes with a final firm statement. Up until now, the speaker has been using anaphora and parallelism to build his catalog of sexy clothes: each couplet has started with the word "a" or "an," and has followed the same grammatical structure. But now the speaker breaks from his pattern to come to the conclusion this whole poem has been building toward.

In the end, the speaker says, all these kinds of messy clothing are far more "bewitch[ing]" than any pristine, polished beauty. He even refers to women's appearances as "art," suggesting that the ladies who take meticulous care of every part of their clothing are both "artful" and "artificial." What he loves is an appearance that shows a woman's love of life—and especially her love of sex. All those personified "erring" laces and lawns speak of a gusto and enthusiasm that's much sexier than perfection.

The speaker closes his argument with alliteration: he just can't be moved by "art" that's "too precise in every part." The pop of those /p/ sounds evokes the precision he rejects.

Here at the end of the poem, it's worth thinking about how "Delight in Disorder" fits into its wider context. Robert Herrick was writing this poem during the English Civil War. During this long and bloody conflict, flamboyant, pleasure-loving Royalist Cavaliers clashed with dour, puritanical Parliamentarian Roundheads. Herrick was a Cavalier to the core, and this poem celebrates not just enthusiastic female sexiness, but a general enthusiasm for all the mess and fun life has to offer. Being "too precise," in this poem's eyes, means getting the wrong handle on life as a whole. This speaker's "Delight in Disorder" speaks to a larger joy in everything that's messy, sexy, and human—and stands against the forces of chilly perfection.

SYMBOLS

CLOTHING

The wild, messy clothes in "Delight in Disorder" symbolize their wearers' whole attitudes toward life. In the speaker's eyes, women wearing clothes in "sweet disorder" are also probably living lives of sweet disorder, enjoying sex with gusto and not worrying whether their hats are on straight afterwards. The speaker here isn't just saying that he finds messy clothing sexy, but that he finds the attitude that messy clothing *represents* sexy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dress"
- **Line 2:** "clothes"
- **Line 3:** "A lawn"
- **Line 5:** "An erring lace"
- **Line 6:** "the crimson stomacher"
- **Line 7:** "A cuff neglectful"
- **Line 8:** "Ribbons"
- **Line 10:** "the tempestuous petticoat"
- **Line 11:** "A careless shoestring"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration evokes the "delight" this speaker takes in "disorder"—and draws attention to his claim that mess is sexier by far than elegant perfection.

Alliteration turns up right from the start with the paired /d/ sounds in the poem's title—/d/ sounds that reappear in the very first line: "A sweet disorder in the dress." That repeated /d/ helps the poem zero in on its subject, moving the reader from "disorder" in general to disorderly *clothing* in particular. (But it's worth noting that the poem is called "Delight in Disorder," not "Delight in Disorderly Clothes": the speaker is quietly enjoying all *kinds* of wild behavior here, not just the clothes that bring that behavior to his mind.)

That first line also sets up an alliterative pattern that continues throughout the poem. Every moment of alliteration here links only two words—a pattern that harmonizes with the poem's rhymed couplets. In line 2, for example, the reader finds linked /k/ sounds in "kindles in clothes," and in line 9, linked /w/ sounds in "A winning wave." These musical one-two sounds give the poem a singsong, back-and-forth music that might also evoke the fun the speaker imagines sharing with all these disorderly ladies!

Alliteration turns up once more at the end of the poem, when the speaker concludes that disorder is much more charming than:

> [...] when art
> Is too precise in every part.

The firm pop of those two final /p/ sounds makes it seem as if the speaker has come to a final pronouncement on the matter of mess: precision just isn't for him.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "disorder," "dress"
- **Line 2:** "Kindles," "clothes"
- **Line 9:** "winning," "wave"
- **Line 12:** "see," "civility"
- **Line 13:** "more," "me"
- **Line 14:** "precise," "part"

ASSONANCE

Assonance works a lot like consonance and alliteration here, giving the poem music and evoking the speaker's relish of mess. See the Poetic Devices entry on alliteration for a longer discussion of how sound devices like these work.

One strong example of assonance appears in lines 9-10:

> A winning wave, deserving note,
> In the tempestuous petticoat;

The linked /eh/ sounds that join "tempestuous" and "petticoat" (alongside the strong /t/ consonance) conjures the frilly "disorder" of that petticoat: these two words next to each other form one long frothy billow of sound, mimicking the layers of lacy, rumpled underskirts the speaker takes such pleasure in peeking at.

Another strong example comes in the next two lines, lines 11-12, with the string of /oo/ and long /i/ sounds:

> A careless shoestring, in whose tie
> I see a wild civility;

Together, all this assonance suggests the speaker's building excitement. There's more assonance here than elsewhere in the poem, and this is also where the speaker's list of clothing comes to and end. Fittingly, he caps off this list with an energetic burst of sound.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "in"
- **Line 2:** "Kindles," "in"
- **Line 5:** "erring," "there"
- **Line 10:** "tempestuous," "petticoat"
- **Line 11:** "shoestring," "whose," "tie"
- **Line 12:** "I," "wild"

CONSONANCE

The rich consonance in "Delight in Disorder" works a lot like the poem's alliteration and assonance: it evokes the speaker's "delight," making it sound as if he's savoring each of his images one by one. (See the Poetic Devices entry on alliteration for even more about how this works.)

One good example comes in lines 5-6. Take a look at the way that /r/ sounds link up the images here:

An erring lace, which here and there
Enthralls the crimson stomacher;

The reader might almost imagine the speaker rolling these /r/s with lascivious pleasure (especially right after he's given the word "distractión" a full four syllables, as if he's speaking in a sultry Spanish accent).

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "disorder," "dress"
- **Line 2:** "Kindles," "clothes," "wantonness"
- **Line 3:** "lawn," "thrown"
- **Line 5:** "erring," "here," "there"
- **Line 6:** "Enthralls," "crimson," "stomacher"
- **Line 7:** "neglectful," "thereby"
- **Line 8:** "Ribbons"
- **Line 9:** "wave," "deserving"
- **Line 10:** "tempestuous," "petticoat"
- **Line 11:** "careless," "shoestring," "whose"
- **Line 12:** "wild," "civility"
- **Line 14:** "precise," "every," "part"

CAESURA

The caesurae of "Delight in Disorder" help to give the poem its swinging, jaunty rhythm, and to give the speaker a little extra space and time in which to enjoy all the delights of messy clothing.

The poem is one long stanza built out of seven couplets, each of which is enjambed. In other words, the first line of each couplet flows right into the next. Caesurae in the middle of many lines help to keep these enjambed couplets from getting up *too* much speed, making sure that the poem's sound reflects both the speaker's enthusiasm and his lingering relish.

For example, consider the caesura in line 5:

An erring lace, || which here and there
Enthralls the crimson stomacher;

Notice how that break gives the line a little breathing room. It's as if the speaker is taking a moment to slowly follow the crazy path of this "erring lace" as it goes "here and there" all over that "crimson stomacher." He's really ogling this messy clothing (and, by extension, the woman wearing it!).

Caesura can also reflect a line's meaning. For instance, take a look at the caesura in line 9:

A winning wave, || deserving note
In the tempestuous petticoat;

That little break in the middle of the line gives the "winning wave" in the petticoat its own space—suggesting that it indeed deserves "note," or special notice.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "lace, which"
- **Line 7:** "neglectful, and"
- **Line 9:** "wave, deserving"
- **Line 11:** "shoestring, in"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of this poem uses a back-and-forth pattern of enjambments and end-stopped lines. The enjambments link the speaker's rhymed couplets, making each feel like a single continuous thought—and evoking the gleeful "disorder" those lines describe.

For example, take a look at lines 3-4:

A lawn about the shoulders thrown
Into a fine distractión;

Here, the line breaks at a strange moment in this sentence, a point where a person saying this line aloud in everyday speech wouldn't pause at all. This creates a little stumbling block for the tongue, mirroring the "distractión" of that "lawn" (that is, the confused messiness of a lady's shawl). There's something literally "distracting" about the way this line breaks, in other words.

Something similar happens in lines 11-12:

A careless shoestring, in whose tie
I see a wild civility;

Here, the enjambment makes two rhyming words, "tie" and "I," collide with each other. This moment of internal rhyme trips the reader up, just like that "careless shoestring" might trip its wearer.

While the enjambments here often reflect messy confusion, they also give the poem momentum, keeping it flowing on like the "winning wave" of that "tempestuous petticoat." Breaks in the middle of sentences hurtle the reader forward, suggesting the speaker's overwhelming enthusiasm for sexy mess.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "dress / Kindles"
- **Lines 3-4:** "thrown / Into"
- **Lines 5-6:** "there / Enthralls"
- **Lines 7-8:** "thereby / Ribbons"
- **Lines 9-10:** "note, / In"
- **Lines 11-12:** "tie / I"
- **Lines 13-14:** "art / Is"

END-STOPPED LINE

"Delight in Disorder" is one long stanza, broken up into couplets; end-stopped lines divide those couplets from each other, making each feel like its own little scene. The rhythm these end-stops create makes it seem like the speaker is building an argument here, speaking in defense of disorder.

Most of the end-stops in the poem are semicolons, like this:

> A cuff neglectful, and thereby
> Ribbons to flow confusedly;

These semicolons separate each of the scenes of sexily messed-up clothing the speaker imagines, but also link each scene to the next. These end-stops make it seem as if each couplet is one more piece of evidence in the speaker's gathering argument that mess is delightful.

The two stronger end-stops in this poem come at the beginning and the end: both the first couplet and the last couplet end with a solid period. Not coincidentally, both of these couplets are firm statements of the speaker's big point. He begins:

> A sweet disorder in the dress
> Kindles in clothes a wantonness.

Period, full stop: this is what the speaker will argue. That period makes these first lines seem almost like a thesis statement.

And at the end of the poem, he says that all of the disorderly bits of clothing he's just described:

> Do more bewitch me than when art
> Is too precise in every part.

Alongside the strong alliteration on /p/ in "too precise in every part," that final end-stopped period makes it clear that this is the speaker's last word on the subject.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "wantonness."
- **Line 4:** "distractión;"
- **Line 6:** "stomacher;"
- **Line 8:** "confusedly;"
- **Line 10:** "petticoat;"
- **Line 12:** "civility;"
- **Line 14:** "part."

PERSONIFICATION

In "Delight in Disorder," personification gives messy clothing a personality, making it into a representative for the person who wears it.

In line 7, for instance, a woman isn't "neglectful" because she's forgotten to button up her cuff. Instead, that cuff itself is a "cuff neglectful," as if it's responsible for its own behavior.

Similarly, a wild, messy shawl is "thrown / Into a fine distractión." This line is particularly clever, and takes a little unpicking. "Distraction," at the time this poem was written, could mean "confusion" or "agitation"—and in fact, people still sometimes say that something crazy-making "drives them to distraction." The speaker is saying that this shawl *looks* wild, but also *is* wild, like a person. At the same time, perhaps it's not just the shawl and its wearer who's distracted, but the speaker himself! Here, personification makes the shawl stand in both for its wild wearer and the speaker, driven to "distractión" by the sexiness of it all.

These clothes aren't just personified as crazed or neglectful, though: they're also flirty. If clothes have "wantonness," they're playful, naughty, and promiscuous—all words that equally might describe the person wearing them. And if a lace is "erring," it's not just threaded wrong, but making illicit sexual choices: when this poem was written, people (or, more precisely, women) who had unmarried sex were said to have "erred."

In short, personification helps this speaker to make his sly point: he takes delight in disorderly clothing because it speaks of its wearer's wild, fun-loving, sexy personality.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Kindles in clothes a wantonness."
- **Lines 3-4:** "A lawn about the shoulders thrown / Into a fine distractión"
- **Line 5:** "An erring lace"
- **Line 6:** "Enthralls the crimson stomacher"
- **Line 7:** "A cuff neglectful,"
- **Line 8:** "Ribbons to flow confusedly;"
- **Line 11:** "A careless shoestring,"

REPETITION

"Delight in Disorder" uses two kinds of emphatic repetition at once: parallelism and anaphora. By repeating his sentence structure over and over, and by starting every couplet but the last with "a" or "an," the speaker gives this poem a feeling of overflowing, luxurious delight, piling one image of sexy "disorder" on top of another.

The poem's first two lines set the pattern for the rest of the speaker's argument:

> A sweet disorder in the dress
> Kindles in clothes a wantonness.

Almost every couplet that follows this first one will parallel it, describing a disorderly piece of clothing and its actions in a single sentence starting with "a" or "an." The speaker presents each item of clothing apart from the first using a two-word

phrase ("erring lace," "cuff neglectful," "winning wave," "careless shoestring"), creating a steady, predictable rhythm while also drawing repeated attention to all these disorderly images. Such parallelism, along with the anaphora on "a/an," makes it seem as if the speaker is making a mental catalog of all the ways clothing can be charmingly messy, like he's turning from one page to the next in his collection of treasured images.

It's only at the end of the poem that the speaker drops the parallelism—and that's only because he's summing things up. All of the wild clothes he's just listed, he says, "Do more bewitch [him]" than artful perfection can. Because he's set up such a regular, predictable pattern of repetitions, the change at the end helps the poem to go out with a bang.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A"
- **Line 3:** "A," "lawn"
- **Line 5:** "An," "erring lace"
- **Line 7:** "A," "cuff neglectful"
- **Line 9:** "A," "winning wave"
- **Line 11:** "A," "careless shoestring"

OXYMORON

"Delight in Disorder" is built on something like oxymoron from the get-go: finding "disorder," or mess, "delight[ful]." While this isn't a full-blown oxymoron, it's an unlikely juxtaposition that the whole poem will go on to explore.

That juxtaposition rings out loud and clear in the very first line, where the speaker praises "a sweet disorder in the dress." That "sweet disorder" might have seemed especially oxymoronic at the time the poem was written, when rich women's clothing was so elaborate that they couldn't get dressed without help. A modern reader might better understand what's going on here if they were to imagine a poem arguing against airbrushing. In standing up for the loveliness of mess, this poem is also subtly criticizing an absurd standard of perfection that doesn't reflect real human life or real human love.

The speaker doesn't just approve of "sweet disorder" in clothing, but in people's characters and behavior. The "wild civility" he sees in an untied shoelace at line 12 is an even clearer oxymoron than that "disorder": how can a person be wild and civilized at the same time? But perhaps it's that contradiction in terms that the speaker finds exciting. To be all wild or all civilized is less fun, in his eyes, than to see wildness peeking out *through* civilization, leaving something to the imagination.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "sweet disorder"
- **Line 12:** "wild civility"

VOCABULARY

Disorder (Line 1) - Messiness.

Dress (Line 1) - The way a person is dressed.

Kindles (Line 2) - Inspires or enflames.

Wantonness (Line 2) - Playfulness, naughtiness, or sexual promiscuity.

Lawn (Line 3) - A shawl made of fine linen.

Distractión (Line 4) - A confusion or jumble. That accent on the "o" shows how Herrick wants this word pronounced: dis-TRAC-see-own, as if the speaker were saying the word with a thick accent.

Erring (Line 5) - Mistaken (with connotations of making sexual "mistakes," having illicit sex).

Enthralls (Line 6) - Fascinates, with connotations of "ties up"—to be "enthralled" originally meant to be enslaved or imprisoned.

Crimson (Line 6) - Bright red.

Stomacher (Line 6) - The lower front part of the bodice on a 17th-century dress—so called because it covers the stomach.

Cuff (Line 7) - The opening of a sleeve.

Thereby (Line 7) - By that means. In context, this means: "A neglected cuff left open, thus allowing ribbons to rush out in a tangle."

Winning (Line 9) - Charming.

Tempestuous petticoat (Line 10) - "Tempestuous" means *stormy*. The image here is of a petticoat (or underskirt) billowing up like a thundercloud, or like the waves of the ocean in a storm.

Civility (Line 12) - Courtesy.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Delight in Disorder" doesn't use a standard form (it's not a sonnet, for instance). Its improvised shape fits right in with its subject: this is a poem about mess, so it makes sense that it wouldn't use a strict form.

The poem is one long stanza, built from seven pairs of rhymed couplets (though a lot of those couplets use slant rhyme rather than perfect rhymes; see the Rhyme Scheme section for more on that). This elegant but slightly mismatched shape evokes the lovely, messy clothing that so "bewitch[es]" the speaker—and also reflects the poem's simplicity. This speaker doesn't need a bunch of separate stanzas to develop a complex thought here. Rather, each couplet is part of the same continuous idea: that "disorder" is "delight[ful]."

METER

"Delight in Disorder" uses iambic tetrameter. That means that each line has four iambs, metrical feet that follow a da-DUM rhythm.

Iambic meters are pretty common in English poetry, in part because they sound natural: a lot of English falls easily into an iambic rhythm. Iambic meters are also flexible, allowing for a little variation within their steady, pulsing rhythm. For instance, take a look at the rhythms in this poem's first two lines:

> A sweet | disor- | der in | the dress
> Kindles | in clothes | a wan- | tonness.

The first line is straightforwardly iambic, but the second begins with a trochee, a foot that goes DUM-da, and ends with two unstressed syllables in a row. A trochee pops up again at the beginning of line 8: "Ribbons." These little variations in the meter gives the poem some extra gusto and momentum, mirroring the speaker's enthusiasm for the sexy mess he describes.

The meter also lets the speaker have a little fun with pronunciation in line 4:

> A lawn | about | the shoul- | ders thrown
> Into | a fine | distract- | ión;

Here, the meter wrings four whole syllables out of the word "distraction," making it sound as if the speaker is putting on an absurd French accent—and really relishing the thought of that distracted, distracting lawn.

RHYME SCHEME

"Delight in Disorder" uses a rhyme scheme of couplets, like this:

AABBCCDDEE

...and so forth. But, as befits this poem's theme, those couplets are often a little messy. Many of them don't rhyme perfectly, but use slant rhymes, like "there" and "stomacher" (pronounced STUM-a-kerr) or "tie" and "civility." Those little almost-rhymes—still harmonious, just not *quite* perfectly matched—mirror the thrillingly messy clothes the poem celebrates.

That said, it's worth noting that some of these words might have rhymed better at the time the poem was written! The way English speakers pronounce vowels has e since the 17th century, and words like "thereby" and "confusedly" might once have sounded a little closer to each other.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker of "Delight and Disorder" doesn't tell readers much about himself directly. But readers still learn plenty about him from the way he describes women's messy clothing.

This speaker clearly loves female beauty. He pays careful attention to every little detail of women's clothes, from an "erring lace" to a "careless shoestring." And he's not shy about peeking under a skirt to spot a "tempestuous petticoat"! His eye for appearances—and his way of seeing everything in sexual terms—marks him out as a sensuous, pleasure-loving kind of guy.

The specific articles of clothing he notices, from a "stomacher" to a "lawn," also place him in the 17th century, a time when women's clothing was often especially rich and elaborate.

While this speaker doesn't ever reveal his gender, we're calling him "he" in this guide because of his strong resemblance to his author, Robert Herrick. Herrick was a Cavalier poet—that is, one of a group of writers who supported the monarchy during the English Civil War. The Cavaliers loved flamboyant clothing, partying, and sex, and Herrick was one of the lustiest of this famously lusty crew. This is only one of his many poems about the pleasures of sex and love—poems that are often spoken in what seems to be his own voice.

That said, it's certainly not necessary to treat the speaker as being Herrick, or as being a man, to understand the poem or identify with its delight in mess.

SETTING

While the poem doesn't give the reader any real sense of its setting, its lavish descriptions of women's clothing suggest a specific time period: the 17th century. Women's clothing in this era was elaborate and complex, with lots of fiddly buttons and laces. A rich woman's outfits might be so complicated that she'd need a maid to help her get dressed in the morning!

The kinds of elegant clothes this poem refers to suggest that this speaker lives in a pretty well-to-do world, where women are decked out in satin ribbons, fine linen shawls, and expensively-dyed dresses. In fact, the loving care with which the speaker describes these clothes almost creates a setting of its own: it's as if his whole imagination is filled up with visions of sexy ladies and their sexy clothes.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The English poet Robert Herrick (1591-1694) first published "Delight in Disorder" in his major book, *Hesperides* (1648). This is only one of the many poems in that collection celebrating one of Herrick's favorite themes: sex. Like his fellow Cavalier poets Richard Lovelace and Andrew Marvell, Herrick often wrote not

just about the joys of sex, but also about coaxing women into sharing those joys with him.

Herrick also considered himself one of the "Sons of Ben": that is, a follower of the poet and playwright Ben Jonson. Jonson was a contemporary (and rival) of Shakespeare's, and his witty, exuberant plays and poetry had a deep influence on Herrick's themes and style.

Herrick's verse fell out of favor in the 18th and 19th centuries, when his sexual frankness wasn't in fashion. But today, he's considered one of the 17th century's most important poets, and some of his poems (especially "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time") are so famous they've become almost proverbial. Readers might have already encountered some Herrick without knowing if they've ever heard someone tell them to "gather ye rosebuds while ye may"!

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Delight in Disorder" was published right in the thick of the English Civil War, a bloody conflict that tore Britain apart between 1642 and 1651. The war began when English anti-monarchist Parliamentarians (also known as Roundheads) clashed with monarchist Royalists (aka Cavaliers) over the governance of the kingdom. The Roundheads were to depose, try, and behead King Charles I only a year after this poem was published: a deep shock to England as a whole and to Herrick (a Cavalier to his core) in particular.

It might seem strange that Herrick and his fellow Cavalier poets would write such light, carefree poetry in the midst of a terrible war: "Delight in Disorder" is hardly Wilfred Owen. But life-loving poetry was one of the ways that the Cavaliers stood up for their own beliefs, rebelling against the grim and Puritanical Roundheads. The Cavalier poets celebrated the pleasures of life not just as an escape from the horrors around them, but as a stand against what they saw as the forces of joyless Roundhead oppression. They'd later rejoice when King Charles II, Charles I's son, returned to the throne at last, ushering in an era of decadence and sexual freedom.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- 17th-Century Fashion — Read up on the clothes that Herrick might have had in mind when he wrote "Delight in Disorder." (https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/category/17th-century/)
- Herrick's Meter — Read an excerpt from a lecture in which a professor discusses how Herrick's meter gives the poem some of its wit and charm. (https://allenginsberg.org/2017/07/j-24/)
- The Poetry Foundation on Herrick — Read a short biography of Herrick, and find links to more of his poems. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-herrick)
- The Introduction to Herrick's Book — Read an appreciation of the poem that opens Herrick's Hesperides, the collection this poem was first printed in. This first poem's world-relishing tone tells readers something about Herrick and his poetry in general! (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/sep/11/poem-of-the-week-the-argument-of-his-book-by-robert-herrick)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud—with some accompanying images that criticize modern ideas about messiness, perfection, and beauty! (https://youtu.be/trpRo8DSeJM)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT HERRICK POEMS

- To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Delight in Disorder.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Jan 2021. Web. 20 Jan 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Delight in Disorder.*" LitCharts LLC, January 1, 2021. Retrieved January 20, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-herrick/delight-in-disorder.