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KLÁRA BICANOVÁ

THE DANGERS OF WIT: RE-EXAMINING C.S. LEWIS'S STUDY OF A WORD

Abstract

In his *Study in Words*, C. S. Lewis identifies three senses of wit – old sense, *wit-ingenium* sense and the “dangerous” sense. The article looks at the last of the three senses as it manifested itself in the Restoration dramatic practice and theory, identifying wit as one of the key notions of literature of the period. Both in Restoration comedy and the establishing dramatic criticism the term represents a receptacle for matters of language, decorum, and aesthetics respectively. In many of the Restoration comedies, wit's social and dialogical propensities allow for expressing earnest concerns of the contemporary society. In the sphere of dramatic criticism on the other hand, wit as a term of early modern aesthetics is being reformulated in tentative definitions several times during the period to become firmly rooted in the cultural vocabulary of the Augustan period.

Key words

English wit and humour; English Restoration drama; Restoration comedy; John Dryden; C. S. Lewis; English language – etymology

1. Introduction

Although today wit is often regarded by critics as “a quaint category of verbal cleverness”, it was a major “analytic mode as well as one of stylistic sophistication” in the English literature of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Sitter 1991: 5). In the time of its busiest currency – i.e. 1660 to about 1730 – it was both a term of praise in artistic and social terms and a target for tenacious moral attacks; a container for some of the most imperious ideas of the age as well as a buzz-word. This article presents a polemic with C. S. Lewis's account of wit

presented in his *Study in Words* which has been left without a major critical reaction so far.¹

The first part of the article is informed by an etymological analysis of the word by C.S. Lewis. His distrustful approach to the word tends to underestimate the significance of wit and fails to acknowledge its status in the literary development of the Restoration and early Augustan periods even if – curiously enough – all of the author’s examples of the word’s period usage are taken from literary texts – poems, plays or works of criticism. The article subsequently suggests a more contextual approach which allows for a better appreciation of the word’s complexity and significance for the contemporary writing and society. In the second part of the article the identified crucial areas of wit’s agency are rhetoric, philosophy and literary practice and theory. These are presented as the key aspects of wit’s transformation.

2. C. S. Lewis’s Approach

In his study C.S. Lewis provides an account of the historical development of the word wit, based on an erudite etymological and semantic analysis. As ingenious as the study is, there are nevertheless several points I wish to challenge, and I will suggest an alternative conclusion to the study’s findings. First, the mythifying quality of the account invites a curiously fictionalizing and anthropomorphizing approach to the topic. At the outset of the study wit is introduced in this way:

Its early life was happy and free from complications. It then acquired a sense which brought into play the distinction between the word’s and the speaker’s meanings. It also suffered the worst fate any word has to fear; it became the fashionable term of approval among critics. This made it a prey to tactical definitions of a more than usually unscrupulous type, and in the heat of controversy there was some danger of its becoming a mere rallying-cry, semantically null [...]. [I]n the end those ‘who speak only to be understood’ rescued it from the critics and fixed upon it the useful meaning it bears to-day. The chequered story has – what is rare in such matters – a happy ending. (86)

This dramatic prolegomenon is in fact an elegant disguise for the author’s manipulative method of rendering the issue. Readers can easily gain the impression that the shifts in the word’s meaning are rather undesirable, confusing, and that they become slightly uncomfortable and distrustful towards the word itself. Furthermore, they are led astray by Lewis’s assertion that whatever happened to the word at certain periods, in particular the Restoration, was nothing more than a careless abuse of and frivolous jugglery with, till then, an innocent word. In my re-reading of the study I wish to suggest that – although the word may indeed have been misused at times – the course it took and the development it

underwent was an important token of the function of wit as an aesthetic category in its own right – at least in that particular period of English literature. I am also arguing that what Lewis sees as comfortable “tactical” definitions should instead be regarded as genuine attempts at description and definition of an elusive term that has often been downplayed by literary scholars as a mere vogue word. The Restoration period was notably susceptible both to the possibilities of the word’s meaning and the need for a re-formulation of ideas of psychological aspect of the artistic creation as well as the ways in which literature interacts with the society in which it is produced.

The old sense of wit and *wit-ingenium*

Lewis identifies three main senses of wit: the original, *old sense* of wit, *wit-ingenium* and the *dangerous sense* of wit. In the Old and Middle English *old sense* of wit designated “mind, reason, intelligence” (Lewis 1960: 86). Thus in *Beowulf* the hero warns his adversary Unferth against “þæs þu in helle scealt werhðo dreogan / þeah þin wit duge” – in Michael Alexander’s versification: “you’re a clever man, Unferth / but you’ll endure hell’s damnation for that” (Alexander 2001: 23). The second, *wit-ingenium* sense, developed from the first sense when different kinds of *wit* started to be distinguished: “Each man’s wit has its own cast bent, or temper; one quick and another plodding, one solid and another showy, one ingenious to invent and another accurate to retain.[...] Thus in Chaucer we have ‘For tender wittes wenen al be wyle / Theras they can pleynly understande’ people of ‘tender’ mind” (Lewis 1960: 88) or in John Lyly’s *Euphues* the eponymous hero is described as someone whose “witte [is] lyke waxe apte to receiue any impression” (Warwick Bond 1967:185). This change, as Lewis rightly observes, was crucial for the future development of the word. By prefixing an adjective to the noun we acknowledge the existence of numerous kinds of wit – it can be quick, tender, showy, ingenious, flexible. Wit starts to be distinguished in terms of its quality. However, this diversification (psychological in its nature) anticipates an even more significant future development as it reveals wit’s potential for becoming an evaluative and critical tool. To explain this development we need to make a slight detour into the Latin etymology as this second sense is associated by Lewis with *ingenium*. This word originally meant “the character of ‘what-sortedness’ of a thing”, its natural character (Lewis 1960: 89). Apart from this meaning, *ingenium* has several other senses as well, which are surprisingly similar to those of wit. Alan Poinis refers to three other groups of meanings described by Egidio Forcellini in his *Totius latinitatis lexicon* (1864–1887):

En second lieu, il s’applique aux êtres humains et à leurs dispositions naturelles, leur tempérament, leurs manières d’être (*natura, indoles, mores*). Puis il exprime, parmi les dispositions naturelles de l’homme, l’intelligence, l’habileté, l’inventivité (*vis animi, facultas insita excogitandi, percipiendi*,

addiscendi, solertia, inventio). Enfin, par métonymie, il désigne les hommes qui sont particulièrement doués de cette faculté (*ingenia est synonyme de homines ingeniosi*). (Cassin 2004: 592)

The second sense of *ingenium* is associated with human beings and their natural dispositions, temperament, and conduct; in the third semantic group the natural dispositions are more precisely identified as intelligence, ability and invention, and the fourth sense designates – by means of metonymy – individuals possessing these faculties. The second sense of wit (quality of mind) corresponds to the third meaning of *ingenium*. Both are often understood as intrinsically positive, even without the specifying adjectives: “Epicurus, says Lucretius, surpassed the whole human race in *ingenium*” (Lewis 1960: 89); Lucilla in *Euphues* bemoans herself and other “silly soules” that don’t have “witte to decypher the wyles of men”, i.e. sharp enough intelligence to see through men’s subterfuge (Warwick Bond 1967: 223).

The two words have indeed much in common. According to Pons, *ingenium* is the innate element of human creativity, which is necessary for intellectual speculation, poetic and artistic creation, persuasive discourse, innovative techniques, and social and political practices (Cassin 2004: 592). For Cicero, *ingenium* was the chief factor in invention, one of the five parts of the rhetoric. Thanks to *ingenium*, we are able to grasp relations between things that stand apart in the order of being. In language, this ability finds its expression in the forming of similes and metaphors. In *Euphues* Philautus criticizes the hero’s *wit-ingenium* by means of an ingenious metaphor: “And as the Bee is oftentimes hurte with hir own honny, so is wit not seldom plagued with his owne conceipte” (Warwick Bond 1967: 208). *Ingenium* and wit operate by the identical principle of bringing together similarities; they also share the risk of being associated with lack of *judicium* or judgment. Seneca’s “nullum magnum *ingenium* sine mixture dementiae” (there is no great *ingenium* without a dash of insanity), and Quintilian’s “You get what is called affectation when *ingenium* lacks *judicium*” both indicate that the critical faculty of *judicium* is necessary counterpart of *ingenium* (Lewis 1960: 91). In the Restoration period, the contrasted pair of wit and judgment will become the crux of the neo-classicist debate of poetic creation and will be discussed in greater detail in the second part of the article. Lewis summarizes the essence of *wit-ingenium* as something which “in its highest exaltation may border on madness; the productive, seminal [...] thing [which is] supplied by nature, not acquired by skill (*ars*). [...] It is what distinguished the great writer and especially the great poet. It is therefore very close to ‘imagination’” (Lewis 1960: 92).²

The dangerous sense of wit

Once a synonym of intelligence, mind, and common sense wit now becomes an imaginative faculty which distinguishes a gifted mind. The first sense of wit

is a key term of the old psychology – there were “five inward and five outward wits or senses” (Lewis 1960: 88).³ Its second sense stands for a man’s “mental make-up” – to use C.S. Lewis’s term – which is unique to every person and therefore helps to individuate him/her from everybody else. This differentiation in the quality of wit meant that it started to be used as an expression of praise for those people whose intellectual capacity and talent surpassed that of their contemporaries. This wit exercises its power in the sphere of the rhetoric; it is commonly associated with the ability of imaginative thinking. It is no longer a term of cognitive psychology and philosophy, but operates in a different sphere – that of artistic creation and criticism. The third sense, which C.S. Lewis ominously dubs as ‘dangerous’, does indeed complicate things but presents a semantic shift which is not unpredictable. The above quoted ingenious metaphor which Philautus points at Euphues is a product of *wit-ingenium* but what it criticizes is the *dangerous sense* of wit. This sense is identified by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as “[q]uickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, esp. in an amusing way” as opposed to the *wit-ingenium*’s sense, which OED describes as “[g]ood or great mental capacity; intellectual ability; genius, talent, cleverness; mental quickness, acumen” (Simpson 1989: 433). The difference between the two meanings is quite subtle but its implications are of vital importance for the Restoration period. It suggests a great deal about the growing emphasis on the social character of Restoration literary genres and forms (comedy, literary journals etc.) as well as the changing milieu of the period itself. The emphasis on the social nature of the Restoration literature and its interaction with wit will be explored in the second part of the article.

What further obfuscates the present situation is that the word’s various senses did not come and go, so that we could safely say that during the Renaissance period *wit* no longer held its original sense, but only the second, more appreciative sense, while in the Restoration texts we only encounter wit in its further sense. Instead, the word retained all its senses and thus could be used in all three of them within one utterance. Hence Dryden can say of Achitophel that “He sought the Storms; but for a Calm unfit, / Would Steer too nigh the Sands, to boast his Wit. / Great Wits are sure to Madness near ally’d; (Hooker et al. 1971: 10). Wit of the second line means natural intelligence; ‘great wits’ of the third line means men of genius, a superior intellectual capacity. The nature of the shift between these two usages – i.e. from a descriptive to an evaluative term – is something C.S. Lewis seems rather uneasy about. For him, the pure evaluative character of words means that they have actually become “useless synonyms for *good* and *bad*” (Lewis 1960: 7–8). This displeasure at the devaluation of words is very much present in his treatment of the ‘dangerous sense’ of wit. He compares Restoration multiple usage of wit to our usage of the word *figure*, which can also be used in several contexts – figure can mean a digit, a figure of rhetoric or a physical build-up of an individual (Lewis 1960: 102).

The analogy, as convincing and smooth as it appears at first sight, becomes rather inaccurate when investigated more minutely. Indeed, there are many Eng-

lish words which work in a similar way (e.g. calf, draught, leg or ring) but none can be compared to wit. Lewis's analogy suggests two things at least. First, that wit belongs to the same group of words from the point of complexity of the meaning, and second, that there exist several meanings of wit used in various contexts which are easily distinguished and identified. As for wit's affinity with the above mentioned nouns – we may well acknowledge it on the level of a kin linguistic character. However, we still need to differentiate it from the same group for its intricate significance in the cultural environment of the period. Lewis himself acknowledges the word's unique position in rather general terms when he says that: "If a man had time to study the history of one word only, *wit* would perhaps be the best word he could choose" (Lewis 1960: 86). More specifically, wit as a key word of the Augustan culture has been acknowledged at least since the rise of critical interest in the Restoration period starting in the 1960s. According to Paul Hammond wit "defines the gap between Restoration culture and the preceding decades," and with 771 occurrences is the second most frequent word to appear in a title of an essay or a treatise in the early Augustan period (Hammond 2002: 15; Price 1998: 39). For Thomas H. Fujimura, wit is "one of the key words in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century aesthetics" and "the very bulk of the criticism devoted to wit indicates its importance in the period" (Fujimura 1968: 12–13). Indeed, it was a word which was used very often, and very often it denoted something with which writers, playwrights and philosophers struggled to voice new ideas or reformulate old ones. Lewis finds those attempts "amusing evidences of the word's drift towards its *dangerous sense*" (Lewis 1960: 100) and he offers an overview of contemporary ideas:

1650: Davenant, describing something 'which is not, yet is accompted, Wit', includes in it 'what are commonly called *Conceits*, things that sound like the knacks or toyes of ordinary *Epigrammatists*'.

1664: Flecknoe warns us that wit must not include 'clenches (puns), quibbles, gingles, and such like trifles'.

1667: Dryden tells us that wit does not consist of 'the jerk or sting of an epigram nor the seeming contradiction of a poor antithesis ... nor the jingle of a more poor paronomasia'.

1668: Shadwell corrects those ignorant people who believed 'that all the Wit in Playes consisted in bringing two persons upon the Stage to break Jests, and to bob one another, which they call *Repartie*'.

1672: Dryden classifies 'clenches' as 'The lowest and most grovelling kind of wit'.

1700: Dryden says that 'the vulgar judges ... call conceits and jingles wit'. (Lewis 1960: 100–101)

In fact, all these are attempts at defining what wit is or should be by means of elimination of the undesired elements.⁴ When Paul Hammond calls Restoration "the age of unstable vocabulary" we should not understand it as a euphemism

for a period in which people would comfortably “slip in and out of the different meanings [of the word] without noticing it” as C. S. Lewis suggests. Rather, we should see it as a period of wit’s pendency; a period of *tentative*, not “tactical” definitions (103). The “amusing evidences” may appear less amusing and more instructing when seen as proofs of a complex situation in a period, where wit started to gradually lose its clear, well-established connotations and became increasingly problematic as well as useful for its users.

3. Wit in Movement: The Neo-classicist Poetics in the Making

The gist of the above summaries of definitions is the fundamental dilemma of wit as a mere wordplay versus wit as a more complex poetic quality described by Dryden as “propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words adapted to the subject” (Sitter 1991: 85). This clash was running as a red thread through the whole bulk of the Restoration and Augustan literary criticism and was informed by changes which took place in the Renaissance intellectual milieu. Reconstructing the background of the Renaissance’s attitude to rhetoric, it will be possible to perceive the gradual changes in taste of the following time and thus see that ‘the bad linguistic situation’ in which the *dangerous sense* of wit thrived was a logical and necessary result of the interplay of several factors. Proceeding from the Renaissance rhetoric via Hobbes’s and Locke’s thoughts on the psychological background of wit, this part of the article argues that through the new genres of Restoration literature, especially comedy of manners and character satire, wit’s social nature surfaces and shapes the notion in the form it became to be associated with for the following centuries. John Dryden’s gradually changing definitions of wit are also discussed in the light of his own literary practice.

The Renaissance rhetoric and its influence on the further development of wit

Literary historicists have agreed that early in the sixteenth century wit became associated with the intellectual ingenuity of rhetorical devices.⁵ It assumed several modes during this journey; one of the first and at the same time, the most eminent, is euphuism, personified by *Euphues* of the eponymous book by John Lyly and defined by D. Judson Milburn as “highly rhetorical style of writing, which employed neatly poised parallelisms of balance and antithesis and abundant alliteration” (Milburn 1966: 36). The Renaissance rhetoric, which is the feeding pool for *Euphues*, underwent a series of modifications which simplified the rules of application and had a far-reaching impact on the development of early modern literature. Originally, rhetoric as a set of stylistic devices contained more verbal devices than did poetics but due [‘to’] the rise of writing as a means of preservation of literary products, rhetoric gradually lost its supremacy and was “relegated

to a division of poetics under the general category of style” (Milburn 1966: 38). Two other events reshaped the rhetoric and shifted its course further from the oral expression and towards the literature: First, Pierre de la Ramée, a French philosopher and mathematician, in his treatise *Rhetoricae distinctiones* split the five parts of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery) in two groups, shifting invention, arrangement and memory under the common rubric of dialectic (i.e. logic), and leaving rhetoric with only the remaining style and delivery (Hawkes 1977: 22). This division was very influential for the process of poetic creation and its reflection. As Terence Hawkes writes: “Where Rhetoric had formerly embraced the totality of the verbal arts, the requirements for hard, logical thought together with those for beautifying ornament, Ramus’s division, reducing it to mere Elocution and Delivery, made it merely a cosmetic repertoire of ‘figures’ or trimmings that could be added to discourse after the logical arguments had been established” (Hawkes 1977: 25). The other change is a result of the previous one: Renaissance rhetoric was reduced into two fundamental classes of figures – figures of thought (*figurae sententiae*) and figures of words (*figurae verborum*). Thus wit became to be associated either with words (letters, respectively) or thoughts.

Hobbes, Locke and wit’s role in the faculty psychology

The ‘wit of thoughts’ was traditionally associated with the ability to state natural truth decorously and thus was a product of judgment, while ‘wit of words’ pertained to wordplays, quibbles and epigrams, and as an embodiment of fanciful delight was a product of imagination. These two mental faculties were the chief elements which wit was linked with in the philosophy of the Restoration period.

The association of the specific ability to form similes and metaphors with rhetoric, posited by the ancient philosophers, was approached newly by Thomas Hobbes in the late seventeenth century. He expressed these ideas mainly in his political treatise *Leviathan*, but some important formulations appeared also in his correspondence with William D’Avenant and in other texts. Hobbes distinguishes between natural and acquired wit. The former kind is defined as “celerity of imagining, that is, swift succession of one thought to another; and steady direction to some approved end.” He goes on to analyse wit in two components:

[...] and whereas in this succession of men’s thoughts, there is nothing to observe in the things they think on, but either in what they be like one another, or in what they be unlike, or what they serve for, or how they serve to such a purpose; those that observe their similitudes, in case they be such as are but rarely observed by others, are said to have a good wit; by which in this occasion, is meant a good fancy. But they that observe their differences, and dissimilitudes [...] in case, such discerning be not easy, are said to have a good judgment: and particularly in matter of conversation and business;

wherein, times, places, and persons are to be discerned, this virtue is called discretion. (Hobbes 1968[1651]: 57)

Wit comprises of fancy, the synthesising power of inventing new similitudes, and judgment, the analysing power of discerning dissimilitudes. Opposing the popular opinion which held that wit was identical with fancy and was therefore the upper of the two constituting elements, Hobbes insisted on the regulatory function of judgment and even maintained that fancy without judgment is not wit: "So that where wit is wanting, it is not Fancy that is wanting, but discretion. Judgment therefore without Fancy is wit, but Fancy without Judgment, not" (Weiss 1953: 115). However, when discussing *wit* in relation to literary creation Hobbes assigns the primary role to fancy. In his *Answer to Davenant* Hobbes expresses his critical ideas as follows: "[...] Memory begets Judgment and Fancy: Judgment begets the strength and structure, and Fancy begets the ornaments if a Poem" (Spingarn 1908: II, 59). Similarly, in *The Virtue of an Heroic Poem* he identifies "Elevation of Fancie" as the virtue which is taken for "the greatest praise" of heroic poetry but he again stresses the importance of judgment: "For in Fancie consisteth the Sublimity of a Poet, which is that Poetical Fury which the Readers for the most part call for. It flies abroad swiftly to fetch both Matter and Words; but if there be not Discretion at home to distinguish which are fit to be used and which not [...] their delight and grace is lost" (Spingarn 1908: II, 70).

The social nature of wit and Restoration comedy

The wit of Restoration comedy is usually associated with witty repartees, sharp bantering and dialogues full of rich metaphorical language. This kind of wit drew heavily from the past literary genres, predominantly metaphysical poetry and the French tradition of *précieuse* writing. The elaborate and extended metaphor – or conceit – was a poetic device which both of these styles were based on and which became the chief means of expression for Restoration comedy. The coining of fresh and ingenious similes, a proof of the imaginative intellect, becomes a token of intellectual superiority associated with the aristocratic origin and environment. Thus in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1673) the play's hero Horner answers to Sir Jasper when the latter defends womankind as "the sweet, soft, gentle, tame, noble Creature" with the following comparison:

Hor: "So is that soft, gentle, tame and more noble Creature a Spaniel, and has all their tricks, can fawn, lye down, suffer beating, and fawn the more; barks at your Friends when they come to see you; makes your bed hard, gives you Fleas, and the mange sometimes: and all the difference is, the Spaniel's the more faithful Animal, and fawns but upon one Master." (II, iii)

The wit of Restoration comedy did not necessarily have to be as exploitative and poignant as this example but it required the same condition which the odes of female beauties had in the saloons of the French aristocracy – a live audience capable of immediate reaction. And as theatre is perhaps even more dependent on the action in and reaction of a social and intellectual ferment, wit's embedded propensity to social appreciation found a felicitous outlet on the Restoration stage.

This type of comedy represents a new medium for wit: an idealised world of London aristocracy with plots which range from being over-complicated to extremely thin and which deal with the social rather than philosophical or religious themes (e.g. marriage, gratification of one's material or sexual desires, generation clashes). It is peopled with characters in which the rhetorical and psychological aspects of wit discussed previously conflate with the ideal of the social conduct and *decorum* embodied by stock characters of so-called *Truewits*. In *The Man of Mode or Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676) by George Etherege, the play's male protagonist Dorimant, an elegant rake, converses with a female version of Truewit, a rich and charming Harriet:

Dor: You were talking of play, madam. Pray what may be your stint?

Har: A little harmless discourse in public walks, or at most an appointment in a box, barefaced, at the playhouse. You are for masks and private meetings, where women engage for all they are worth, I hear.

Dor: I have been used to deep play, but I can make one at small game when I like my gamester well.

Har: And be so unconcerned you'll ha' no pleasure in it.

Dor: When there is a considerable sum to be won, the hope of drawing people in, makes every trifle considerable.

Har: The sordidness of men's natures, I know, makes them willing to flatter and comply with the rich, though they are sure never to be the better for them.

Dor: It is in their power to do us good, and we despair not but at some time or other they may be willing.

Har: To men who have far'd in this Town like you, it would be a great mortification to live on hope. Could you keep a Lent for a mistress?

Dor: In expectation of a happy Easter, and though time be very precious, think forty days well lost to gain your favour.

Har: Mr. Bellair! Let us walk. 'Tis time to leave him. Men grow dull when they begin to be particular. (III, iii)

The “provocative banter” of the double-entendre-ridden exchange is a perfect example of the conversational, decorous wit of Restoration comedy. Pat Gill contends that “[t]he plots of Restoration drama begin, develop, and end in concerns about gender, sexuality and marriage” (Payne Fisk 2000: 191). These rather delicate matters become the battleground of wit, with characters trying to negotiate

the best terms for their future lives while retaining intellectual sharpness and control over the discourse. William Congreve depicts such a contest in his last and generally considered best comedy *The Way of the World* (1700). In the famous *proviso* scene, the central couple Millamant and Mirabell engage in a witty, yet earnest negotiation of the conditions of their marriage. Proceeding from trifles such as the right to keep their own respective sleeping patterns when married, the debate becomes more and more serious. Millamant demands of Mirabell “to have no obligation [...] to converse with wits that I don’t like, because they are your acquaintance, or to be intimate with fools, because they may be your relations” (IV, i) and suggests: “Let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while, and as well-bred as if we were not married at all” (IV, i).

The ingenious similes, one of the characteristic traits of Restoration comedy, were becoming worn-out towards the close of the period. In the same comedy, Congreve used the audiences’ growing displeasure at this device and galvanized the play into a fresh comic activity by introducing Witwoud, an affected fop, whose obsessive urge to produce ever new comparisons is annoying even for the play’s characters themselves:

Millamant: O I have denied myself airs today. I have walked as fast through the crowd –

Witwoud: As a favourite in disgrace; and with as few followers.

Mill: Dear Mr. Witwoud, truce with your similitudes: for I am as sick of ‘em –

Wit: As a physician of a good air – I cannot help it, madam, though ‘tis against myself.

Mill: Yet again! Mincing, stand between me and his wit.

Wit: Do, Mrs. Mincing, like a screen before a great fire. I confess I do blaze today, I am too bright.

Mrs Fainall: But, dear Millamant, why were you so long?

Mill: Long! Lord, have I not made violent haste? I have asked every living thing I met for you; I have enquired after you, as after a new fashion.

Wit: Madam, truce with your similitudes! No, you met her husband, and did not ask him for her.

Mirabell: By your leave, Witwoud, that were like enquiring after an old fashion to ask a husband for his wife. (II, i)

This social raillery is both biting and decorative, and renders the conversations serious and playful at the same time. As John Dryden says in his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, in the Restoration comedy, witty repartees are “one of its chief graces; the greatest pleasure of the audience is a chase of wit, kept on both sides and swiftly managed” (Lewis 1960: 102). The “pleasurable chase” which unites the characters on the stage and the audiences becomes the distinctive feature of one type of the Restoration wit. Dryden himself, however, identified and employed some more types to suit his critical and poetical purposes.

John Dryden and wit(s)

The concluding part of the article comes back to C. S. Lewis and his charge of Dryden for recklessly using wit in different meanings. As it happens, this accusation is a known fact and has been acknowledged by many literary scholars (e.g. Sitter 1991, Milburn 1966). John Dryden, as the chief shaper of the Restoration literary production, produced his texts, artistic as well as critical, according to the current taste which changed rather quickly in the course of the late seventeenth century. One of Dryden's first poems "Upon the Death of the Lord Hastings", written in 1649 when the poet was about eighteen years old, pays tribute to the then decaying metaphysical wit consisting of shocking images and a ceaseless flow of conceits:

Was there no milder way but the Small Pox,
The very Filth'ness of *Pandora's* Box?
So many Spots, like *naeves*, our *Venus* soil?
One Jewel set off with so many a Foil?
Blisters with pride swell'd; which th'row's flesh did sprout
Like Rose-buds, stuck i' th'Lily-skin about.
Each little Pimple had a Tear in it,
To wail the fault its rising did commit:
Who, Rebel-like, with their own Lord at strife,
Thus made an Insurrection 'gainst his Life.
Or were these Gems sent to adorn his Skin,
The Cab'net of a richer Soul within?
No Comet need foretell his Change drew on,
Whose Corps might seem a Constellation.
(ll. 53–66)

The bizarre metaphorisation, irregularity of run-ons, awkward elision and harsh sounds contribute to the general unevenness of the poem in which the Metaphysical *wit* reached its last stage of every fashion – excess educing irritation from the audience. The general movement of poetics was towards a more regular rhythm, even lines and natural accents in the style of Edmund Waller and others. Wit found its new station in the heroic couplet, which Dryden mastered in his "Mac Flecknoe" some thirty years later after this slightly morbid elegy. In "Mac Flecknoe", wit's satirical lashings reveal its potential for slanderousness and profanity which were soon to become wit's own ruin. The poem satirizes Thomas Shadwell, "a Whig, Protestant and dully moralistic dramatist" who was Dryden's successor in the function of a *poet laureate*. In the poem, Shadwell is to succeed one Richard Flecknoe, a minor poet and Dryden's adversary, as "Prince of Nonsense" (imaginary equivalent to the function of *poet laureate*). Flecknoe praises his follower's potential in these famously satirical lines (Milburn 1966: 72–73):

Sh[adwell] alone my perfect image bears,
 Mature in dullness for his tender years.
 Sh[adwell] alone, of all my sons, is he
 Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.
 The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
 But Sh[adwell] never deviates into sense.
 Some beams of Wit on other souls may fall,
 Strike through and make a lucid interval;
 But Sh[adwell]'s genuine night admits no ray,
 His rising Fogs prevail upon the Day;

The antithetical turns upon the maturity of dullness, the strength of stupidity, the inability to deviate into sense all show wit's ability to combine the comic and the intellectual. The gradual change of attitude towards wit can be seen not only when Dryden uses wit as a working tool, but when he thinks about the word as a part of his critical vocabulary. Judson D. Milburn summarizes this development as follows:

When [Dryden] was most enthusiastic toward wit, his aim was to "please" or "delight" first, and then to "instruct". By 1677 he had reversed these aims, for now comedy aimed first to instruct delightfully. In 1700 he was apologizing for having placed pleasure before instruction. The same shift is evident in his opinion of wit. Whereas he had early emphasized the importance of the secret graces which violated the rules, by the mid-eighties he was stressing propriety and decorum. Dryden had, in fact, re-evaluated the Age of Wit, which he had proudly proclaimed in 1672. (264)

The fact that Dryden was able to produce several, sometimes opposing, definitions of wit should not be interpreted as a proof of his literary double-dealing or carelessness. Different contexts of wit called for different definitions, just as did new genres and changing tastes of the times. John Sitter stresses the dialogical nature of Dryden's most famous definition:

If we take Dryden at his words, that wit "is a propriety words and thoughts; [...]" – we have a definition that happily refuses to separate wit from words and conversation. And in this sense, making the barest historical allowance for the fussiness that would later attach to "propriety" and "elegantly", Dryden's wit is clearly related to the conversation of English-speaking human beings ever since. (85)

The emphasis on the social, dialogical aspect of the notion specifies wit's function in late seventeenth century English culture and at the same time endangers its position as an easily identified synonym for either mental qualities or its verbal product. It transfers wit from the ever so slightly secluded realm of philosophical

categories or rhetorical figures of speech into the dangerously unstable sphere of social interaction, with its ceaselessly changing tastes and sensibilities.

4. Conclusion

Whether we consent to call it protean, nebulous or mercurial or not, we must admit wit as a concept was remarkably mutation-prone during the period of its prominent agency. We have seen it permeate philosophical, psychological and literary discussions of the age with energy unlike most of the key concepts of early Augustan culture. The process of transformation relies heavily on the various literary genres which use wit as one of their stylistic component. Whereas the metaphysical mode of poetry stressed wit's poetical and rhetorical qualities, the Restoration comedies and Augustan satire can find use for those that are most scathing and socially critical. When Joseph Addison set up his motto in *The Spectator* magazine "to enliven morality with wit and to temper wit with morality" (with the journal being a new genre merging the philosophical and social topics), he firmly rooted wit in the cultural vocabulary of the early Augustan period.

This may serve as proof that if we wish to analyse such a word as wit from semantic and etymological perspectives, we cannot ignore the implications it bears on the society in which it works so actively and fruitfully. Though an earnest and learned study, C. S. Lewis's de-materialized history of wit fails to embed the word in the social world of language where it belongs. In its puristic approach that divorces linguistic and cultural reality, it also misses to acknowledge wit's existence not only as a *word* but more importantly as a concept, albeit an unstable one, operating in a culture of a particular period and place. The social implications of wit may create some confusion when attempting to neatly label the word, but present its integral part and help us to contextualize its meanings in a particular historical setting.

Notes

- 1 John Sitter in his *Arguments of Augustan Wit* calls Lewis's study as a "mythical" account which "casts the semantic history of a word in the form of a contest between good and evil (roughly the native "*ingenium*" of the English language itself versus "dangerous" intrusions), posits a primitive purity of ("foremost") meaning against which later complications are seen as heretical deviation, and simplifies uncertainties in the interest of narrative symmetry" (1991: 84).
- 2 In his study *Restoration Comedy of Wit* (1968) Thomas H. Fujimura offers a similar, if a slightly too general definition of wit in terms of *ingenium*: "[...] the most comprehensive meaning of wit, in the general sense of *ingenium* [...] was used loosely to designate any of the following – a faculty of mind, its activity, a special quality of either the faculty or its activity, a product of the faculty or of its activity, or the quintessence of such product. Wit was described as acute, sharp, agile, penetrating, and lively; it was associated with the fortuitous

- discovery of ideas and images, and with a careful arrangement of these; it was regarded as both assimilative and discriminatory; and it was considered the quintessence of any work" (1968: 19–20).
- 3 Although five wits were often synonymous with five (outward, physical) senses, they could also refer to the "inward senses" or intellectual faculties: common wit, imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory. According to Brewer's 1909 edition of *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* "common sense is the outcome of the five senses; imagination is the "wit" of the mind; fantasy is imagination united with judgment; estimation estimates the absolute, such as time, space, locality, and so on; and memory is the "wit" of recalling past events" (466). Thus e.g. Shakespeare's *Sonnet 141* discusses a conflict of five intellectual faculties and five physical senses on the one hand and emotions on the other: "But my five wits nor my five senses can / Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee".
- 4 Once again, Lewis neglects the context in which these definitions were formulated. The definition by elimination was a frequent method of the Restoration writers; a similar approach to definition can be seen in the attempts at defining wit by Abraham Cowley, true religion by Earl of Rochester or humour by William Congreve. The reasons for this kind of definition can be searched for in the nature of the intellectual milieu of the late seventeenth century, with its scepticism and nascent methodology of the newly established natural sciences. For further analysis of this phenomenon see e.g. Charles O. McDonald, *Restoration Comedy as Drama of Satire: An Investigation into Seventeenth Century Aesthetics*, p. 542 and Richard Foster Jones, 'Science and Language in the Mid-seventeenth Century,' in *The Seventeenth Century. The Studies in the History of English Thought and Literature from Bacon to Pope*, pp. 143–160.
- 5 For detailed accounts of this association see A. J. Smith's *Metaphysical Wit* (1991) (Chapter 3), T. Hawkes's *Metaphor* (1977) (20–27) or Judson D. Milburn's *Age of Wit. 1650–1750*. (1966) (Chapter 2, 38–53). Even though they stress different aspects of the problem and offer various reasons for the change, all three writers see Renaissance as the period for the key transformation of rhetoric and its association with wit as a literary quality expressed by novel figures.

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