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Wit as aesthetic concept

In: Bicanová, Klára. *From rhetoric to aesthetics: wit and esprit in the English and French theoretical writings of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2013, pp. 31-44

ISBN 978-80-210-6662-5

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129631>

Access Date: 02. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

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view of language in relation to persons, things, events, and ideas” (Kroll, ‘Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*’ 728). Kroll thus rejects attempts of previous critics (e.g. T. H. Fujimura’s classification of characters based on whether they belong to the class of ‘Truewit’, ‘Witwoud’ or ‘Witless’) and suggests that “‘character’ is itself constituted as a feature of discourse” (‘Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*’ 728).

Kroll identifies three planes of discourse in the play: natural, legal and social. These realms of interpretation must be controlled by the characters of the play in order to be successful in achieving their respective goals. The purely natural realm “includes the hidden drive for love, money, or power, which we cannot hope to purge but must at all events socialize” (‘Discourse and Power in *The Way of the World*’ 738). This is the fundamental level of human communication and there is zero possibility of manipulation of language. The legal discourse is a level of contractual realm, where certain words and expressions are bound by a general social agreement and therefore can be trusted. The final level of discourse is the social one, in which only the most verbally skilled, creative, and at the same time self-disciplined characters can operate successfully. This level of discourse allows to bargain for the matters of love (finding a lover, starting a family) and power (inheritance settlement, pre-nuptial agreement, marriage etc.) using a language that is not only acceptable by the society but even admired by it.

Associating each of the three levels of discourse with a certain group of the play’s characters, Kroll shows that the most despicable and ultimately defeated characters are those who cannot operate beyond the levels of the natural or legal discourse. Meanwhile, the heroine and hero of the play are represented as the victorious couple who achieve all they wished (and worked hard) for: mutual love, marriage, as well as a large dowry. Their ability to manipulate language and to navigate it through the murky waters of the Restoration milieu of epistemological scepticism is unmatched and highly appreciated. Kroll proposes to view wit as an ability to creatively manipulate language (through metaphors, comparisons, quick repartees and other means), and through it the social reality in which our lives are set.

1.2 Wit as Aesthetic Concept

1.2.1 The Problem of Definition: ‘Wit’ in Dictionaries

While most of the definitions of wit found in the dictionaries of literary and critical terms are bent on providing an extensive account of the term’s complicated historical development, and/or stressing the changes it went through during the process (Beckson’s and Ganz’s *Reader’s Guide to Literary Terms*, *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*), others attempt to formulate a general principle of wit’s function and to evaluate its position in the contemporary literary production and criticism. For example, Babette Deutsch’s 1965 *Poetry Handbook* claims that wit is the “faculty that makes for metaphor by the perception of likeness in unlike things” (169). Quoting T. S. Eliot’s definition of

wit in some of seventeenth-century poets as it appeared in the Andrew Marvell essay (“a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace”), she contends that wit “is now admired as a sign of the poet’s power to relate incongruities and so give a fresh understanding of complexities [...]” (*Poetry Handbook* 170). Recalling Eliot’s remark that wit can also be found in the work of certain twentieth-century poets, Deutsch focuses primarily on wit’s function in poetry. However, it is significant that Eliot was able to discern the poetic wit in the contemporary prosaic texts as well, praising for example the wit of Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, a cult modernist novel written in dense, gothic language.

Unlike Deutsch’s narrow but systematic focus on (modern) poetic wit, *A Reader’s Guide to Literary Terms* by Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz states that “[i]n modern times, *wit* is limited to intellectually amusing utterances calculated to delight and surprise” (240). In an attempt to cover all aspects of the term’s agency, the brief entry emphasizes the periodic changes wit underwent, “so that its meanings, overlapping from period to period, have at any one time been numerous” (*A Reader’s Guide to Literary Terms*, 239). In the Renaissance, the word [...] meant “intelligence” or “wisdom”:

During the seventeenth century, the term *wit* meant “fancy” [...] implying such nimbleness of thought and such originality of figures of speech as was found in the Metaphysical poetry [...] of John Donne and others. In the latter half of the century, the meaning of *wit* changed. For Hobbes (in the *Leviathan*, 1651) judgment rather than fancy was the principal element of wit, and, in fact, he felt that wit could be achieved by judgment alone. The excess of fancy, he remarked later, resulted in a loss of delight in wit. As a poetic faculty, true wit was the poet’s ability to see similarities in apparently dissimilar things. False wit, as later described by Addison, involved the association of words rather than ideas; such linguistic devices as puns, anagrams, acrostics, etc., he listed as types of such wit. (Beckson and Ganz 239-40)

Attempting to squeeze the complex question of Hobbes’s opinion of wit into a short paragraph, this definition of the term is bound to confuse rather than enlighten a prospective student of early modern English critical vocabulary.

The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory provides a rather succinct but serried chronological survey of the term’s development. Associating *wit* with the Old English *witan* – ‘to know’, the entry starts by observing that the “word has acquired a number of accretions in meaning since the Middle Ages, and in critical and general use has changed a good deal” (*The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* 985). Referring to Roger Ascham, John Lyly or Sir Philip Sidney as the Renaissance exponents of the term, it then assumes the usual trajectory of names, associated with the most pregnant definitions of wit produced at various stages of its development: Thomas Hobbes, John Dryden, Abraham Cowley and Alexander Pope in the Restoration and early Augustan periods, as well as those who are regarded as spokesmen of the pre-Romantic and Victorian periods’ displeasure at wit: Dr. Johnson in the eighteenth century, and William Hazlitt and Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth. The entry closes with T. S. Eliot’s rediscovery of John Donne and Andrew Marvell which is based on rehabilitation

of wit, stating that in the current usage “[...] wit [...] suggests intellectual brilliance and ingenuity; verbal deftness, as in the epigram” (985-6).

Probably the most inclusive account of wit is provided by *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* edited by Alex Preminger. Two editions in particular (the enlarged 1974 edition and 1993 *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*) offer a very detailed chronological summary of wit’s journey through history. Though both of the editions’ entries follow the same chronological pattern and refer to the identical canon of authorities on wit (Thomas Hobbes, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, T. S. Eliot), either of them contain places not present in the other one. Starting with ancient Greece and ending with the twentieth-century literary critics, the entries provide comparative accounts of wit’s equivalents in other languages (French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Russian) as well as assessment of the current status of the word as critical term which takes into account its varied and convoluted history. A short summary of both entries is worth presenting here as they represent a succinct yet rarely complex account of wit’s gradual transformation of meaning.

Wit’s equivalent in the ancient Greece is the term *euphuia*, mentioned in Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* – in these texts the word occurs in senses ranging from “shapeliness” to “cleverness”. In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* wit is associated with the ability to make apt comparisons – i.e. the fundamental principle behind metaphor, or “well-bred insolence.” For the Roman rhetoricians – e.g. Cicero and Quintilian – the equivalent was *ingenium* (“cleverness”, “ingenuity”) – senses which “would seem to generate the whole historical range of the meanings of wit in English” (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 1374). During Renaissance the term is used in senses similar to the classical meaning, “with perhaps more emphasis on ingenuity and the ability to create the bizarre, the extraordinary, and the unique” (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 897). Renaissance treatises on *invention* – one of the five parts of the art of rhetoric – tend to identify wit with the ability to discover and amplify new subjects. In the seventeenth century wit becomes increasingly present in discussions of style which use it to identify the ability to discover brilliant, paradoxical, and far-fetched figures, especially metaphor, irony, paradox, pun antithesis etc.

Literary Baroque with its national varieties of styles – *marinism* in Italy, *gongorism* in Spain, Metaphysical poetry in England and *préciosité* in France – gave rise to wit as one of key concepts of the seventeenth-century literature and culture in general and the treatises of Spanish and Italian theoreticians – e.g. Baltasar Gracián’s *Agudezza y arte de ingenio* (1642) and Emmanuele Tesauro’s *Il Cannocchiale aristotelico* (1654) – are the first examples of early modern texts of literary criticism to document this. In its heyday, wit referred to the inventive or imaginative faculty and, in particular to the ability to see similarity in disparates (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 1375). In general, the authors believed it was essential quality of poetry. Emmanuele Tesauro, Italian rhetorician and playwright, claimed that the process of divine creation is the defining principle of wit and the more wit an author reveals, the more godlike he becomes. This Metaphysical theory of poetic creation was later replaced by rationalist theories of e.g. Thomas Hobbes, who – under the influence of René Descartes and Blaise Pascal – regarded wit in more psychological terms. As the latter part of the seventeenth

century progressed, the discussions of wit became numerous so that it is impossible now to reduce the mass of material produced on the topic to any simple form. “Wit was sometimes contrasted to fancy or judgment; sometimes identified with one or the other. At times it was contrasted with humor, raillery, satire, and ridicule; at times compared to them” (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 897). Naturally, the vagueness and elasticity of the term eventually led critics to suspect its validity and the last decade of the seventeenth century saw a growing disregard for the term, enhanced by the changing social climate as well.

A type of dichotomy developed in the critical texts related to wit, dividing it up into “true wit” – the ideal of all poetic striving, and “false wit” – writing which dazzles without appealing to the understanding. The climax in the discussion of wit was represented by Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* (1711) – a poem which sums up in its context the central sense of wit to be found in poet-critics from John Dryden to Samuel Johnson and indicates a rejection of the “false wit” as mere cleverness of the previous age. The somewhat confusing situation in which the term found itself between approximately 1650 and 1720 is explained by the encyclopaedia as following: “This polysemy is not unusual, nor should be seen as distracting as long as we recognize the use of wit in a technical aesthetic sense to mean the imaginative or striking figure, the flash of verbal intuition, the marmoreal phrase, the pointed dictum” (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 1375).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a fairly close correspondence of meaning develops among the English wit and the French esprit, the Spanish *agudeza* and *gracia*, the Italian *ingegno*, *acutezza* and *argutezza*, the German *Schärfe* and *Witz*, and the Russian *um* and *ostroumie*, even though all these terms underwent historical semantic changes and have different stories in general. In French, the word *esprit* is polyvalent in many of the same ways; indeed Boileau’s *Art poétique* (1674) was clearly a prime model for Pope. *Esprit* is a more unstable or modish word than wit, yet it survived in its focused meaning at least through Voltaire (1694 - 1778). In Italy *acutezza* (*argutezza*, *arguzia*) and in Spain *agudeza* were generally treated as the rhetorical ornament enhancing the thought (*conchetto*, *concepto*).

While the key words in Italian, Spanish, and Russian have survived in contemporary speech, though bereft of their literary specificity, English “wit” entered quite a new realm of meaning parallel to that other historically complex word “humour” (see the discussion of C. S. Lewis). Samuel Johnson in his *Life of Cowley* dubbed the wit of Metaphysical poetry as the “heterogenous ideas ... yoked together by violence together” thus stressing the term’s unnaturalness which was taken up by the romantic poets who transformed its meaning so that the word became to be associated with levity and its former sense was attributed to *imagination*. For example, William Hazlitt in his essay *Wit and Humour* (1819) distinguished wit as the artificial element and imagination as the valid one, and Matthew Arnold rejected Chaucer and Pope from his list of the greatest poets because of their wittiness: they lacked what he called “high seriousness” (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 898). This reduction of the term’s meaning became widespread and was shifted only in the first two decades of the twentieth century thanks to a revived interest in the Metaphysical poets.

Eliot's revaluation of Metaphysical wit, discussed above, is only one of this revival's tracks. No less important (especially from the point of view of the feminist readings of wit in the Restoration comedies) was Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical concept of *witz*, or C. Brooks's emphasis on irony and paradox as the principal devices of literary complexity and structure, and a persistent strain of parody as a means to what might be called intertextual wit, as in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920) and Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947). Eliot's assessment found sympathizers in Brooks and I.A. Richards and modern poets insist on allowing wit a place in their conceptions of the nature of poetry. Thus the meaning of wit has in the 20th century regained some critical force and, through its literarily serious connection with irony and parody, begun to approach again its old kinship with imagination. The meaning of the term, however, seems not to have come quite full circle: it is not commonly associated with imagination or conceptual power; on the other hand, it is associated with irony, and irony *is* associated with imagination and conceptual power.

To conclude this section, I wish to include an example of French and German definitions of wit as they appeared in recent dictionaries of aesthetic terms. While there are overlaps in some of the meanings of the word, it is significant to acknowledge the culturally specific features which helped differentiating the word's overall meaning as well as status in all three cultures.

'Esprit' and 'spirituel'

In *Vocabulaire d'esthétique* (2004), Anne Souriau divides the entry on 'esprit' into four categories: "1. Wit as mind, as opposite to body 2. Wit as more than average degree of creative mental faculty 3. Wit as a particular turn of phrase and 4. Wit as aesthetic category"⁴ (686-7).

The first two semantic spheres do not differ radically from some of the English meanings of the word. With regard to the first meaning of the term, Souriau writes that

Wit means the whole of human psyche; sometimes in a more specific sense the faculties of intellect ("wit" as intelligence as opposed to "heart" as emotions) or the faculties of invention (sometimes opposed to reason). It is this sense of the word which we have in mind when we describe works of literature or arts as "works of wit": we do not refer to them as to physical objects only, but also and more importantly as the resulting products of the mind's activity.⁵ (*Vocabulaire d'esthétique* 686)

Describing the second sense of 'esprit', we can hear echoes of C. S. Lewis's 'dangerous' meaning. It also approximately follows the chronological trajectory of the English *wit* in its gradual demise and replacement with other meanings of the word:

This sense of the word is rather old, but it is important to be familiar with it order to avoid possible misinterpretation. It was used especially in the 17th century [...] to say that a writer

has wit; modern day equivalent would be talent or genius. Thus Louis XIV said to Mme de Sévigné about Racine's tragedy *Esther* that the playwright "has much wit." This sense started to disappear in the 18th century: Voltaire, author of the entry on *Wit* (*Philosophie et Belles-Lettres*) in *l'Encyclopédie*, dispensed of this particular sense in favour of the following ones.⁶ (686-7)

Thus, in the eighteenth century, the French 'esprit' loses the appreciative charge and has to be accompanied by a positive adjective to regain it:

According to Voltaire "it is a generic word which nowadays must be used with another word to determine it ... Sublime wit of Corneille is not the same thing as wit of Boileau, or naïve wit of de la Fontaine," etc. Here, wit is used in the sense of a particular character of the author, his specific type of thinking, his world view, his style. In this sense, wit was used in the 18th and early 19th centuries as a part of the expression "Wit of ..." to describe a summary of an author's work accompanied by a few extracts from his work. This sense of the word is lost today, in its own time it had, as a part of a title, a certain commercial value. (687)⁷

"Wit in this sense is a stimulating sharpness of thought, which determines aesthetic category of 'wittiness'"⁸ (ibid.).*

Souriau divides the latter term's entry into two main semantic spheres: the first, original one is a religious notion; its English equivalent is the 'spiritual'. The second one, however, is more complex. As Souriau suggests, "even if it is easily connected with the comic and the satiric, it should not be confused with either"⁹ (1307). She provides a number of examples that set the comical apart from the witty, stating that "[a] mistake can be comical, but it is not witty, a mispronunciation can amuse, [...], it causes laughter, but it is not wit"¹⁰ (ibid.). In wit of this sense there is nothing risible, comical, or satiric: wit does not make us laugh, it makes us smile. Souriau proposes four features which – when combined – can be regarded as a definition of wit: 1. Ingeniousness of unexpected connections, 2. Suitability of connections thus brought together, 3. The impression of ease and facility, and 4. Signification¹¹ (1307-8).

The first condition is concerned, it can produce two slightly differing effects. In a poetic context, the contrasting elements (lively rhyme and elevated vocabulary or colourful and dreamlike description of an everyday reality) cause delightful surprise, while in a 'lighter' context of a joke, the delight comes from a sudden change of direction of the narrative: "Mirabeau was capable of virtually anything for money – even a good deed"¹² (1307). Souriau concludes by calling wit "liberation from [...] the banal, the expected; a play of creative force, liberated soul"¹³ (ibid.).

Another feature of wit is its conciseness. Although this feature does not reduce wit to jokes only, a certain economy of form is necessary – one-act comedies, short novels,

*) In order to emphasize difference between "l'esprit" and "le spirituel" in this particular instance, I choose to translate it as "wit" and "wittiness." As will become presently clear, however, "le spirituel" can be also translated as "wit."

songs or poems with terse structure and quick-paced tempo are most likely to be labelled as having wit. This logically results in wit's association with ease and facility of expression. The surprise we experience when reading/watching/listening to something witty has to be accompanied by the impression of effortlessness. The last condition proposed by Souriau is that wit has to have a deeper meaning: even though appearing as a mere play, it offers a piercing look at reality. In the 18th century wit was often associated with the quality of sharpness and perceptiveness. This last condition recalls Freud's conception of wit, as expressed in his 1905 study *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (usually translated as *Le mot d'esprit et ses rapports avec l'inconscient* into French). As we will see, the entry on 'witz' in Wolfhart Henckmann and Konrad Lotter's *Lexikon der Ästhetik* draws heavily on this conception.

'Witz'

Although etymologically closer to the English 'wit' than the French 'esprit' at first sight, 'witz' is – according to Henckmann and Lotter – a result of predominantly French historical influences. The original meaning was, however, similar to the English 'wit':

[Wit] means natural cleverness or resourcefulness. The modern meaning of the term was narrowed down under the influence of the French "esprit" in the 18th century. Related to satire and caricature, wit is one of the forms of the comic shaped by reason. It stands against the sentimental, warm-hearted, "sensible" humour.¹⁴ (*Lexikon der Ästhetik* 399)

While some of the term's fundamental features in the entry are identical to the previous descriptions, they are of course associated with different authorities:

Its important structural feature is brevity (Jean Paul). As a "simple form" of narration (Jolles) it usually consists of two parts – the story and the punch line (?). In principle though we have to distinguish among verbal wit, wit of situation (gag), and wit of action. Wit's effect is produced by revelation of the hidden similarities of two otherwise unrelated things or ideas or dissolving of the "high expectations" into nothingness (Kant, Visher).¹⁵ (399)

The brief remark concerning wit's other possible means of manifestation (apart from the verbal one) are not pursued any further by the authors. Instead, the main part of the entry is dedicated to description of the mechanics of Freudian wit and its qualities. In this, part wit is the driving force behind jokes, losing all its artistic – and aesthetic – associations:

Its default mood is aggressive. The laughter that it provokes is directed against ethnic minorities (jokes at the expense of Jews or blacks), against socially marginalized groups (jokes at the expense of the disabled, mentally ill), against certain professional groups (jokes at the expense of the doctors, teachers, priests, judges), against establishment (political jokes) etc.¹⁶ (399-400)

The concluding part of the entry dissociates wit from all the possible literary or artistic manifestations, reducing it to the ‘witz-joke’ aspect of the term:

Wit is disrespectful, it does not succumb to cultural norms, it breaks down taboos and thus enables the (indirect) gratification of the forbidden or displaced wishes. Its pleasure is the result of the sudden removal of the obstacle which guards off the forbidden emotions, thoughts or instincts.¹⁷ (400)

Similar to the missing question of the various forms of aesthetic employment of wit, there is a striking absence of a historical survey of the term’s usage by German authors – both in theory and practice.* The result is somewhat reduced description of a term that in the context of German contemporary culture seems to be associated exclusively with the sphere of jocularitas.

1.2.2 Wit and Humour and the Sublime and the Beautiful: Comparative Approach

Towards the close of the seventeenth century, wit was getting increasingly compared to and contrasted with humour. Before proceeding to comparing wit’s and humour’s characteristics, I want to suggest that it is possible to view this dichotomy as parallel to one of the chief dichotomies of the aesthetics – that of the sublime and the beautiful.

While wit was often contrasted with humour in the literary and dramatic criticism of Restoration the sublime was set against the beautiful by Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). As these two latter concepts have been frequently held in opposition as a point of theoretical contrast, we may wish to compare them with the wit-humour dichotomy. Philip Shaw compiles in his study of sublime a list of contrastive adjectives, characterising the relationship between the sublime and the beautiful. The sublime is “greater than the beautiful; the sublime is dark, profound, and overwhelming and implicitly masculine, whereas the beautiful is light, fleeting, and charming and implicitly feminine (Shaw 9). Unlike the sublime, which is “a divisive force, encouraging feelings of difference and deference,” the beautiful encourages a spirit of harmony and unity (ibid.). Translated into political terms, the sublime is associated with the individualistic, even dictatorial, while the beautiful is connected to the social and democratic. The gendered nature of the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful also has a history: Longinus says that sublime speech ‘ravishes’ or rapes the listener; in Burke, the sublime is a virile masculine power, one that is contrasted with its passive feminine counterpart, the concept of the beautiful. Even more explicit in the early Kant is the distinction between

*) German Romantics in particular were interested in wit from aesthetic point of view. For example Friedrich Schlegel called wit “logical sociability”, “absolute social feeling, or fragmentary genius”, and “an explosion of confined spirit” (Harrison, *Art in Theory* 899-902).

the depth and profundity of the masculine sublime and the shallow, slight nature of the feminine beautiful (10).

The gendered nature of the relationship between wit and humour becomes increasingly apparent during the eighteenth century which preferred the gentleness of humour to the keenness of wit. In his *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Railery, Satire, and Ridicule. To Which Is Added, an Analysis of the Characters of an Humourist, Sir John Falstaff, Sir Roger de Coverly, and Don Quixote* Corbyn Morris, a Whig politician and economist, provides an exhaustive catalogue of the superior virtues of humour over wit. Firstly, humour is associated with nature, while wit with art and artificiality. Secondly, humour “frequently exhibits very generous benevolent Sentiments of Heart,” while wit is the expression of the cold, intellectual activity of the mind (Tave 119). Humour excites the feelings of harmony and solidarity, while wit encourages the atmosphere of aggressive competition and emulation. In political terms, the impulse of humour is egalitarian, and middle-class while that of wit elitist and aristocratic.

Wit and the sublime, then, are often associated with the masculine, while humour and the beautiful with the feminine. As we will see in the following chapters, the questions connecting the terms of wit and the sublime and gender categories – either as metaphorical expressions or as qualities ascribed to one or the other gender - run through many a text that bridges the literary and the social world. For some of the French authors, the question whether *esprit* – one of the characteristic features of members of the polite circles – could be possessed by both genders was one of the most crucial ones in relation to the term. For others, *esprit*'s linking with qualities associated traditionally with one or the other gender seems to represent an aid in attempt at defining the term.

1.2.3 Wit as Aesthetic Principle: Visual Arts, Theatre Studies, Game Theories

Wit as easy grace: *Sprezzatura*

If *jouissance* can be seen as a late twentieth-century equivalent to wit in the sphere of literary criticism, its Renaissance equivalent in the area of visual arts can be found in *sprezzatura*. There are many features these two terms share – a fact that is rarely commented on. In this brief account, I would like to emphasize these features to manifest the similarities and connections. *Sprezzatura* is most frequently associated with the period of Italian High Renaissance, when it was used to describe either the ideal of courtly behaviour or a highly appreciated artistic achievement (mainly in painting but also in music). While it was not a new term (its roots go back as long as classical times), *sprezzatura* was the main topic of *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldesar Castiglione ('Il libro del cortegiano,' 1528). Having ascribed both negative and positive connotations to the term, Castiglione defined it as paradoxical in nature as it “conceals art, and presents what is done and said as if it was done without effort and virtually without thought” (I.26). In his study Harry Berger defines the term as “the ability to show that

one is not showing all the effort one obviously put into learning how to show that one is not showing effort” (*The Absence of Grace: Sprezzatura and Suspicion in Two Courtesy Books* 296).

Both wit and *sprezzatura* manipulate the reality (of language, artistic production etc.) to give the impression of ease and gracefulness with which the effect (a witty repartee, a sublime portrait) is achieved. The impression of effortlessness is a vital condition of both these concepts and will re-appear again in the analytical parts of this work where it will constitute the difference between what was termed ‘true’ and ‘false’ wit in the early modern English aesthetics. Furthermore, they also both function as “social mask”; *sprezzatura*’s nonchalant ease and wit’s adroit twisting of language both dissimulate reality: the artist never reveals the amount of hard work he or she invested in the final creation while the author of the witty repartee can go unpunished when insulting a co-conversationalist.

Wit as meta-communication: Semiotic model

In the work of the Czech theatre semiotician Ivo Osolsobě wit becomes the general organizing pattern of the dramatic aesthetic. In his study *Divadlo, které mluví, zpívá a tančí: Teorie jedné komunikační formy* (1974, ‘Theatre That Speaks, Sings, and Dances: A Theory of a Form of Human Communication’) Osolsobě puts forward a convincing – and witty – theory which bridges Aristotle’s concept of metaphor and wit as aesthetic principle which governs the modern theatre. He sets out with his own reading of the definition of metaphor, contending that:

[...] wit is in its principle identical with metaphor, i.e. it is an image that precipitates and facilitates apprehension of something which would have to be otherwise explained in a long and complicated manner and thus it gives us pleasure.¹⁸ (Osolsobě 82)

He continues by relegating wit’s structural features from rhetoric to both the realm of everyday activities (where it is possible to use the expression “resourcefulness” instead of wit to describe the quality) and the realm of arts, formulating the general working definition:

Wit is then – if we translate this principle to the realm of other than rhetoric tasks of explicating something to someone – *a solution of a certain rather complicated task; a solution which surprises by its ease and simplicity*. [...] this solution is more surprising (and hence more effective), if we do not have to spend too much energy, time etc., if we can utilize what is readily available and at the same time what nobody else thought of.¹⁹ (ibid.)

Testing the presumption in both realms, Osolsobě produces several examples, ranging from sport, mathematics, an utterance set in a neutral context, joke, music and literature:

Witty, then, is such a chess-player (or a football or a volleyball player), who is able to turn to his advantage a situation which was created by his adversary; witty is such an answer which uses a word or an expression, which has just been used by a partner in conversation; witty is a such solution of an equation which contextualizes previous solution procedures; witty is such a musical composition which successfully utilizes a seemingly barren music theme or which can [...] change the whole nature of the piece; witty is a such piece of writing which does not strain to create a new plot function, but will use a character originally meant for a different function, and will combine both functions.²⁰ (ibid.)

Osolsobě then goes on to pronounce the final definition of his conception of wit as “any detour, which turns out to be a shortcut and the shortest way to reaching a goal” (ibid.).²¹ Coming back to Aristotle, Osolsobě reveals ingenious connection between metaphor, wit and model:

[...] Aristotle associated wit with metaphor: metaphor is nothing else than a model, or a model “of a higher level”: what modelling does with objects (i.e. substituting them for other objects), metaphor does with their names. Why not [...] associate wit not only with metaphor but also with a model? The invention of model is in itself a classical witty solution: it does not toil and moil searching for what is not available, but instead utilizes what is available here and, in a final, victorious step, now and presents this inadequacy as its asset.²² (83)

Finally, Osolsobě applies his theory of wit to theatre, claiming that “[...] theatre (in the sense of the dramatic work) creates a model of communication using communication, and, using what is at hand, creates a model of the communication which is not available at the moment”²³ (ibid.). Wit thus becomes an aestheticized model of communication about communication.

Witticism and meta-wit

In his article “Contingency, Games, and Wit” Gary Morson presents wit as the ability to resist the fundamental state of the world which is entropy. Suggesting that “[e]xperience teaches us that left to themselves, things tend to a ‘muddle,’ as Gregory Bateson put it,” Morson identifies the lack of order, i.e. contingency as the ruling principle of our lives. One of environments designed to banish contingency (apart from e.g. the social institutions such as insurance companies etc.) is art. He sees art as a sort of game, quoting Roger Caillois, French theoretician of aesthetics and, who claims that “[p]lay [...] is an attempt to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of contemporary life” (quot. in Morson, 133).

For Morson witticism is a form of play: “As a genre, it vindicates the superiority of mind, even in extremities of difficulty where mental presence must overcome a disadvantage” (144). It resembles the sort of game of improvisation in which one must handle an unexpected challenge and to come up with an appropriate response without hesita-

tion: “The harder the challenge, the faster and less predictable the reply, the greater the wit’s mastery of social circumstances, and the cleverer his facility with verbal resources – the better the witticism and the more surely the game has been won” (145). Like the game of improvisation, the witticism dramatizes the mind’s encounter with contingency. Both depend on presentness: “The successful witticism expresses the triumph of mind and its adequacy to any social situation” (147). In a short moment, the wit masters all the complexities of a set of social circumstances and formulates a perfectly apropos remark that illuminates them. Witticism thrives in socially challenging situations when speed and verbal and mental adroitness are of the utmost importance. Witticism, unlike wise saying or aphorism, involves *story*. For Morson, this does not mean the *narrative* that constitutes the witticism, but another story or context which envelops the witticism. As an example he provides the relationship between Samuel Johnson and his biographer James Boswell. Boswell’s function was to tell amusing little stories showcasing Johnson’s wit. He could feature as the narrator, insultee, provocateur or any combination of these three. Thus in the context of Johnson’s witty insult regarding Boswell’s origin narrated by the latter, the biographer assumes the third role – that of the provocateur which is, at the same time, his second role within the story (148):

BOSWELL: I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.

JOHNSON: That, Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countryman cannot help.

Here, Boswell does not only narrate to perfection his own diminishment but has also had the wit to foresee exactly what would inspire Johnson to diminish him so quotable thus ensuring the suitable form for witticism.

Morson suggests that “certain locales, especially salons, serve as conventional settings for witticisms” (149). The salon becomes the playground – “a marked off space and time for an occasion governed by rules for verbal and nonverbal behaviour. So much are salons the favoured locale for wit that witticisms themselves may retrospectively characterize a locale or social situation as a sort of salon. The less like a salon a situation may be, the wittier it is to make it into one” (*ibid.*). One of such unexpected locales is the place of execution where gallows humour or wit hails from.

Gallows wit or ‘wit of the last words’ presents a challenge in that it treats execution or generally something that would evoke terror in others as no more than an inconvenience. For the wit it however presents an opportunity to play, to engage in mental agility. Morson asserts that “here is another way such wit impresses: it demonstrates supreme courage. Both wit and courage demand mental presence when most difficult. Not everyone can *make sport* of his or her own imminent dismemberment” (153). He also suggest that the ‘truly witty and courageous’ can even use martyrdom as the playground for their wit and he provides the following examples of Saint Lawrence, who, being burned alive on a gridiron, said at one moment that he might be turned over, since he was done enough on that side, and Thomas More, who, mounting the scaffold, urged the chief executioner: “I pray you, master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and [as for] my coming down, let me shift for myself [and] drawing his beard aside before placing his head on the block

he remarked: This has not offended the king.” (quot. in Morson, 153). More’s pun on “shift” makes the place of execution into another salon. More importantly though, the last joke concerning the guilt of his head reminds us of head as the seat of mind, the centre of wit. According to Morson, “the game of wit on the scaffold assimilates what is most alien to human life – death itself – into the mind-made game world” (154). Witticism then ultimately shows that mind triumphs over nature, political power or physical force.

In these brief encounters with wit in three different areas of contemporary and historical theories of art my goal was to draw attention to the term’s omnipresent and universal structural features. Although the following parts of this study will mainly be concerned with wit as a term of literary criticism and aesthetics, it will be possible to recognize some of the above features in the texts analyzed in the following chapters. It is however important to keep in mind that, while some of the accounts describing these features are fairly recent, they have been in existence for a considerable amount of time. For example the concept of meta-wit – i.e. being witty about wit – is wit’s specific feature which can be traced at least as far as Shakespeare’s comedies. Rupert D. V. Glasgow shows how the complex network of associations between sex, archery, and wit in probably the wittiest of Shakespeare’s comedies *Love’s Labour’s Lost* manifests that not only is wit inherently sexual in nature, but it is also a courtly pastime (like archery). Applauding a bout of wit exchanged between Rosaline and Boyet, Maria responds to it using the metaphor of the ‘mark,’ meaning a shot at target. Boyet warns her to be cautious, as ‘mark’ can also mean pudendum, and he himself plays on the double meaning of ‘prick’:

MARIA. A mark marvellous well shot, for they both did hit it.
 BOYET. A mark! O, mark but that mark! A mark, says my lady!
 Let the mark have a prick in’t, to mete at, if it may be.
 MARIA. Wide o’ the bow hand! I’ faith, your hand is out.
 COSTARD. Indeed, a’ must shoot nearer, or he’ll ne’er hit the clout.
 BOYET. An if my hand be out, then belike your hand is in.
 COSTARD. Then will she get the upshoot by cleaving the pin.
 MARIA. Come, come, you talk greasily; your lips grow foul.
 COSTARD. She’s too hard for you at pricks, sir: challenge her to bowl.
 BOYET. I fear too much rubbing. Good night, my good owl.

(*Love Labour’s Lost*, IV. 1)

Wit, as Glasgow points out, is a matter of “hitting a target with a timely prick” (232) and this particular instance is moreover a witty comment about wit.

Meta-wit, however, is not an exclusive feature of wit in English literature. In his novel *Siebenkäs*, the German Romantic writer Jean Paul presents marriage as meta-wit: in his *Preschool of Aesthetics*, he defines wit as “the disguised priest who marries every couple” (quot. in Flemming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor* 126). As Paul Flemming comments: “Wit gladly combines disparate and heterogeneous ideas that otherwise wouldn’t be associated with each other. In wit, as in marriage, every couple is

potentially an odd-couple” (ibid.). In *Siebenkäs*, the newlywed couple – the eponymous hero and his fiancée Lenette – could not be more heterogeneous themselves: which is all the better for wit, but all the worse for the newlyweds.

As will become evident in the works of the Restoration and early modern English writers analyzed in the second part of this study, meta-wit belonged to their repertoire as well. It gets most attention from Alexander Pope, who employs it in his *Essay on Criticism* written in heroic couplets when merging the critical contents and poetical form creating perfect environment for meta-wit to thrive in.

1.3 The Literature and Culture of the Late Seventeenth Century: Political, Philosophical and Literary-historical Background

1.3.1 Rhetoric and the Renaissance Poetic

Aristotle distinguished between the style of rhetoric and that of poetry. Rhetoric, most of which pertained to style, contained more verbal devices than poetics. Since verbal devices always tend to usurp all other means of expression and since writing techniques tend to subsume oral ones, the once dominant study of rhetoric was slowly relegated to a division of poetics under the general category of style. The actual fusion of theories of oratory and poetry is generally attributed to Cicero. His aims in *De oratore* combined the qualities of poetry (to delight) with the aim of oratory (to persuade). He discussed wit (*ingenium*) as a means of developing a full, ornate style through imitation of the Greek orators and pointed out parallels between *ingenium* as he used it and Plato’s comments on εὔφρα (wit) in *The Republic* (VII, 535), and εὔφρονης (witty) in *The Phaedrus* (Sections 269^d-270^a). Aristotle was also familiar with Plato’s idea, stated in *The Laws*, that a person who is εὔφρονης (witty, i.e. having excellent natural endowments) may do more harm to the state than an ignorant citizen if such a witty person has evil intentions.

Despite the early fusion of theories, rhetoric still retained its classical meaning of effective oral expression during the Middle Ages and was (possibly except grammar) the most important study in the *trivium* (i.e. the three lower *Artes Liberales* which included grammar, rhetoric and logic). Classical rhetoric consisted of five traditional parts or canons: *inventio* (invention or discovery), *dispositio* (arrangement), *elocutio* (style), *memoria* (memory), and *pronuntio* (delivery). By the Renaissance, only the first three of the traditional parts retained any significance – *memoria* and *pronuntio* pertained largely to oral expression and rhetoric was by that time a part of the discipline in the writing of both prose and poetry. Another development was the gradual simplification of figurative language. Medieval treatises had gradually reduced the complex categories of rhetoric to tropes and figures. Even as early as postclassical criticism, these two categories had failed to maintain separate status and distinctions. Quintilian had noted that “many