

Bicanová, Klára

## Introduction

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. 9-18

ISBN 978-80-210-6662-5

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129629>

Access Date: 24. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

# Introduction

This study began as a comparative analysis of wit and humour in the Restoration drama and dramatic theory. Drawing on my B.A. thesis on English comic theories in the late seventeenth century I intended to explore the literary and aesthetic implications of the two terms as they contested for the audiences', authors' and critics' favour in the early modern England. Furthermore, I included the French literary scene of the corresponding period and its employment of and theorizing about *esprit* which significantly widened the scope of both considered issues and analyzed texts. Therefore, I decided to focus exclusively on the *wit/esprit* aspect of the project and consider it primarily from the point of view of the literary and aesthetic ideas articulated in the critical texts of the period, i.e. 1660s to 1710s. While I occasionally mention a piece of contemporary creative writing, be it a poem or a play, I do so to illustrate a point or contrast a statement made in a preface, theoretical treatise, essay, a letter etc., and my focus is on the relatively new genre of literary and dramatic criticism as well as aesthetics and the interactions of these disciplines with the questions pertaining to the terms of *wit* and *esprit*, respectively.

While a relatively large amount of studies concerning *wit* has been carried out in the past six decades, in my research I have not come across a single piece of critical writing which would have a comparative aspect. I have come across a number of comparative studies dealing with various aspects of English and French literature during my research; however, the theme of *wit* and *esprit* respectively never came up as a key topic. The question of influence is, of course, too vital to be ignored completely and I will be making occasional brief comments concerning the individual authors influencing one another. However, my intention in this study is not to present a coherent argument concerning *wit* based on an idea of the influence of one national literature on the other but rather to look at some of the key texts of the period in their cultural contexts. These texts illustrate the background of the influence and provide a comparative reading of the two concepts which will hopefully yield new interpretive approaches to the nearly neglected area of wit.

The aim of this study is twofold: First to review a fairly dated but so far unchallenged view of wit as an outmoded and irrelevant term belonging to the critical vocabulary of literary past. Seen as a rather obscure item of a vague historical significance at best, wit has ceased to be considered relevant enough to be included among the canon of literary

critical terms covered by the renowned “Critical Idiom” series published by Methuen during the 1970s and early 1980s which included terms such as metaphor, comedy of manners, conceit, irony, absurd, etc. On the other hand, it did find its way into numerous dictionaries of literary terms, where – with few exceptions – it has been presented as a literary device operating exclusively in the sphere of verballity. Part of my attempt to rehabilitate *wit* lies in presenting the term as a complex concept relevant to many art-related areas – not only literature, but also visual arts, theatre studies, and theory of games. This approach should result in a more comprehensive and multi-faceted notion of the term and, consequently, it should allow the fundamental features of the term become clear. By demonstrating that wit is not an exclusive property of verbal expression, I argue that it is more beneficial to regard it as aesthetic term whose applicability is much more extensive than modern research has shown so far.

The second aim of this study is literary historical. By focusing on the English and French literature of the second half of the seventeenth century, i.e. the period when *wit* received much (both positive and negative) attention, I wish to trace the term’s gradual shift from the realm of rhetoric to the newly established field of literary aesthetics. The claim concerning the move from rhetoric to aesthetic has been both contested and endorsed by various scholars. In his study *The Classical Sublime: The French Neoclassicism and the Language of Literature* Nicholas Cronk argues that articulating new theoretical terms in the second half of the seventeenth century, be it the *sublime*, *wit*, or the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, rises from the “the struggle to break free from an inherited rhetorical tradition and to forge a new aesthetic doctrine” but the literary tradition out of which this need rises from must be taken into account as well (Cronk 82-3). He contends that to speak of a shift from rhetoric to aesthetic could be said to be tautology in the context of seventeenth-century critical thought. The term ‘rhetoric’ seems appropriate to the period; however, the problem – especially for a twenty-first century reader – is how to understand it. Also, poetics at this time was not considered separately from rhetoric, but rather as a part of that wider discipline; manuals of rhetoric frequently drew on poets for their examples. Neoclassical poetics lost its autonomy in the process of rhetorisation. Therefore, Cronk concludes, to speak of “severing a literary-critical terms from its rhetorical origins is not meaningful in the context of French neoclassicism” (83). Opposing this claim is a short but terse text by Jeane Goldin “Jeux de l’esprit et de la parole. D’une rhétorique à un art de la pointe.” In her defence of ‘la pointe’ (conceit), Goldin claims that it cannot be treated as a rhetorical figure, as it “manifests [...] a specific mental dynamism,” stressing “the ambiguity of an epoch which gave birth to the modern thought”<sup>1</sup> (136). Perhaps more convincing than Goldin’s argument, focused too narrowly on a single poetic device to encompass the field of rhetoric and aesthetic in its entirety, is the evidence of the shift which can be found in writings of one of the most prominent seventeenth-century French author. In the *Preface* to his translation of the ancient treatise *On the Sublime*, Nicolas Boileau writes with respect to the ancient author’s intentions:

It must be observed then that by the sublime he [Longinus] does not mean what the orators call the *sublime style*, but something *extraordinary* and *marvellous* that strikes us in a discourse

and makes it elevate, ravish, and transport us. The *sublime style* requires always great words, but the sublime may be found in a thought only, or in a figure or turn of expression. A thing may be in the *sublime style*, and yet not be *sublime*, that is, have nothing *extraordinary* nor *surprising* in it [...]. (*The Continental Model* 272)

In addition to the above-mentioned arguments in favour of the shift from rhetoric to aesthetic, I believe that Cronk is confusing the gradual shift from rhetoric to aesthetic with a much more radical and contestable severing or dissociating of the two spheres. I have no intention to claim that in order to understand how wit was employed and theorized during the period of English and French literature in question it should be severed from its rhetorical origins. On the contrary, I believe that these origins have to be kept in mind and stressed. Nevertheless, I believe that to deny the gradual shift of the theoretical paradigms in which wit and related terms were organized from the rhetorical to the aesthetic is to deny the legitimacy of the terms themselves.

In summary, this thesis aims at a more complex, if not exhausting, look at an aesthetic concept whose vitality is indisputable in its timelessness, while concentrating on the theories surrounding it during the period of its busiest currency. It details the early modern shift from the concept of wit as a rhetoric device to a more inter-disciplinary approach which I believe is necessary to employ in order not to regard the term as an item from an outdated critical vocabulary. In addition, this thesis emphasizes the comparative potential of the concept outside of English discourse by putting the term side by side with its French equivalent, a perspective which to my knowledge has been absent from the studies on wit I have encountered during my research.

Apart from the project history and thesis statement, this Introduction shall provide a preliminary account of history of the so-called vogue words – a category into which *wit* and *esprit* are often pigeonholed – and their connection to literary criticism from the historical point of view. My argument here is that while a fairly useful prolegomenary label, it cannot be the only or main denotation of wit. The historical aspect of both terms is further explored in a brief introduction of the words from etymological perspective, concentrating on the period immediately preceding the seventeenth century, that is the Renaissance. I will continue to discuss the historical context of the terms in more specialized details in the first chapter of the thesis. After I have demarcated the historical territory of the thesis I move on to present an outline of its structure, briefly introducing the individual chapters and subchapters and delineating my interest in each part of the text.

## The vogue words and their place in literary criticism

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 5). Wimsatt and Brooks see wit is a “kind of genteel slang word” in the early eighteenth century

(*Literary Criticism* 241). To state that wit is beyond precise definition may at first appear like a trivial tautology. Delving deeper into the term's layers – etymological as well as contextual – it appears that not only there might have been a reason for the difficulty in formulating a stable definition but also that other terms – or 'vogue words' – shared same destiny. This particular feature of these terms is what has divided critics and scholars in two camps – the former suggesting that the instability of the term is a sign of its shadiness, and the latter claiming that wit "is one of those words too useful ever to be exactly defined" (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 2571). T. S. Eliot's ideas penned in his 1921 essay on Andrew Marvell testify to the extraordinary amount of apprehension of the complexities of the term:

You cannot find it in Shelley or Keats or Wordsworth; you cannot find more than an echo of it in Landor; still less in Tennyson or Browning; and among contemporaries Mr. Yeats is an Irishman and Mr. Hardy is a modern Englishman – that is to say, Mr. Hardy is without it and Mr. Yeats is outside of the tradition altogether. On the other hand, as it certainly exists in Lafontaine, there is a large part of it in Gautier. And of the magniloquence, the deliberate exploitation of the possibilities of magnificence in language which Milton used and abused, there is also use and even abuse in the poetry of Baudelaire. Wit is not a quality that we are accustomed to associate with 'Puritan' literature, with Milton or with Marvell. ('Andrew Marvell' in *Times Literary Supplement* 31 March 1921)

Wit has been labelled a modish word, a linguistic fashion item of the Restoration England. Its equivalent in this sense can be the *bel esprit*, but – as I suggest in the second chapter – only when it is complemented by another, equally if not more, fashionable word in the French history – the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The quintessentially indefinable critical keyword whose heyday came around the 1660s represented a way of articulating experience of a powerful and seemingly inexplicable force. Today it is regarded as a mannered archaism in both French and English, yet it still offers to speakers of both languages a way of articulating their experience of a powerful and seemingly inexplicable force. To label wit as a mere vogue word is hardly acceptable or serious scholarly approach to literary history. Thus, Gunar Sorelius contends that "[w]it' is often an ambiguous word in Restoration criticism", yet "of great currency and importance" (Sorelius 96). Similarly, Paul Hammond recognizes it as "the hallmark of an intelligent, confident culture" and suggests that "[i]mplicitly, in Dryden's lines and elsewhere, it defines the gap between Restoration culture and the preceding decades" (*Restoration Literature. An Anthology* xv). In attempt to avoid an overly simple labelling, I propose that it is necessary to look into when and how the accretion of semantical layers started and what it implies for the contemporary understanding of the term.

## Pre-history of the terms

Although I will devote a part of the first chapter to describing how etymology of *wit* changed throughout its existence, I will not go into too much detail regarding its Renaissance history (apart from its relationship with Renaissance rhetoric, which is one of the topics of the last subchapter of the following chapter). For this reason, I wish to present a brief summary of what *wit* came to denote during this period in the English context; this summary will be followed by a similar account of *esprit*.

During the reign of Elizabeth I the meaning of words in general was shifting perhaps even more than usual, as William Crane suggests, reminding that Erasmus's caution that every definition is misfortune will be repeating during this period (Crane, *Wit and Rhetoric* 6). In Gabriel Harvey's *Trimming of Thomas Nashe* (1597) wit's formal definition runs as follows: "[Wit is] an affluent Spirit, yielding inuention to praise or dispraise, or anie ways to discourse (with judgment) of euerie subiecte" (quot. in Crane 9-10). Here, wit's association with rhetoric is apparent, as *invention* was one of the five elements of rhetoric. Wit was often paired up with qualifying adjectives: 'true,' 'false,' 'biting,' or 'quick.' Even though the controversy over what constitutes wit as such became acute only after 1700, it was inherent in the subject from very early times. For example wit's frequent association with unruliness or rebelliousness was not a feature peculiar to the Renaissance period. In all ages mental acumen "has displayed a tendency to run away with its possessor" (Crane 11). This ambivalence has been commented on by the ancient rhetoricians and Cicero would praise wit in some of his treatises while growing highly suspicious of it in others.

As literary fashions were changing in the quarter century from 1590 to 1615 with a rapidity that has never been equalled before, new conceptions of wit achieved currency. About 1590 the word began to be associated with ability to write plays and gain a living by the pen. The near relation between wit and rhetoric which had marked the preceding years of Elizabeth's reign persisted to a considerable extent. Plays of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, writings of Greene and Lodge provide evidence of this close connection. Soon after publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591), sonnet came into vogue, followed by satire and epigram. The emphasis which these forms placed on neatly turned thought tended to swing wit in the direction of play upon words.

In the nearly three decades following 1615 wit mutated more and more toward association with anagrams, acrostics, quips and other poetic forms favoured by the Metaphysical poets while still retaining many of its older meanings. In the view of this fact, Abraham Cowley observed in his "Ode: of Wit" (1660) that "A thousand different shapes it bears, / Comely in thousand shapes appears" while providing a list of things wit is not: "'Tis not a Tale, 'tis not a Jest / Admir'd with Laughter at a feast, / Nor florid Talk which can that Title gain ; / The Proofs of Wit for ever must remain. / 'Tis not to force some lifeless Verses meet / With their five gouty feet" (*The Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse* 693). Nor is wit adornment and gilding, puns, anagrams, acrostics, bawdy jokes, lines that almost crack the stage, tall metaphors (i.e. conceits) or odd similitudes. This

critical analysis of aesthetic theory, emphasizing the poet's capacity to create order out of disparate elements, brings into play the problem of definition which will be a recurring topic of this thesis. Also, all the poetic devices mentioned by Cowley are important to take note of as they will be referred to by John Dryden, Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison some thirty to sixty years later in their respective attempts to provide a satisfying definition of the troublesome word.

Unlike wit, *esprit* does not seem to have ever acquired the vogue word status – this was reserved for other terms, such as the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and others. It, however, shared wit's similarly complex etymology. *Esprit* is a term, as Alian Pons suggests, “whose semantical range is extremely wide, [and] it was employed for an equivalent of the Latin expression *ingenium* at the expense of great ambiguity, rendering the French word very vague”<sup>2</sup> (Pons 2003). Giambattista Vico, in his *La Méthode des études de notre temps* (1709) remarks that

the French, when they wish to express a certain mental faculty which allows to connect separate things in a manner which is fast, propiarte and fortunate, and which we call *ingegno*, use the word *esprit* (*spiritus*), and this mental faculty which manifests itself in the synthesis they regard as something completely simple, as their exaggeratedly subtle intellects excel in the finest reasoning more than in synthesis.<sup>3</sup> (quot. in Pons 2003)

The variant of the term, the *bel esprit*, became prominent during the first decade of the seventeenth century. Taking on new layers of meanings and contexts it reflected the turbulent changes of the French society which will be explored in the last part of the first chapter.

## Outline of structure

The structure of the present thesis reflects the multi-perspectival and reflexive manner in which I wish to present the term in question. Apart from the Introduction and the Conclusion, the thesis consists of three main chapters, one of them focusing on theoretical and literary historical issues and two other on textual analyses. The Introduction is followed by Chapter 1 titled “Theoretical and Historical Prolegomena.” In this chapter I deal with the present state of research on wit and the historical frame of the concept. Subchapter 1.1 provides a summary of twentieth-century approaches to wit – the main approaches, developments and points of dissension in the field of wit studies are presented and critically evaluated. Tracing the revival of interest in wit to the first decades of the twentieth century, I pay attention to the ideas of J. E. Spingarn, J. W. Courthope and T. S. Eliot as the pioneers representing the initial stage of the modern day research in wit. These were followed by William Empson and C. S. Lewis who contested over the term in the atmosphere of new developments of the post-war literary criticism. From the ample stream of the structuralist and psychoanalytic liter-

ary scholarship of the more recent decades I chose to present the views of Jonathan Culler, John Sitter and Richard W. F. Kroll as they represent important theoretical approaches to wit based on post-structuralist literary criticism. While Jonathan Culler uses the term to present the post-structuralist theory of language, John Sitter brings together the seventeenth-century ideas on language and its ability to represent reality and the post-structuralist theories to show that wit can be used as a bridging element between these two historical periods. Finally, Richard Kroll uses the post-structuralist premises to present wit as closely linked to the matters of power and control (linguistic or otherwise) as they were represented in Restoration comedy. All three approaches testify to wit's vitality and usefulness for the modern literary criticism as they show the plurality and versatility of the term and thus refute some of the older, more sceptical views on this matter. In a direct rebuttal of C. S. Lewis's opinion of wit as a subversive, morally dubious concept, John Sitter's work is particularly beneficial, which is also the reason why I devote so much attention to his theories. Drawing on the questions raised by this part of the chapter, I move on to subchapter 1.2 where I present four contexts of wit: its definition as a literary and aesthetic concept, its relation to the questions of humour, the sublime and the beautiful respectively and finally, wit's employment in the current artistic endeavours outside the literary area – I present wit as an agent in semiotic theory of theatre of a Czech semiotician Ivo Osolsobě, and in the form of meta-wit in the theory of games. These several possible interpretations of wit are all united by my intention to present it as an aesthetic term, using theories and notions from different artistic disciplines. Introducing the notion of *sprezzatura*, a term characteristic for the painting and life at court in the Italian Renaissance, I suggest that it shares similar features with wit – this also anticipates my readings of the French authors whose writings are analyzed in the second chapter. Their ideas on *esprit* are very much part of a system of aesthetics which is partly based on the concept of *sprezzatura*.

The last subchapter of the introductory chapter (1.3) continues to explore the historical aspect of wit, focusing on the Renaissance period and in particular on the sixteenth century rhetoric and its role in shaping the concept of wit. Starting with clarification of the relationship of rhetoric and poetry, I move to presenting some basic rhetorical devices and demonstrate how they influenced the division of different types of wit. Special attention is devoted to epigram, a genre which in a way sums up the intrinsic tensions lying at wit's centre – the problem of verbal representation versus conceptual truth, and its appreciation by the seventeenth-century as well as modern critics. These tensions can be said to stand for the cultural environment of both France and England of the latter half of the seventeenth century which is a topic of the second and third part of the last subchapter. I briefly present the cultural, political and philosophical backgrounds of France and England, covering roughly the whole of the seventeenth century, but focusing mainly on the period between 1660 and 1700. The purpose of these two subchapters is to make the reader familiar with some terms – *sprezzatura*, *préciosité*, *honnêteté* – as well as ideas and historical settings, that will be used in the next two chapters.



After identifying the main historical and theoretical areas in Chapter 1 I move on to presenting textual analyses of the three selected French authors. Chapter 2, titled “Esprit and the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: Bouhours, Méré, and Boileau” comprises three subchapters concentrating on the theories of *esprit* and related terms, such as the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, *délicatesse* and the *sublime*, deployed in the texts of Dominique Bouhours, chevalier de Méré and Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux. In subchapter 2.1 I deal with two texts of Dominique Bouhours, *Les Entretiens d’Artiste et d’Eugène* and *La Manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d’esprit* as representatives of the genre of literary and social criticism which became a partial inspiration for the work of Joseph Addison whose theories of wit are the subject of my textual analyses in the third chapter. Bouhours’s ideas on *esprit*, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and other concepts form a system of thought which was unique to the seventeenth century gradual forming of aesthetics. The *bel esprit*, Bouhours’s own version of the ideal of poetic and social achievement is analyzed in contrast to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to show how these terms’ vagueness was a strategically employed device meant to keep the elite circles of French society closed to intruders from the newly establishing merchant classes. Keeping in the same sphere of social literature and literary criticism, subchapter 2.2 examines the rarely analyzed text of Antoine Gombauld, chevalier de Méré, *Discours de l’Esprit*. I explore Méré’s text mostly with regard to the accessibility of *esprit* to women who were often seen as the founders of the new sensibility associated with *préciosité*. Being regarded as one of the chief theorists of *honnêteté*, Méré continues the tradition of the polite writer such as Bouhours, linking the genres of literature and its appreciation and the rules of etiquette and appreciation of conduct. The last subchapter of Chapter 2 (2.3) focuses on different meanings of *esprit* in the theories concerning poetry and its appreciation in the work of Nicolas Boileau. I focus on the author’s masterpiece of neoclassical criticism *L’Art poétique*, and I also look into his ideas on the *sublime* expressed in his preface to the translation of the *Le Traité du sublime*. Here I am specifically interested in how Boileau used Longinus’s text for conveying his own ideas on *esprit* which he later extended in the critical *chefs-d’oeuvre*. Unlike my textual analysis of Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* (3.2), where I use a number of relatively recent critical studies to either support or contrast my opinion, I analyze the employment of *esprit* in Boileau’s *L’Art poétique* using very few secondary sources. While all the foreign-language quotations, both from primary and secondary sources, appearing in the first and second chapter are translated into English in the main body of the thesis and the original text can be found in the Endnotes at the end of the thesis, I opted for a different approach in the subchapter 2.3. The quotations from Boileau’s *L’Art poétique* which I use in my textual analysis in this subchapter are quoted in French directly in the text and followed by (mostly my own) English translation. That way I can explore several meanings of *esprit* used by Boileau and trace their connections to other terms of his theories of literature as well as the use of *esprit* in the texts of other French authors, especially Méré. Boileau’s understanding of the term also anticipates the employment of the word in theories of the English authors mostly in terms of its duality and emphasis on the link between the aesthetic and ethical dimension of artistic creation.

After looking at the ways in which *esprit* was employed in the works of the French authors, I move to presenting textual analysis of works of three English authors. These readings are the subject of Chapter 3, named “True and False Wit: Dryden, Pope, and Addison.” While all the three authors and the analyzed texts (*Essay on Dramatick Poesy*, *Essay on Criticism*, and the *Spectator* papers respectively) are considered a stable part of the canon, they have been seriously understudied. The main purpose of the chapter is to trace wit’s change from the rhetoric device used by the previous generations of the Metaphysical poets to the concept of creative powers combined with ethical awareness favoured by the newer neo-classicism-influenced authors.

Subchapter 3.1 explores John Dryden’s theories of wit in the context of his critical oeuvre. A pioneer of the English dramatic criticism, Dryden never expressed his theories of wit systematically in one text. Instead, they appear spread over a number of critical writings – essays, prefaces, letters etc. I traced those texts and attempted to follow the writer’s changing ideas on the subject as his ideas on the role and function of literary criticism developed throughout his career. For Dryden, wit seems to fulfil the role of a measuring device in the contest of literary and cultural achievement of the present and the previous generations of authors. I demonstrate that while many of his critical precepts and theories were inherited either from precisely those generations he rebelled against or foreign authors, he managed to shape the concept of wit so that it became an indispensable item of the latter seventeenth-century criticism.

Subchapter 3.2 focuses on Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* which has often been regarded as a riposte to Boileau’s *L’Art poétique*. In this subchapter I continue to explore the interconnection between the development of literary criticism and the concept of wit. I demonstrate that Pope’s concept of wit is a morally engaged faculty, and as such is crucial for the ideal critic Pope is describing in his text. Here, good conduct and cultivated artistic sensibilities again seem to blur the boundaries between the social and the artistic as in the case of Bouhours and Méré. Here, a similarity emerges between Boileau’s and Pope’s ideas on how wit must include the concern for both the artistic achievement and moral integrity. A similar concern can be seen as linking Pope’s text with ideas on wit analyzed in the last subchapter of the third chapter which concludes the analytical part of the thesis. In subchapter 3.3 I come back to the genre of social literature in the form of the early modern social journal *The Spectator*, collaborative work of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. I concentrate on the ideas on wit Addison expressed in the series of five entries (numbers 58-63) and some of his earlier, much less known texts, namely ‘Notes on Some of the Foregoing Stories in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*’, ‘Dialogues upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals, especially in Relation to the Latin and Greek Poets’ and the *Essay on the Georgics*. While Addison’s ideas on wit continue the line of aesthetic experience curbed with moral concern, they also demonstrate interest in clarity as a feature of non-fiction literature, at the same time allowing for some degree of equivocality of fiction, a difference often disregarded by scholars.

In subchapter 3.4 I present the final comparison of the ways in which the terms of wit and *esprit* were employed and treated by the six chosen authors. While the present study is a comparative one, I am more interested in the differences than similarities of

the deployment of the term by the English and the French authors of the period in question. One of the aims of the thesis is to identify and describe the differences which grew out of the two cultures whose intellectual, cultural, and political concerns and problems were at that point of history very alike in certain areas. Also, the multi-semantic nature of the two terms could suggest similar treatment on both sides of the channel. For all this, the ways in which *wit* and *esprit* were employed by the French and English authors can hardly be expected to be identical.

Finally, in the conclusion to the whole study, I review the results of my research, focusing on the various parallels and differences between the concepts of *wit* and *esprit* as they appear in my textual analyses. I also suggest some possible reasons for the findings of my thesis. I summarize the history of the concept with respect to the modern literary criticism, once again highlighting the difference between its assessment of wit and my position on the matter. Furthermore, I discuss how, in today's culture wit bridges the artistic and social spheres as a term of appreciation, proving to be a vigorous, if not unequivocal, concept. Rounding off the whole thesis, I point out several possible directions the research into wit might be headed into.