Bicanová, Klára

The culture of the late seventeenth century: political, philosophical and literary-historical setting

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. 44-54

ISBN 978-80-210-6662-5

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129632
Access Date: 18. 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.

MUNI Masarykova univerzita Filozofická fakulta
ARTS

Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
digilib.phil.muni.cz

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 εύφυϊα (wit) in *The Republic* (VII, 535), and εύφυής (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 εύφυής (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), *disposition* (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

authors have considered figures identical with tropes"; furthermore "there are some who call tropes figures." By the sixteenth century, Elizabethans thought of rhetorical devices mostly in terms of figures, and rhetoricians usually listed under that classification not only tropes but also schemes and repetitions. For example George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) divided figures into three groups: those which serve the ear ('auricular'), those which serve the mind ('sensible') and those which serve both together ('sententious'). Among the chief rhetoricians of the Renaissance, three classes of figures were considered most important. The first group consisted of figures of thought: definition, division, distinction, enumeration, cause, effect, antecedent, consequence, comparison, similitude, dissimilitude, example, and citation of authority. The second group consisted of various forms of exclamation, interrogation, and description – all designed to sway emotions. The third group consisted of some 150 figures depending upon such merely mechanical devices as spelling, diction, and syntax. Because of its importance in the creation of wit, the first group, in particular comparison, similitude, and dissimilitude, received increasing attention in the seventeenth century.

Figurae verborum and figurae sententiae

The subordination of rhetoric to techniques of style, together with the simultaneous simplification of rhetorical devices into classes of figures, had great bearing upon the kinds of wit, as the English Renaissance viewed them. The simplification of rhetorical devices into classes of figures was important in the discussion of what was later labelled as *wit of thoughts* and *wit of words*. According to D. Judson Milburn "wit of thoughts and of words became a common distinction from the seventeenth century onwards" (41). Nowadays this distinction may be slightly obscure but the distinction certainly became the centre of literary criticism in the years following the restoration of Charles II till the second decade of the eighteenth century.

This division of wit arose from the reduction of rhetoric to tables of figures, in which the figure came to predominate verbal ornamentation. Tables of figures were subdivided traditionally into *figurae verborum* and *figurae sententiae*. The first, *figurae verborum* (figures of language, words, speech) sought agreeable sounds either alone or in combination, as in parallelisms, antitheses, alliterations, rhymes, and assonances. The second category, *figurae sententiae* (figures of thought, matter, sense) sough effective development of the idea in the sentence or sententious statement; it made use of exclamations, rhetorical questions, and suggestions. During the seventeenth century, the discrimination between wit of words and wit of thoughts became increasingly important, and as reaction against excessive ornamentation increased wit of words became the first object of critical attack.

Epigram

Epigram, recognized as a classical verse genre, was a favoured poetic form during the first three decades of the seventeenth century, after which its vogue started to fade. Generally having the form of a short poem building to a surprising turn of thought or sententious statement, it varied in length from two to sixteen or more lines and the last line or two contained an often surprising 'sting' based on wordplay. The content was rather trivial as this epigram by Henry Parrot, one of the most productive Jacobean epigrammatists shows:

Nuptiae post nummos

There was a time when men for love did marry
And not for lucre sake, as now we see:
Which from that former age so much doth vary
As all's for – what you'll give? or nought must be.
So that this ancient word called *matrimony*
Is wholly made *a matter now of money*.*

During the Restoration period, epigram's artistic status grew more and more unstable as the vogue for verbal wit was disappearing. At the same time, however, epigrammatic heritage was carried on by such famous writers as John Dryden, whose famous lines: "Here lies my wife: here let her lie! / Now she's at rest – and so am I" lack the convoluted, Metaphysical quality of their Elizabethan and Jacobean predecessors while retaining the 'sting'. As the period advanced, epigrammatic style became criticized more and more often. Sir William Temple wrote of the degenerate moderns, who, "not worthy to sit down at the Feast," have to "content themselves with the Scraps," that is, with lesser forms of poetry; thus they incorporate epigrams which "were all turned upon Conceit, or some sharp Hits of Fancy or Wit" ("Of Poetry" quot. in Spingarn, III 99-100). At the same time, however, epigrammatic wit continued to find audience and readership during the first half of the eighteenth century at least, keeping a considerable portion of the press business afloat with numerous reprints of poetical miscellanies and specialized anthologies such as *Martial Reviv'd* (1722), *A Collection of Epigrams* (1735), or *Selected Epigrams* (1797).

Epigram has not ceased to cause fascination as well as indignation to the present day and is a thorn in the flesh for some modern scholars as well. Associated with falseness of wit, its subversiveness especially in the sphere where language and religion are brought into immediate contact, epigram becomes the target of a certain type of literary criticism. For example, in a number of his critical writings, Roger D. Lund attacks epigrammatic wit, appropriating the seventeenth-century terminologies of 'true' and 'false' wit in order to catch it out at 'sinning against reason' – to use Jonathan Culler's phrase – as

*) Henry Parrot, *Mastive*, quoted by J. William Hebel and H. H. Hudson, eds. *Poetry of the English Renaissance, 1509-1660* (New York, 1946), p. 529.

well as morality. To do so, Lund works with quotations similar in tone to this passage of Pope's *Essay on Man*:

> All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
> All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
> All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
> All partial Evil, universal Good;
> All, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
> One truth is clear, "Whatever IS, is RIGHT." (I, 289-94)

Noting Pope's apparent "teleological confusion", Lund draws attention to the "aggressive binarims as Nature/Art, Chance/Direction, Discord/Harmony, and Partial Evil/Universal Good" that "emerge as the necessary product of Pope's antithetical logic" result of which is that the author's "epigrammatic sentiments strike the unsympathetic reader as both surprising and perverse" (Lund, "The Ghosts of Epigram, False Wit, and the Augustan Mode" 77). In another of his texts titled "Infectious Wit: Metaphor, Atheism, and the Plague in Eighteenth-Century London" Lund asserts that

> [f]or eighteenth-century Englishmen, particularly those who equated social stability with the interests of Church and Monarch, the intellectual movement that created the greatest anxiety was the steady rise of secularism, rationalism, sexual libertinism, and anticlericalism, which had been roughly designated as forms of modern atheism. (46)

Epigram's ambiguous reception is parallel to that of wit – it signals the fact that literary practice favoured forms and styles which were disapproved of by the contemporary criticism. This chasm bears significantly on the issues of language and its relationship to knowledge and style as it developed during the late seventeenth century. The following part of this study will address these issues in order to provide complete background of the studied period.

1.3.2 Seventeenth-century France: Society and Arts in the State of Flux

As I have suggested above, the Restoration period was an intellectually and politically turbulent time. Thus, when thinking about a work of literary art hailing from England between the years 1660 and 1720, we need to keep in mind that it was not only a long standing classical heritage, but also the empiricism and scepticism of the English provenance together with French classicism what shaped them. In the following subchapter I will provide a brief sketch of the French culture, its concerns and dilemmas of the seventeenth century before turning to the philosophical and cultural background of England.

The changing patterns and relationships of seventeenth century France deeply affected its literature and philosophy. After the second half of the fifteenth century

which was marred by endless dynastic rivalry, economic pressure and most importantly the Wars of Religion, a religious and political conflict, the dominant mood of the society was the desire for order, organization and restraint. The court of Henry IV, the king who began the long process of reformation of the powers of state, was busy planning reconstructions of cities and the task of the refining manners and language and bringing together the literary and social scenes had to be taken up by other circles. Marquise de Rambouillet, a wife of one of the most important court members, withdrew from Versailles and helped create a new social movement – *préciosité* – equal in its exclusivity to that of the court, but with very different tastes and ideology which, ultimately, became the decisive factor in the forming of the seventeenth-century arts and society. *Préciosité* and neoclassicism, the style it partly helped shape will be the subject matter of the following pages, then, as they have significant implications for the subsequent parts of this study. While my treatment of these issues (*préciosité* and neoclassicism) will be rather brief at this moment, I will draw on them when discussing the key topics of the second chapter – the *bel esprit* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – as they represent vital elements in understanding the texts of the French authors analyzed in the next chapter.

Préciosité: The ideal of genteel manners and the concept of honnête homme

The word *préciosité* ('preciousness') denotes a literary style and/or a social movement of French aristocracy of the first half of the seventeenth century that pursued refinement of conversation and *gentilesse* of manners. The movement's core members were aristocratic ladies, with Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet, as its central figure and a dismissed wife of Henry IV., Marguerite de Valois, a royal asset to the circle. They gathered in *salons*; the most eminent one being that of Marquise de Rambouillet who for more than forty years (1618-1660) entertained visitors from the art crowd as well as Parisian respectabilities (Mikeš 19). L'Hôtel de Rambouillet with its legendary *le salon bleu* became the workshop of the movement that was to influence France's literary scene as well as political course as one of its many guests were Richelieu, at that time still a bishop of Luçon, cardinal de la Valette, marshal de Souvré and others. The writers included Malherbe, Vaugelas, Chapelain, Segrais, and Voiture. Thomas Kaminsky, drawing on the studies of Ferdinand Brunot and Domna C. Stanton, presents the following picture of this environment, with a new type of a social ideal in its centre:

> Within this coterie, *politesse* became the defining quality of the *honnête homme*, a person of both elevated character and refined wit who seemed to possess a natural ability to please. Learning was esteemed in women as well as men, so long as it remained well-bred and devoid of pedantry. Grace, wit, and a free but pleasing manner were the touchstones of precieux society. (20-1)

The *honnête homme* represented the combination of urbanity of manners, sophistication in literary taste and gentility of expressing it which becomes one of the guiding principles of

> literary production in both France and Britain of the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries (France, *Politeness and its Discontents*: *Problems in French Classical Culture* 4).

The literary taste of the *précieuses,* how they were labelled, revelled in Giambattista Marini or Honoré d'Urfé who wrote the celebrated pastoral novel *L'Astrée* (1613-9). Kaminsky suggests that "the concept of *préciosité* is generally associated nowadays with the affectations of language that Molière satirized in *Les Précieuses ridicules*" but at the same time he also asserts that "modern French critics generally agree that the so-called jargon of the *précieux* salons actually enriched the French language while the stylistic characteristics of the authors provided the foundation for French 'classicism'" (19).

The language and awareness of political endangerment were closely interrelated in the movement's purifying efforts: "As far as language was concerned, the efforts to purify and chisel it, to get rid of all vulgarity and to distinguish it from the vulgar, machiavelism-soaked hedonism of the new social classes was only the beginning"[24] (*Divadlo francouzského baroka* 22). The refinement of the language gradually became the over-refinement, the purifying effort produced affectedness and artificiality and, finally, issued in hypocrisy. *Préciosité* put a ban on words such as 'cow', 'pig', 'breast' and 'to breed' because they all referred to things of 'vulgar' and 'low' origin (*Divadlo francouzského baroka* 22). The movement's striving for difference and originality bred metaphorical, kenning-like expressions like 'liquid element' for water, 'buttress of life' for bread or 'inhabitants of Neptune's kingdom' for fish (ibid.).

The movement's main impetus was the need to differentiate the language from that of the French *bourgeoisie*, the relatively new class of merchants and bankers and to oppose the political and economic strength this class was gradually gaining. The seventeenth century saw the last phase of the shift of power from aristocracy to the capitalist middle class and the aristocratic isolation of language, refuge in safety of the salons was a last and desperate act of defence. There was, however, a considerable literary contribution in this language exercise. The salon frequenters developed considerable skill in employing metaphors, which sometimes, admittedly, produced overtly subtle, far-fetched comparisons. Still, the overall tendency to precision, sophistication, and most importantly the stylistic self-awareness of *préciosité* shaped some of the founding principles of neoclassicism.

Neoclassicism and la 'querelle des anciens et des modernes'

The battle between the ancients and the moderns was the result of speedy development of literary taste during the first half of the seventeenth century. The tradition of humanism, the ideological complement of the Renaissance with its penchant for rules and imitation of the ancient authors was opposed to the Baroque 'modernism' which strove for the excessive, ornamental in music and visual arts and far-fetched metaphor (*la pointe*) in literature. By 1630 this style became more and more outdated and replaced by *préciosité* and its pre-classical concerns with emotional restraint and order as the ruling features of

expression. François de Malherbe, the pioneer of French classicism, initiated the forming of its first principles during the 1630s and by the mid-century, the classical doctrine was complete.

Neoclassicism, as it was instituted in France during the 1630s, was the literary instrument of a state bent on centralizing and consolidating its authority. As a response to the scrutinization by the state, writers soon developed meticulously coded methods of writing. Thus Pierre Corneille, for instance, circumvented some of the rigidities of French neoclassical formal prescriptions by developing and refining strategy that John Dryden later used against Corneille himself, that of 'misquotation' – in the sense of inventing another's words, not altering them. The official French literature of the period aimed to be socially conformist: its function was to describe man as a universal phenomenon, not an individual with idiosyncrasies distinguishing him or her from the rest. The concern with proportion, propriety and order was the central framework of the style. The already mentioned notion of *bienséance* and *vraisemblance* are closely related to it. The former term refers to the principles of decorum maintained not only by the members of the fashionable salons, but also by characters of the literary and dramatic works these *honnêtes gens* produced and consumed. It required no violence, no foul language or buffoonery, it preferred lofty themes and noble characters – both in real life and on stage. The principle of *vraisemblance* demands that the actions and plots be believable for which purposes the three Aristotelian unities of time, place and action were rediscovered and applied rigidly the neoclassical playwrights, especially by Molière and Racine. As the process of rediscovery and new appreciation for the ancient literary rules and production became wide-spread, a wave of resistance against these strict regulations appeared and with it the battle between the ancients and moderns.

While I do not intend to go into chronological details of the battle here, it is necessary to at least briefly summarize the two camps and their opinions. The 'battle' itself could be more readily described as a series of – mostly personal – attacks between individual members of the opposite sides, starting around the mid-century and dying away after 1715. It is important not so much for its immediate outcome, but rather for the pattern of literary exchange which was then iterated by the English authors. Its significance also lies in the ideological implications, as both sides tended to promote a different set of cultural standards. It is not surprising then, to see the term *taste* repeated again and again, as it was one of the key issues of the dispute.

The central belief of the advocates of the moderns that modern literature has benefited from the general advance of knowledge that had occurred between ancient times and the present. The two works that support this idea are Charles Perrualt's *Parallèle des anciens et les modernes* (1688-97) and Bernard Fontenelle's *Digression sur les ancienes at les moderns* (1688). Perrault asserted that "knowledge of the human heart had increased, so the modern poet has an advantage over his predecessors"; Homer, for example, "would have written a better epic if he had lived in the age of Louis XIV" (*The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 4 The Eighteenth Century 91). While supporting monarchy, the moderns were more inclined to acknowledge the shifts in the social strata, and they are

often associated with Paris and the salons. Their taste was for the *politesse* and ingenuity of language; the Greek and Latin culture was for them – in some extreme cases – a synonym of dark, barbarous times.

The ancients were represented by Jean de la Fontaine (1621-95), Jean de la Bruyère (1645-96) or Nicolas Boileau-Déspreaux (1636-1711). These authors represented a circle much closer to the official power of Versailles and the king. For the ancients the classics of antiquity remained worthy of admiration and imitation. This, however did not imply slavish copying, but continuing an old tradition which had been revitalized at the Renaissance and this feature of their style is emphasized by Peter France or Antoine Adam, who claims that one of the crucial motives of the neoclassical literature was the "wish for renewal, the new creativeness" (142). Similar tensions between the feelings of obligation to acknowledge the literary and cultural traditions and the need to outgrow can be observed in the English society of the Restoration period.

1.3.3 Society in Transition: Restoration England and its Culture

For Derek Hughes, the question of naming is one of the most characteristic themes of Restoration drama. In the introductory chapter of his *English Drama 1660-1700* as well as elsewhere, he claims that the act of naming and entitlement, i.e. identifying oneself or another is a moment when a character's social and familial place as well as linguistic order is restored. This act always happens through the medium of language (Hughes, *English Drama 1660-1700*, 26). In this section I want to argue that this 'pre-naming' state of instability or equivocality was not only characteristic for the portrayal of the human existence in late seventeenth-century England, but it can also be applied to the area of human intellectual output of that time – mainly that concerned with literary and dramatic criticism and the embryonic aesthetics. The period of Restoration was – in words of Paul Hammond – "an age of unstable critical vocabulary" and the circumstances of this instability will now be analyzed in order to provide an ideological background for the following parts of this study.

Restoration England is sometimes pictured as a flamboyant, care-free period of English history, one in which King Charles II and his train of royal concubines and courtiers – loved by his people – spend days visiting bawdy and irreverent Restoration comedies, celebrating the end of the horrors of the Puritan *interregnum* (1642-1660) during which the official theatrical production was banned. It is however much more realistic if we choose to see this period as a dynamic time of transition from old modes (political, economic as well as social and cultural) to new ones. The spirit of the period can be conveniently characterized by the words of John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury who wrote that "[t]he fashion of the age is to call every thing into question" (*English Drama 1660-1700* 1).

One of the foremost areas which was influenced by 'the questioning mode' of the times was religion. The rise of scepticism and new forms of religions (e.g. Deism) gave space for a new critical discourse which runs through most of the philosophical works

of Thomas Hobbes and other philosophers of the period. The "explosion of upper-class atheism" practised by e.g. playwright Earl of Rochester or theatre critic Charles Gildon, though a statistical minority, was an important influence on the ideas these authors presented in their works. Closely connected to the deterioration of the system of Christianity as the universal codex of laws is the questioning of the nature of morality – in *Leviathan* Thomas Hobbes portrayed man as an appetitive and morally relative creature, for whom right or wrong is insignificant in the state of nature in which he is at war with all other man. This idea clashed dramatically with the whole concept of unchanging universality of Christian morals.

Consequently, these ideas destabilized the concepts of the nature of personal (psychological, sexual etc.) and social identity. Influenced by the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne, Hobbes claimed that the human life and consciousness must be viewed in the terms of the processes of matter in motion, implying that human identity is essentially unstable. As far as social identity is concerned, the horror of the state of nature with its brutality in hostility drove men to form societies, exchanging the dangerous freedom of anarchy for subjection to a protective authority. The most stable protection being offered by an absolute sovereign, men contracted away their natural rights in return for security (13). Thus, Hobbes's conception of society is based on a paradox: humanity creates societies not to fulfil its nature but to escape it – man is in equal measure savage and citizen – these two elements remain eternally conflicting, yet eternally inseparable. His view is in fact an explicit rejection of Aristotle's concept of man as *zoon politicon*.

Hobbes then dissolved the universal, natural character not only of traditional hierarchy but also of traditional morality. Moral values were decided by political authority; Hobbes even likened social codes to the rules of a game when he stated that "[i]t is in the Laws of a Commonwealth, as in the Lawes of Gaming; whatsoever the Gamesters all agree on, is Injustice to none of them", and continued by defining morality in his 1656 essay *Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, as not transgressing the rules set by those involved: "As men in playing the turn up trump, and civil conversation our morality is all contained in not disobeying of the laws" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 388).

The intellectual milieu of the Restoration period: The Ancients and the Moderns

The intellectual context of the majority of the Restoration authors – and certainly of those analyzed in the third chapter of this study – is usually described as "neoclassical". However, the term "Neoclassicism" has acquired a number of meanings, often resulting in contradictory statements. It will be useful to present a brief survey of the term's definitions before I continue with describing the specific features of the intellectual background of the Restoration period themselves. As Robert D. Hume suggests, "neoclassical" is sometimes used simply as a descriptive term to designate works falling within the 1660-1800 period or, in its more restricted sense, it can be used to mean French literary theory of the later seventeenth century. Even though these definitions seem to

offer genuine advantages (the former because it is neutral in its assessment, the latter because it clearly implies the influence of the French literary orthodoxy on the English writing) they ultimately do not serve their purpose. The neutrality of the first definition does not hold true, since the term carries the clear implication of a revival of or a returning to an earlier culture. The strictly national demarcation of the second definition is unrealistic mostly because, as the period went on, an increasing amount of genuine classicism appeared which was not imported from the other side of the Channel (Hume *Dryden's Criticism* 155).

The well-known cultural controversy, which helped define the Restoration period, was the clash between the ideas supporting the dominance of the artistic and intellectual values of the Ancient Rome and Greece, and those in favour of the contemporary (and more or less local) culture. The notorious proponent of the Ancients' views was Sir William Temple who argued against the Modern position in his essay "On Ancient and Modern Learning". In the essay he incidentally repeated the commonplace, originally from Bernard of Chartres, that we see more only because we are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants. As Bernard Levine maintains: "The quarrel [...] both preceded the Restoration and continued to be argued for a long time afterward, but it took on a peculiar form and significance in the later century" (Levine viii). Many (if not most) Restoration authors "began with a self-consciously modern position, but after much vacillation, each wound up accepting a large dose of *ancienneté*" seeking "a position somewhere on a sliding scale between the extreme demands of both parties, and in doing so they developed a stance to culture that has sometimes been called "baroque", but may also be seen as a prelude to eighteenth-century neoclassicism" (ibid.). Levine rightly observes that "the tension between the ancients and the moderns was undoubtedly one of the chief defining characteristics of Restoration culture and colored much of its thought" (ix). The basic condition of the quarrel – and much of the intellectual history of the period – was a broad insistence that the ancient Greeks and Romans had set the supreme models and standards for every sort of endeavour, most particularly for politics and the humanistic arts associated with it: rhetoric and oratory, history, poetry, and moral philosophy.

Ancienneté was thus the basic inheritance of the Restoration gentleman, as it had been earlier, reinforced now by a repugnance to the profoundly disturbing revolutionary events that had so recently challenged both the social order and the classics." Levine suggests that the outcome of the battle was draw "in which the field was pretty much divided – the ancients commanding the humanities, and the moderns the sciences" and the Restoration "anticipated the outcome and defined itself in the process" (ix-x).

Language, knowledge, and epistemology in the late seventeenth-century English culture

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Neoplatonic view that Adam's original language had been a system of natural signs, genuinely corresponding to the things

expressed, was in decline. The schism between the signifier and signified became more evident than ever before. The irreconcilable gap between words and things was a theme of much of the contemporary philosophy which became increasingly aware of vagueness of words. Hobbes, for example, vigorously rejects the idea of natural language and frequently expresses horror of confusing words with 'things', "believing that the subordination of the sects and the intellectual stagnation of scholasticism were alike sustained by a corruption of language in which insignificant expressions were held to correspond to real entities" (*English Drama 1660-1700*, 14). For Hobbes, linguistic signs have no essential significance, "for language originates in arbitrary compact, as consequence to the need to establish signs for the conducting of social intercourse" (15).

Similar to its function in Hobbes's theory of morality, *consensus communis* is the underlying principle of language and communication: "That is a true sign, which by the consent of men becomes a sign" (Hobbes, *Philosophical Rudiments concerning Government and Society*, 221). Consequently, the linguistic compact is potentially unstable and "it is perpetually necessary to establish agreed meanings and careful definitions" (*English Drama 1660-1700*, 15). According to Deborah Fisk Payne the suspicion that language is not transparent medium through which reality can be grasped undeformed was present in the writings not only of Thomas Hobbes, but also his predecessor Francis Bacon, and contemporaries Thomas Sprat and John Locke. These philosophers were all "aghast at language gone astray" and "attempted to slip a leash on words, to domesticate them into isomorphic relationship with objects in nature" (Payne 411). John Locke's position as expressed in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1698) is that of nearly extremist rejection of language, as the following lines show:

> [...] figurative speeches and allusion in language will hardly be admitted as an imperfection or abuse of it. I confess in discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from them can scarce pass for faults. But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetorick, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheats: And therefore [...] they are [...] wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them.[...] Eloquence [...] has too prevailing beauties in it, to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. (III. x. 34)

The atmosphere of untrustworthiness of the unstable language influenced both Restoration comedy – especially its usage of language and thematic choices – and the forming genre of literary and dramatic criticism. It becomes most conspicuous when people use it metaphorically, "that is, in other sense than [words] are ordained for; and thereby deceive others" (*Leviathan*, ch. 4, 102).