FROM **RHETORIC** TO **AESTHETICS:**
WIT AND ESPRIT

IN THE ENGLISH AND FRENCH THEORETICAL WRITINGS

OF THE LATE SEVENTEENTH AND EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

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Reviewed by Dr. Ema Jelínková (Palacký University, Olomouc)
PhDr. Věra Pálenská (Masaryk University, Brno)

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For my Grandmother who had appreciation for wit

Introduction

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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 the1970s 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 verbality. 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 nd 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"[1] (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 *marvelous* 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 March1921)

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"[2] (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, propriate 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 exaggeradly subtle intellects excel in the finest reasoning more than in synthesis.[3] (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-