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True and false wit: Dryden, Pope, and Addison : [introduction]

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3 True and False Wit: Dryden, Pope, and Addison

*Wit's now arrived to a more high degree;
Our native language more refined and free.
Our ladies and our men now speak more wit,
Than all the former age of poets writ.*

John Dryden, Epilogue to *The Conquest of Grenada* (1669)

*Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out
whatever came earlier; in the hope of reacting at last
a point that could be called a true present,
a point of origin that marks a new departure.*

Paul De Man, *Literary History and Literary Modernity* (1970)

In this chapter I will examine the works of John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Joseph Addison with respect to wit, tracing the term's development in their writings. While concentrating on Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesy*, Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, and Addison's *Spectator* series of essays on wit, I will also include some of their other critical texts. Because all three authors are traditionally considered to be the most significant critical authorities of the period between 1660 and 1720, I will provide a short overview of the nature of the Restoration and the early eighteenth-century English criticism. As we will see, the nature of the contemporary criticism interacts to a great degree with the way wit was employed by the selected authors.

I particularly look to explore the ways the term developed in each author's understanding as a part of the contemporary critical terminology, with its gradually changing meaning and as a part of the culture's self-identifier through which society denoted its own differences from past times and expectations for future. Using this double signified-signifier approach, I hope to arrive at a more complex portrait of wit during its prime time. While I will make *en passant* comparisons among the individual English authors' conceptions of wit, a comparative analysis of the English and French authors will provide a conclusion to this chapter.

The literary (or in Dryden's case dramatic) criticism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries has not enjoyed much attention or appreciation on the part of

modern scholars. Many remarks have been made by modern critics regarding the unstable nature of Restoration criticism. I believe that J. E. Spingarn is right when he states that “seventeenth-century criticism is really a very troubled stream; winds from every quarter blow across its surface; currents from many springs and tributaries struggle for mastery within it” (Spingarn, I cvi). A similar view is held by Robert Hume who claims that “the Restoration is not an intellectually homogeneous period. Its temper – if it is possible to speak of such thing – must be seen as an inharmonious blend of incongruous elements” (Hume, *Dryden’s Criticism* 176). I agree with Hume and Spingarn that the Restoration is a transitional period and that critical texts of John Dryden mirrors his intellectual milieu to a remarkable degree.

3.1 John Dryden and Vagaries of Restoration Wit

In this subchapter, I will explore the usage of the term wit in the critical works of John Dryden. To understand how Dryden employs the term, I will first examine the nature of his critical oeuvre, which, as was already mentioned in the introduction, has been under a more or less constant attack of modern critics. While trying to justify Dryden against the widespread charges of cavalier inconsistency and critical carelessness, I wish to prove that his employment of the term wit has suffered from similarly unfair misinterpretation and accusation of haphazard treatment and apparent contradictions. Furthermore, considered within the context of the contemporary literary criticism, his employment of critical terminology – and in particular that of French provenance – should cast some light on his usage of the term in question.

3.1.1 The Specifics of Dryden’s Critical Style and Terminology

Robert Hume contends that Dryden’s criticism was not of the typically neoclassical prescriptive kind, and suggests dividing his criticism into three types, even though he acknowledges that such categories are far from absolute. The first type is prescriptive criticism (e.g. “The Grounds of Criticism today”), the second is speculative (*Essay of Dramatick Poesy*) and the last type is explanatory (the vast majority of his critical efforts) (Robert Hume, *Dryden’s Criticism* 6-7). He counters George Watson who thought Dryden’s criticism was most of all prescriptive, and asserts that Watson “underemphasizes the transitional nature of Dryden’s work” (*Dryden’s Criticism* 24). Hume characterizes Dryden’s criticism as follows: “To look for a tidy pattern in the development of Dryden’s criticism is ultimately pointless. He never tried to work out a formal aesthetic, and his comments on the practice of criticism amount to no more than some scattered commonplaces” (6). Dryden is much keener to examine the possibilities of resolving specific literary problems (such as details of language, plot, characters, theatrical conventions, etc.) than attempting to deal with ab-