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John Dryden and vagaries of restoration wit

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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-

stract issues, which make him uncomfortable.* H. James Jensen refers to Dryden's style as 'rambling' and considers it to be the reason why the author never systematically developed a work or theory of criticism to any length, and his discussions of particular subjects, as well as why many of his great critical statements, occurred in isolated passages, and often in momentary digressions. As a result, one passage can seldom represent Dryden's over-all views on a subject and – in Jensen's words "he will cheerfully deny at one time what he confidently affirmed two years earlier" (4).

In addition to the nature of Dryden's criticism, we need to consider his unique conception of critical terminology. In parallel to the aversion towards abstract topics, his dislike of technical terms, such as those used in rhetorical textbooks, led Dryden to come up with terms that were frequented in cultivated circles of aristocracy, or the critical words which came from French, the polite language of precise and sophisticated criticism. Thus Dryden's critical terms usually have both general and specific meanings. His use of French meanings for English equivalents can sometimes be misleading or puzzling depending on whether the French or the English meaning might apply or whether an English meaning is quite different from the French. For example, "point" cannot be understood without knowledge of the meanings of the French *pointe*. Dryden's 'point of wit' is "a thought which surprises with a certain subtlety of imagination, a kind of word play"⁹⁵ (Cayrou 674). A 'point' thus must be regarded as rhetorical rather than emotional. Dryden's use of 'spirit' also cannot be understood without knowledge of the various meanings of *esprit*. Still, 'spirit' is, as we have seen in a previous chapter, such a complex term that in some areas neither the French nor the English meanings are in a total agreement with Dryden's use. One of the meanings of 'spirit' is similar to 'genius', to the indefinable essence of a great work of art, and thus to the conception of Bouhours's *je-ne-sais-quoi*, at least after 1671.**

Analyzing the nature of the Restoration criticism, Paul D. Cannan suggests that "part of the reason these critics seem to flounder so much is because they are searching for a critical voice" (19). Seen in the light of this explanation, Dryden's criticism cannot be dismissed as a product of a muddled mind, which seems to have been a suggestion on the part of many modern scholars. However, there have been other, more helpful, explanations. George Watson suggests that Dryden's inconsistency can be accounted for by a combination of 'a sense of tact' and the influence of scepticism, the most powerful stream of the contemporary philosophy (60), while Michael Gelber contends it was a reflection of Dryden's "attempt to bring his theories into harmony with his art" (3). In his study of Dryden's theory of comedy Frank Harper Moore also notes the now nearly notorious claim of modern literary historians that Dryden's critical opinions are a sign of amateurish insouciance. Moore defends Dryden, explaining that "these changes constitute a reasoned

*) Comparing the English and French dramatic criticism of that period, Gunnar Sorelius makes a similar claim, saying the English criticism was "much more pragmatic and empirical than that of France. Restoration critics – [...] almost all of them [being] also dramatists in their own right – show great awareness and understanding of the practical needs of the theatre" (*The Giant Race Before the Flood: Pre-Restoration Drama on the Stage and in the Criticism of the Restoration*, 31).

***) One of Dryden's notable paraphrases from Bouhours's "Je ne sais quoi" appears in his dedication of *Amboyna*, one of his less notable dedications.

development of his theory; they are the products not of inconsistency and insincerity but of open-mindedness and continued interest” (10). I am inclined to agree with Gelber and Moore rather than with Watson and I develop their line of argument and defence of Dryden furthermore with a claim that this gradual transition should be seen as a reflection of the changing taste as well as the force which changes the taste as I will manifest in the following part of this subchapter.

Dryden might have felt a similar unease towards wit – a word which was perused very frequently in the Restoration criticism, and which often denoted the struggle of writers, playwrights and philosophers to voice new ideas or reformulate old ones. C. S. Lewis finds those attempts “amusing evidences of the word’s drift towards its dangerous sense” (Lewis, *Studies in Words* 100) and he offers a – hardly unintentionally simplified – overview of contemporary ideas on the term:

- 1650: Davenant, describing something ‘which is not, yet is accompted, Wit’, includes in it ‘what are commonly called Conceits, things that sound like the knacks or toys of ordinary Epigrammatists’.
- 1664: Flecknoe warns us that wit must not include ‘clenches (puns), quibbles, gingles, and such like trifles’.
- 1667: Dryden tells us that wit does not consist of ‘the jerk or sting of an epigram nor the seeming contradiction of a poor antithesis...nor the jingle of a more poor paronomasia’.
- 1668: Shadwell corrects those ignorant people who believed ‘that all the Wit in Playes consisted in bringing two persons upon the Stage to break Jests, and to bob one another, which they call Repartie’.
- 1672: Dryden classifies ‘clenches’ as ‘The lowest and most grovelling kind of wit’.
- 1700: Dryden says that ‘the vulgar judges ... call conceits and jingles wit’.

(*Studies in Words* 100-101)

In fact, all these are attempts at defining what wit is or should be by means of elimination of the undesired elements. Paul Hammond’s labelling of the Restoration as ‘the age of unstable vocabulary’ should not be understood then as a euphemism for a period in which people would comfortably “slip in and out of the different meanings [of the word] without noticing it” as C. S. Lewis suggests. Rather, I propose to regard it as a period of wit’s pendency; a period of tentative, not “tactical” definitions (103). The “amusing evidences” may appear less amusing and more instructing when seen as proofs of a complex situation in a period, where wit started to gradually lose its clear, well-established connotations and became increasingly problematic as well as useful for its users.

John Dryden, as one of the chief shapers of the Restoration literary production, produced his texts, artistic as well as critical, according to the current taste (and, also, often with regard to his financial situation) which changed rather quickly in the course of the late seventeenth century. One of Dryden’s first poems “Upon the Death of the Lord Hastings”, written in 1649 when the future Poet Laureate was about eighteen years old, pays tribute to the then decaying Metaphysical wit consisting of shocking images and a ceaseless flow of conceits:

Was there no milder way but the Small Pox,
 The very Filth'ness of Pandora's Box?
 So many Spots, like naeves, our Venus soil?
 One Jewel set off with so many a Foil?
 Blisters with pride swell'd; which th'row's flesh did sprout
 Like Rose-buds, stuck i' th'Lily-skin about.
 Each little Pimple had a Tear in it,
 To wail the fault its rising did commit:
 Who, Rebel-like, with their own Lord at strife,
 Thus made an Insurrection 'gainst his Life.
 Or were these Gems sent to adorn his Skin,
 The Cab'net of a richer Soul within?
 No Comet need foretell his Change drew on,
 Whose Corps might seem a Constellation.

(ll. 53-66)

The bizarre metaphorisation, awkward elision and harsh sounds contribute to the general unevenness of the poem in which the Metaphysical wit reached its last stage of every fashion-excess bringing out irritation from the audience. The general movement of poetics was towards a more regular rhythm, even lines and natural accents in the style of Edmund Waller and others. Wit found its new station in the heroic couplet, which Dryden mastered in his *MacFlecknoe* nearly thirty years later after this slightly morbid elegy. In *Mac Flecknoe* (written 1672, published 1682), wit's satirical lashings reveal its potential for slanderousness and profanity which were soon to become its own ruin. The poem satirizes Thomas Shadwell, "a Whig, Protestant and dully moralistic dramatist" who was Dryden's successor in the office of Poet Laureate. In the poem, Shadwell is to succeed one Richard Flecknoe, a minor poet and Dryden's adversary, as "Prince of Nonsense" (imaginary equivalent to the function of Poet Laureate). Flecknoe praises his follower's potential in these famously satirical lines:

Sh[adwell] alone my perfect image bears,
 Mature in dullness for his tender years.
 Sh[adwell] alone, of all my Sons, is he
 Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.
 The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
 But Sh[adwell] never deviates into sense.
 Some beams of Wit on other souls may fall,
 Strike through and make a lucid interval;
 But Sh[adwell]'s genuine night admits no ray,
 His rising Fogs prevail upon the Day;

(*The Works of John Dryden*, II. 54)

The antithetical turns upon the maturity of dullness, the strength of stupidity, and the inability to deviate into sense all show wit's ability to combine the comic and the intellectual. The gradual change of attitude towards wit can be detected not only when Dryden uses wit as a working tool, but when he thinks about the word as a part of critical vocabulary. Judson D. Milburn summarizes this development as follows:

When [Dryden] was most enthusiastic toward wit, his aim was to 'please' or 'delight' first, and then to 'instruct'. By 1677 he had reversed these aims, for now comedy aimed first to instruct delightfully. In 1700 he was apologizing for having placed pleasure before instruction. The same shift is evident in his opinion of wit. Whereas he had early emphasized the importance of the secret graces which violated the rules, by the mid-eighties he was stressing propriety and decorum. (264)

Still, in the poem, Dryden defends wit against humour. With it he attacks Shadwell's humour, his farcical 'humour characters'. Shadwell declares his lineage from Jonson, but Jonson's satire of humour characters has by now degenerated into Shadwell's meaningless laughter, laughter for its own sake. As Ronald Paulson suggests, Dryden presumes that wit operates "more efficiently on these figures than the mere representation of 'the follies and extravagances of *Bedlam*'. He makes wit normative in a satire of humor; the poet's wit provides the "bite" that Shadwell's humor so notably lacks" (46).

The fact that Dryden was able to produce several, sometimes opposing, definitions of wit should not be interpreted as a proof of literary double-dealing or carelessness. Different contexts of wit called for different definitions, just as new genres and changing tastes of the times did. John Sitter stresses the dialogical nature of Dryden's most famous definition:

If we take Dryden at his words, that wit 'is a propriety of words and thoughts; [...] - we have a definition that happily refuses to separate wit from words and conversation. And in this sense, making the barest historical allowance for the fussiness that would later attach to 'propriety' and 'elegantly', Dryden's wit is clearly related to the conversation of English-speaking human beings ever since. (85)

The emphasis on the social, dialogical aspect of the notion specifies wit's function in late seventeenth century English culture and at the same time endangers its position as an easily identified synonym for either mental qualities or its verbal product. It transfers wit from the ever so slightly secluded realm of philosophical categories or rhetorical figures of speech into the dangerously unstable sphere of social interaction, with its ceaselessly changing tastes, sensibilities and ideologies. In the following part of this subchapter I will examine with Dryden's more or less isolated statements concerning wit in his critical texts will be examined. By contextualizing them, I hope to demonstrate that Dryden's attitude towards wit was not a result of his "muddled mind", but rather a self-conscious attempt to deal with various themes and questions posed by the literary practice of the changing late seventeenth-century English culture.

3.1.2 The Beginnings: *The Essay of Dramatick Poesy*

Essay of Dramatick Poesy – written 1665, published 1668 – is an example of explanatory criticism according to Hume’s categorization. It has a form of a dialogue on dramatic practice between four speakers: Eugenius (meant to represent Lord Buckhurst, Dryden’s patron), Crites (Sir Robert Howard, a dramatist and Dryden’s son in law), Lisideius (Sir Charles Sedley), and Neander (meaning ‘new man’ – a hint that Dryden, a member of the gentry class, is entitled to join in this dialogue on par with the three men who are both older and his social superiors).

The four friends discuss three topics: The relative merit of classical drama (upheld by Crites) as opposed to modern drama (championed by Eugenius); whether French drama, as Lisideius maintains, is better than English drama (supported by Neander, who famously calls Shakespeare ‘the greatest soul, ancient or modern’); and the question of whether plays in rhyme are an improvement upon blank verse drama – a proposition that Neander, despite having defended the Elizabethans, now advances against the sceptical Crites (who also switches from his original position and defends the blank verse tradition of Elizabethan drama). In reality, it is closer to six set speeches arranged in three pairs than to a dialogue in the Platonic sense, as George Watson rightly observes (40). Crites argues for the Ancients, Eugenius for the Moderns; Lisideius cries up the French drama, Neander the English; Crites defends blank verse, Neander rhyme. The inflexibility of the dialogue, which is deliberate according to Watson as well as Hume (Watson 41, Hume, *Dryden’s Criticism* 48), provides a not very dynamic platform for an authentic discussion, but is a rather fixed medium in which topics are merely displayed. Indeed, Dryden makes no attempt to argue the issues out, arrive at compromises or spot overlapping parts of the speakers’ positions.

Dryden does not attempt to formulate a definition of wit in the essay. However, he uses the word in the first dialogue mainly as a key term in distinguishing the achievements of the drama of his own days from the playwrights of the past age, Ben Jonson, John Fletcher and William Shakespeare. He, then, does not employ or explore the term as a signified, but rather as a signifier, whose signified – for the time being – is left comfortably undefined. The most important feature of this signifier is its ability to denote the measure of improvement and refinement of language and conversation between the age of Shakespeare, Fletcher and Jonson and Dryden’s own times:

But, that you may know how much you are indebted to those your masters, and be ashamed to have so ill requited them, I must remember you that all the rules by which we practise the drama at this day, either such as relate to the justness and symmetry of the plot; or the episodical ornaments, such as descriptions, narrations, and other beauties, which are not essential to the play; were delivered to us from the observations that Aristotle made, of those poets, which either lived before him, or were his Contemporaries: we have added nothing of our own, except we have the confidence to say our wit is better; which none boast of in our age, but such as understand not theirs. (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I 27)

But he also talks about wit in terms of superiority of comedy of wit versus the Jonsonian comedy of humours, stating: “I think him [Jonson] the most learned and judicious Writer which any Theater ever had. He was a most severe Judge of himself as well as others. One cannot say he wanted wit, but rather that he was frugal of it” (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I 69).

As mentioned in the first chapter, Dryden’s intellectual environment was an example of the tumultuous mixture of the influences of French classicism and contemporary English ideas. For Dryden, the Ancients as well as more recent predecessors were the biblical race of giants before the flood indeed, but he was not ready to bow before them in a gesture of self-deprecation. His ruminations of Shakespeare, Jonson and others betray a confidence which was an important feature of the Restoration culture.

3.1.3 *Annus Mirabilis* and Beyond: Theory Expounded

As has already been pointed out, Dryden’s own definitions of the term have often been found inadequate and confusing. They were so for his contemporaries, too, and even caused a “prefatory war” with Thomas Shadwell, a minor Restoration playwright. The source of the confrontation was Dryden’s assertion in the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* that Jonson’s wit falls short of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher. Dryden was not attacking Jonson then, however; he was using his example to argue for the superiority of the English drama over the French. But Shadwell mistook those comments as an affront to Jonson and his own dramatic practice, and as shameless self-promotion of Dryden’s comedy of wit. In the preface to his play *The Sullen Lovers* (1668), he accused Dryden of emphasizing wit at the expense of character. Dryden took up the opportunity to answer this accusation in the preface to *An Evening’s Love* (1671), where he described Ben Jonson’s plays as pleasant: “[...] but that pleasantness was not properly wit, or the sharpness of conceit, but the natural imitation of folly” (148).

In this explication, we are beginning to see that Dryden’s employment of the term indeed has to be considered within the actual literary context. In this particular place, ‘sharpness of conceit’ indicates the emphasis upon liveliness as distinct from the apt and perfect description of ‘natural imitation’; but this is emphasis only. A year later Dryden writes about Ben Jonson in the *Defence of the Epilogue* that

the most judicious of poets, he always writ properly, and as the character required; and I will not contest farther with my friends who call that wit: it being very certain that even folly itself, well represented, is wit in a larger signification; and that there is fancy, as well as judgment, in it, though not so much or noble [...] (178)

For Dryden wit had to include both judgment and fancy in order to produce authentic artistic value. This can be traced in fact as early as 1667, when he published the poem *Annus Mirabilis*. In the preface, he describes “the proper wit of an heroic or historical poem” as “some lively and apt description [...] such [...] that it sets before your eyes the

absent object as perfectly, and more delightfully, than nature” (98). This specific definition is preceded by a lengthier, yet more general definition of wit, which takes into account its two different aspects:

The composition of all poems is, or ought to be, of wit; and wit in the poet, or wit-writing (if you will give me leave to use a school distinction) is no other than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which, like a nimble spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of memory, till it springs the quarry it hunted after: or, without metaphor, which searches over all the memory for the species or ideas of those things which it designs to represent. Wit written is that which is well designed, the happy result of thought, or product of imagination. (97-8)

As John Sitter contends, this definition of wit is Dryden’s “most striking and most complicated” because it first proposes “a twofold distinction between “wit writing” and “wit written” and then merges these into a threefold description of “imagination” (Sitter, 79). “Wit writing” in this dichotomy is the process, while “wit written” is the result and as Sitter observes, “wit written” “will turn out to be the wit of most of Dryden’s discussions, where it becomes, simply, “a propriety of thoughts and words” (80).

However, other critics find definitions like this one wanting. The failure of such definition, as David Wykes points out in his study *Preface to Dryden*, is that it seems too general, as does Dryden’s later notorious definition penned in ‘The Author’s Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic Licence, prefaced to *The State of Innocence*’ (1677): “a propriety of thoughts and words” (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I 207). In fact Dryden himself was aware of the vagueness of his account, and he attempted to narrow down the definition by explaining what wit is not in the preface to *Annus Mirabilis*:

But to proceed from wit, in the general notion of it, to the proper wit of an heroic or historical poem; I judge it chiefly to consist in the delightful imaging of persons, actions, passions, or things. It is not the jerk or sting of an epigram, nor the seeming contradiction of a poor antithesis (the delight of an ill-judging audience in a play of rhyme) nor the jingle of a more poor Paronomasia; neither is it so much the morality of a grave sentence, affected by Lucan, but more sparingly used by Virgil. (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I 98)

Dryden proceeds by presenting a positive definition: “[...] it is some lively and apt description, dressed in such colours of speech, that it sets before your eyes the absent object, as perfectly, and more delightfully than nature,” which finally becomes “wit is a propriety of thoughts and words or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject” (I 207). Dryden continues by elaborating on the topic of the nature of the creative act of poetry – one of the very few passages in all of his critical writing, where abstract criticism is not interrupted by some practical advice:

So then the first happiness of the poet’s imagination is properly invention or finding of the thought; the second is fancy, or the variation, deriving or moulding of that thought, as the judgment represents it proper to the subject; the third is elocution, or the art of clothing and

adorning that thought, so found and varied, in apt, significant, and sounding words: the quickness of the imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility in the fancy, and the accuracy in the expression. [...]

This is the proper wit of dialogue or discourse, and consequently of the drama, where all that is said is to be supposed the effect of sudden thought; which, though it excludes not the quickness of wit in repartees, yet admits not a too curious election of words, too frequent allusions, or use of tropes, or, in fine, anything that shows remoteness of thought or labour in the writer. (98-9)

In the relatively late ‘To the Right Honourable My Lord Radcliffe’ prefixed to *Examens poeticum: Being the Third Part of Miscellany Poems* (1693) Dryden’s discussion of wit takes the form once again of a comparison between poets – Ovid, and, among others, Virgil. “If wit be pleasantry,” Dryden says, “he [Ovid] has it to excess; but if it be propriety, Lucretius, Horace, and, above all, Virgil are his superiors” (II 163). Here, Dryden’s doubts concerning wit’s true nature come to the surface most clearly. Edward Pechter comments: “The implied doubt of the if-subjunctive constructions illustrates once again Dryden’s open-mindedness. Wit may and should be seen as residing in both pleasantry and in propriety. Dryden’s comparison does not reject one poet or the other” (Pechter 26). I would like to extend this assumption by adding that, just as Dryden’s mind is open to appreciation of both poets – Virgil as well as Ovid, his mind is open to both conceptions of wit – i.e. wit as pleasantry and wit as propriety – as they both represent two different kinds of legitimate poetic value.

This dual legitimacy can be described by means of the set of terms from the contemporary aesthetics – the “faculties” of judgment and fancy. Judgment accomplishes aptness, perfectness, accurate representation – a just, proper imitation, while fancy accomplishes liveliness, elegance – in other words, works taken by nature up to a higher pitch. It seems, then, that Dryden, while apparently allowing the meaning of the term to fluctuate, insists throughout his criticism upon the comprehensive nature of wit, stressing its inclusion of both fancy and judgment.

3.1.4 French vs English, Moderns vs Ancients: Wit as Compromise

Dryden’s siding with the Moderns was enabled by his idealization of wit. The basis of the argument – i.e. the present correcting the past – reflected his theory of comedy of wit (represented by plays of his fellow authors and his own) pitted against the comedy of humours. In the already mentioned prologue to *An Evening’s Love* (1671) he distinguishes wit and humour: “The first works on the judgment and fancy; the latter on the fancy alone: there is more of satisfaction in the former kind of laughter, and in the latter more of scorn” (*Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* I 146). Several pages later, he expands the comparison by listing the differing effects both devices have on the reader: “[...] for the business of the poet is to make you laugh: when he writes humour, he makes folly ridiculous; when wit, he moves you, if not always to laughter, yet to a pleasure that

is more noble” (I 152). By arguing for wit over humour Dryden identified himself with the Earl of Rochester, the aristocratic Court Wits and the libertine tradition as such. Furthermore, by citing the conversation of courtiers and, the ultimate model, the monarch himself, the epitome of witty conversation, he was able to equate wit, polite discourse, aristocracy, and monarchy.

Despite Dryden’s often proclaimed antipathy for French culture, his knowledge of their literature and criticism was profound, detailed, and very up-to-date during his whole literary career which spanned over almost forty years. He read, appropriated, or was influenced by Pierre and Thomas Corneille, Racine, Molière, Georges and Madeleine de Scudéry, Quinault, La Calprenède, and he made references to works of St. Evremond, Boileau, Segrais, Bossu, Dacier, Rapin, l’Abbé d’Aubignac, du Bartas, Descartes, Fontenelle, Malherbe, and Perrault. As his career was nearing its end, he even began to refer to French authors with respect and sympathy, so much so that it is possible to claim that “Dryden kept insisting upon his Englishness, but [...] his scope was decidedly European” (2). Lord Buckingham’s comedy *The Rehearsal* (1672) satirically lashes out at Dryden’s manner of unbridled acquiring of plots and speeches. In the following scene of the play Bayes (indicating the bay leaf – the symbolic plant of the Poet Laureate) boasts – though not specifically referring to robbing the French – his “ingenious” composing methods:

BAYES. And I do here averr, That no man yet Sun e’er shone upon, has parts sufficient to furnish out a Stage, except it were by the help of these my Rules.

JOHNSON. What are those rules, I pray?

BAYES. Why, Sir, my first Rule is the Rule of Transversion, or *Regula Duplex*: changing verse into Prose, or Prose into verse, *alternative* as you please.

[...]

I take a book in my hand, either at home or elsewhere, for that’s all one, of there be any Wit in’t, as there is no book but has some, I Transverse it; that is, if it be Prose put it into Verse, (but that takes up some time) and if it be Verse, put it into Prose.

(5-6, I.i.)

Although Dryden’s principles for writing and evaluating literature came mostly from the Ancients and the French authors, he applied them in a personal way, giving Restoration readers and audiences standards by which to judge art. His fundamental principle, which comes from the Ancients, is that art is imitation of nature. A record of his changing concepts of wit is a good barometer of the varying proportions of imagination and judgment Dryden demanded. In ‘wit writing’ and ‘wit written’, an excess of either imagination or judgment was an extreme; a balance of each carried to great heights, in the highest genres, manifests itself in a work of ‘sublime genius.’ Dryden’s most characteristic personal stance appears to be his abhorrence of extremes, and therefore he constantly vacillates in attempting to find a balance, a golden mean, on every occasion, in judging all works of art and in debating all practical critical problems.