

Essays on Wit No. 2 eBook

Essays on Wit No. 2 by Joseph Warton

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With an Introduction to the Series on Wit by Edward N. Hooker

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES ON WIT

The age of Dryden and Pope was an age of wit, but there were few who could explain precisely what they meant by the term. A thing so multiform and protean escaped the bonds of logic and definition. In his sermon "Against Foolish Talking and Jesting" the learned Dr. Isaac Barrow attempted to describe some of the forms which it took; the forms were many, and it is difficult to discover any element which they held in common. Nevertheless Barrow ventured a summary:

It is, in short, a manner of speaking out of the simple and plain way, (such as Reason teacheth and proveth things by,) which by a pretty surprizing uncouthness in conceit of expression doth affect and amuse the fancy, stirring in it some wonder, and breeding some delight thereto.

And about sixty years later, despite the work of Hobbes and Locke in calling attention to the importance of semantics, the confusion still existed. According to John Oldmixon (*Essay on Criticism*, 1727, p. 21), "Wit and Humour, Wit and good Sense, Wit and Wisdom, Wit and Reason, Wit and Craft; nay, Wit and Philosophy, are with us almost the same Things." Some such confusion is apparent in the definition presented by the *Essay on Wit* (1748, p. 6).

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In general it was recognized that there were two main kinds of wit. Both fancy and judgment, said Hobbes (*Human Nature*, X, sect. 4), are usually understood in the term *wit*; and wit seems to be “a tenuity and agility of spirits,” opposed to the sluggishness of spirits assumed to be characteristic of dull people. Sometimes wit was used in this sense to translate the words *ingenium* or *l’esprit*. But Hobbes’s disciple Walter Charleton objected to making it the equivalent of *ingenium*, which, he said, rather signified a man’s natural inclination—that is, genius. Instead, he described wit as either the faculty of understanding, or an act or effect of that faculty; and understanding is made up of both judgment and Imagination. The Ample or Happy Wit exhibits a fine blend of the two (*Brief Discourse concerning the Different Wits of Men*, 1669, pp. 10, 17-19). In this sense wit combines quickness and solidity of mind.

In the other, and more restricted sense, wit was made identical with fancy (or imagination) and distinguished sharply from reason or judgment. So Hobbes, recording a popular meaning of wit, remarked (*Leviathan*. I, viii) that people who discover rarely observed similitudes in objects that otherwise are much unlike, are said to have a good wit. And judgment, directly opposed to it, was taken to be the faculty of discerning differences in objects that are superficially alike. (Between this idea of wit as discovering likeness in things unlike, and the Platonic idea of discovering the One in the Many, the Augustans made no connection.) A similar distinction between wit and judgment was made by Charleton, Robert Boyle, John Locke, and many others. The full implication lying in Hobbes’s definition can be seen in Walter Charleton, who said (*Brief Discourse*, pp. 20-21) that imagination (or wit) is the faculty by which “we conceive some certain similitude in objects really unlike, and pleasantly confound them in discourse: Which by its unexpected Fineness and allusion, surprizing the Hearer, renders him less curious of the truth of what is said.” In short, wit is delightful, but, because it leads away from truth, unprofitable and, it may be, even dangerous.

The identification of wit with fancy gave it a lowly role in Augustan thinking; and also in literary prose, which was supposed to be the language of reason (cf. Donald F. Bond, “‘Distrust’ of Imagination in English Neo-Classicism,” *PQ*, XIV, 54-69). What of its position in poetry? According to Hobbes, poetry must exhibit both judgment and fancy, but fancy should dominate; and the work of fancy is to adorn discourse with tropes and figures, to please by extravagance, to disguise meaning, and to create pleasant illusions. One of Hobbes’s followers announced that fancy must have the upper hand because all poems please chiefly by novelty. While they made wit the most essential element in poetry, they made it trivial and empty, and thereby helped to bring poetry itself into contempt.



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Partly to oppose this low opinion of poetry, the neo-Aristotelians among the critics began to stress the view that fable, design, and structure were the really essential elements in poetry, and that these were the product of reason, or judgment. And because reason was the means by which truth was discovered, poetry by virtue of its rational framework became capable of revealing and communicating truth—that is, of instructing. In this conception of poetry there was little glory left for wit. It was relegated to be used for color and adornment in serious poetry, or to furnish the substance of the “little” poetry which could not boast of design or structure. Thus, the *Essay on Wit* invites the poet, (p. 15):

Have as much Wit as you will, or you can, in a Madrigal, in little light Verses, in the Scene of a Comedy, which is neither passionate or simple, in a Compliment, in a little Story, in a Letter where you would be merry yourself to make your Friends so.

Be witty in these playful varieties of poetry, because wit in a large and serious work would be insufferable.

“These Sports of the Imagination, these Finesses, these Conceits, these glittering Strokes, these Gaieties, these little cut Sentences, these ingenious Prodigalities” in which wit is expressed might be either sober or funny. Most of the examples in the *Essay on Wit* are of the sober kind, coming under the order of wit because they are pretty and diverting fancies. But by the 1690’s there had been a clear tendency to associate wit with mirth, and often with satire. By 1726 James Arbuckle could write (*A Collection of Letters*, 1729, II, 72): “... Satire and Ridicule, which are the main Provocatives to Laughter, still keep their ground among us, and are reckoned the chief Embellishments of Discourse by all who aim at the Character of Wits.”

The end of wit was to surprise and delight. One may surprise by novelty, but the easiest road to the goal is audacity; and the subjects which lent themselves most readily to audacity were sex and religion. The treatment of the latter proved especially troublesome to good men like Blackmore, and the frequency of portraits and characters of the Profane Wit shows that many people were disturbed. Shaftesbury in *Sensus Communis* (1709) tried to justify the use of wit in discussing religion. For the rest of the century Shaftesbury’s position was the center of heated debate, with Akenside supporting, and John Brown and Warburton opposing, the employment of wit in religion; and the *Gentleman’s Magazine* is full of the arguments of lesser men who took sides. The author of the *Essay on Wit* places himself firmly beside Shaftesbury when he remarks (p. 14) that “a Subject which will not bear Raillery, is suspicious.” The controversy is reviewed in an article by A.O. Aldridge, called “Shaftesbury and the Test of Truth” (*PMLA*, LX, 129-156).

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Wit was taken to be the source, of tropes, and figures of speech, of all the color and adornments of rhetoric; and the old tradition of rhetoric, handed down from the Renaissance, tended to regard tropes and figures as mere ornament, a means of decorating the surface, an artful prettifying of a subject in order that it might please. For this reason wit was likely to be considered out of place in serious works which called for naturalness and passion. The objection to the simile in the language of passion was an old note in English criticism (cf. Dennis, *Critical Works*, I, 424); but the author of the *Essay on Wit* in condemning glittering strokes and ingenious prodigalities in impassioned literature shows by his phrasing that he is following Father Bouhours (cf. *Manlere die Bien Penser*, Amsterdam, 1688, pp. 8-9, 234, 296, 388).

In *Spectator*, no. 249, Addison entered the contest known as the Battle of the Books, and lined himself up squarely on the side of the Ancients. The ancients, he said, surpassed the moderns in poetry, painting, oratory, history, architecture, and, in fact, all arts and sciences which depend more on genius than on experience. It was no lightening of the judgment when he added that the moderns surpass the ancients in doggerel, humour burlesque, and all the trivial arts of ridicule, the arts of the “unlucky little wits.” So degraded had wit become! In the *Adventurer*, nos. 127 and 133, Joseph Warton showed himself to be essentially in agreement with Addison’s verdict, differing only in thinking that a few moderns might compare with the ancients in works of genius. He appears somewhat less scornful of wit, recognizing its part in the arts of civility and the decencies of conversation; and yet he associates it with ridicule, laughter, and luxury, and makes it the pleasant plaything of gentlemen.

Occasionally there were attempts to restore wit to its pristine glory, to the position it had occupied before it was tied to mirth and ridicule, when Atterbury could thus define it: “Wit, indeed, as it implies, a certain uncommon Reach and Vivacity of Thought, is an Excellent Talent; very fit to be employ’d in the Search of Truth....” So the anonymous author of *A Satyr upon a Late Pamphlet Entitled, A Satyr against Wit* (1700) could rhapsodize:

Wit is a Radiant Spark of Heav’nly Fire,
Full of Delight, and worthy of Desire;
Bright as the Ruler of the Realms of Day,
Sun of the Soul, with in-born Beauties gay....

So Corbyn Morris in his *Essay towards Fixing the True Standards of Wit, Humour, Raillery, Satire, and Ridicule*, 1744, probably the best and clearest treatment of the subject in the first half of the eighteenth century, wrote (p. 1): “Wit is the Lustre resulting from the quick Elucidation of one Subject, by a just and unexpected Arrangement of it with another Subject.” And so the author of the essay “Of Wit” in the *Weekly Register* for July 22, 1732, ventured his opinion (reprinted in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, II, 861-862):

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Wit is a Start of Imagination in the Speaker, that strikes the Imagination of the Hearer with an Idea of Beauty common to both; and the immediate Result of the Comparison is the Flash of Joy that attends it; it stands in the same Regard to Sense, or Wisdom, as lightning to the Sun, suddenly kindled and as suddenly gone....

But for the most part wit was becoming an expression of mirth or ridicule in which fancy was primarily involved; at its best wit was coupled with politeness and elegance in conversation, and at its worst with silliness and extravagance, or with indecency and impiety.

The essay from the *Weekly Register* is one of a large number of little histories of wit, which appear through the age of Dryden and Pope and which attempt to relate developments in wit to changes in fashion, religion, politics, social manners, and taste. These are rudimentary but important expressions of the idea that literature is conditioned by changing circumstances and social customs in the lives of the people from whom it springs.

The *Essay on Wit*, 1748, is reprinted here, by permission, from a copy in the library of the University of Illinois. Flecknoe's *Characters* are reprinted from a copy of *Sixty Nine Enigmatical Character* owned by the library of the University of Michigan. The essays of Joseph Warton is the *Adventurer*, and the typescript copy of the essay

“Of Wit” from the *Weekly Register* (as reprinted in the *Gentleman's Magazine*) are also taken from copies belonging to the University of Michigan.

Edward Niles Hooker
University of California, Los Angeles

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[Illustration: Title page]

AN ESSAY ON WIT.

[Price Six-pence.]

AN ESSAY ON WIT:

To which is annexed,

A DISSERTATION on Antient and Modern HISTORY.

* * * * *



— *Sapientia prima*
Stultitia caruisse. HOR. Epist. I. Lib. I.

* * * * *

LONDON:

Printed for *T. Lownds*, Bookseller, at the *Bible and Crown*, in *Exeter-Change*, in the
Strand, 1748.

* * * * *

AN ESSAY ON WIT.

A Gentleman who had some Knowledge in the human Heart, was consulted about a Tragedy which was going to be acted: He answer'd that there was so much Wit in the Piece that he doubted of its Success.—At hearing such a Judgment, a Man will immediately cry out, What! is Wit then a Fault, at a Time when every Body aims at having it, when nobody writes but to shew he has it; when the Publick applauds even false Thoughts, provided they are shining! Yes, 'twill doubtless be applauded the first Day, and grow tiresome the next.



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That which they call Wit, is sometimes a new Simile, sometimes a fine Allusion: Here 'tis the Abuse of a Word which presents itself in one Sense, and is understood in another; there a delicate Relation between two uncommon Ideas: 'Tis an extraordinary Metaphor; 'tis something which in an Object does not at first present itself, but nevertheless is in it; 'tis the Art, to unite two Things which were far from one another; to separate two which seem to be joined, or to set them in Opposition; 'tis the Art, of expressing but half the Thought and leaving the other to be found out. In short, I'd tell all the different Ways of shewing Wit, if I knew of any more.

But all these Brightnesses (and I speak not of the false ones) agree not, or very seldom agree with a serious Work, which ought to be interesting. The Reason of it is, that 'tis then the Author that appears, and the Publick will see no body but the Hero. Moreover the Hero is always either in a Passion, or in Danger. Danger, and the Passions seek not Expressions of Wit. *Priam* and *Hecuba* don't make Epigrams, when their Children's Throats are cut and *Troy* in Flames:—*Dido* does not sigh in Madrigals, when she lies to the Pile upon which she's going to sacrifice herself:—*Demosthenes* has no Prettinesses, when he animates the *Athenians* to War; if he had, he'd be a Rhetorician indeed, instead of which he's a Statesman.

If *Pyrrhus* was always to express himself in this Stile:

*'Tis true,
My Sword has often reek'd in Phrygian Blood,
And carried Havock through your Royal Kindred:
But you, fair Princess, amply have aveng'd
Old Priam's vanquish'd House: And all the Woes,
I brought on them, fall short of what I suffer.*

This Character wou'd not touch at all: 'Twou'd soon be perceiv'd, that true Passion seldom makes Use of such Comparisons, and that there is very little Proportion between the real Fires which consumed *Troy*, and the amorous Fires of *Pyrrhus*; between the Havock he made amongst *Andromache's* Kindred and the Cruelty she shews him.

Chamont says, in speaking of *Monimia*:

You took her up a little tender Flower, Just sprouted on a Bank, which the next Frost Had nipt; and, with a careful loving Hand, Transplanted her into your own fair Garden, Where the Sun always shines: There long she flourish'd, Grew sweet to Sense, and lovely to the Eye; Till at the last, a cruel Spoiler came, Cropt this fair Rose, and rifled all its Sweetness, Then cast it, like a loathsome Weed, away.

This Thought has a prodigious Eclat: There's a great deal of Wit in it, and even an Air of Simplicity that imposes upon one. We all see, that these Verses, pronounced with the

Art and Enthusiasm of a good Actor never fail of Applause; but I think we may also see, that the Tragedy of the *Orphan* wrote entirely in this Taste would never have lived long.



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In effect, why should *Chamont* make such a long-winded Simile almost in the Height of Rage for the Ruin of his Sister? Is that natural? Does not the Poet here quite hide his Hero to shew himself?

This brings into my Mind the absurd Custom of finishing the Acts of almost all our modern Tragedies with a Simile; surely in a great Crisis of Affairs, in a Council, in a violent Passion of Love or Wrath, in a pressing Danger, Princes, Ministers, Heroes or Lovers, should not make Poetical Comparisons.—Even *Marcia's* (or rather Mr. *Addison's*) beautiful Simile at the End of the first Act of *Cato*, is scarcely to be forgiven.

What then would a Work be, that was filled with far-fetched and Problematick Thoughts? How infinitely superior to all such dazzling Ideas, are these simple and natural Words of *Monimia* to her angry Brother?

Look kindly on me then. I cannot bear Severity; it daunts, and does amaze me: My Heart's so tender, should you charge me rough, I should but weep, and answer you with sobbing. But use me gently, like a loving Brother, And search through all the Secrets of my Soul.

Or these of *Brutus*, when he receives the News of his Wife's Death:

Brutus. Now, as you are a Roman, tell me true.

*Messala. Then like a Roman bear the Truth I tell;
For certain she is dead, and by strange manner.*

*Brutus. Why farewell Portia.—We must die, Messala.
With meditating that she must die once,
I have the Patience to endure it now.*

Or these noble ones of *Titinius*, when he stabs himself:

By your leave Gods—this is a Roman's Part.

It is not that which is called Wit, but what is sublime and noble that makes true Beauty.

I have purposely chose these Examples from good Authors, that they may be the more striking; and I speak not of those Points and Quibbles, whose Impropriety is easily perceiv'd. There is no one but laughs when *Hotspur* says,

*Why, what a deal of candied Courtesie This fawning Greyhound then did proffer me!
Look, when his infant Fortune came to Age, And gentle Harry Percy—and kind Cousin
—The Devil take such Cozeners.—*



Shakespear found the Stage, and all the People of his Days, infected with these Puerillities, and he very well knew how (though perhaps he never read it in *Epictetus*) [Greek:] to attune, or harmonize his Mind to the Things which happen.

I now remember one of these shining Strokes, which I have seen quoted in several Works of Taste, and even in the Treatise of Studies by the late Mr. *Rollin*. This *Morceau* is taken from the beautiful Funeral Oration of the great *Turenne*: The whole Piece is very fine, but it seems to me that the Stroke I am speaking of should not have been made Use of by a Bishop.—This is it:



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“O Sovereigns! Enemies of *France*, ye live, and the Spirit of Christian Charity forbids me to wish your Deaths, &c.—But ye live, and I mourn in this Pulpit the Death of a virtuous Captain, whose Intentions were pure, &c.—”

An Apostrophe in this Taste would have been very proper at *Rome* in the Civil Wars, after the Assassination of *Pompey*; or at *London* after the Death of *Charles* the First. But is it decent, in a Pulpit, to wish for the Death of the Emperor, the King of *Spain*, and the Electors; to put them in Balance with the General of a King’s Army, who is their Enemy? Or ought the Intentions of a Captain, which can be no other than to serve his Prince, to be compared with the Politick Interests of the crown’d Heads against which he serves? What would be said of a *Frenchman*, who had wished for the Death of the King of *England*, because of the Loss of the Chevalier *Belleisle*, whose Intentions were pure?

For what Reason has this Passage been always praised by the Criticks? ’Tis because the Figure is in itself beautiful and pathetick, but they did not examine into the Congruity and Bottom of the Thought.

I return to my Paradox—That all these shining Strokes, to which they give the Name of Wit, never ought to be introduced into great Works made to instruct or to move; I’ll even say they ought not to be found in Odes for Musick. Musick expresses Passions, Sentiments and Images: but what are the Concords that can be giv’n an Epigram? *Dryden* was sometimes negligent, but he was always natural.

In a Sermon of Doctor *South*, where he speaks of Man’s Rectitude and Freedom from Sin before the Fall, are seen these Words:

“We were not born crooked, we learnt these Windings and Turnings of the Serpent.”

I remember to have heard this Passage admired by several People: but who does not see that the Motions, *viz.* the Windings and Turnings of the Serpent’s Body are here confounded with those of its Heart: and that at best, ’tis but a mere Point and Pleasantry.

Certainly there’s a great Impropriety in putting any kind of Smartness into Pieces of such a Nature as Dr. *South*’s; but what is still worse, we generally find these Smartnesses to be quite vague and superficial; they don’t enter, but only play upon the Surface of the Soul.

Had a certain polite Author been a Cotemporary of the Doctor’s, he’d have told him that

[Greek: Ten men Spoudhhen dichph teirein gheloi, thyn de geloia spoudhe.]

Humour is the only Test of Gravity; and Gravity of Humour. For a Subject which will not bear Raillery, is suspicious; and a Jest which will not bear a serious Examination, is certainly false Wit.



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These Sports of the Imagination, these Finesses, these Conceits, these glittering Strokes, these Gaieties, these little cut Sentences, these ingenious Prodigalities, which are lavished away in our Times, agree with none but little Works. The Front of St *Paul's* Church is simple and majestick. A Cabinet may with Propriety enough contain little Ornaments. Have as much Wit as you will, or you can, in a Madrigal, in little light Verses, in the Scene of a Comedy, which is neither passionate or simple, in a Compliment, in a little Story, in a Letter where you would be merry yourself to make your Friends so.

Spencer was very well acquainted with this Art. In his *Fairy Queen*, you find hardly any thing but what is sublime and full of Imagery: but in his detached Pieces, such as the Hymn in Honour of Beauty, The Fate of the Butterfly, *Britain's* *Ida*, &c. he gave a Loose to his Wit and Delicacy. The following Verses are Part of the Description of *Venus* asleep, in the last mention'd Poem:

*Her full large Eyes, in jetty-black array'd, Proud Beauty not confin'd to red and white,
But oft herself in black more rich display'd; Both Contraries did yet themselves unite, To
make one Beauty in different Delight: A thousand Loves, sate playing in each Eye, And
smiling Mirth kissing fair Courtesy, By sweet Persuasion won a bloodless Victory. Her
Lips most happy each in other's Kisses, From their so wish'd Imbracements seldom
parted, Yet seem'd to blush at such their wanton Bliss; But when sweet Words their
joining Sweets parted, To the Ear a dainty Musick they imparted; Upon them fitly sate
delightful Smiling, A thousand Souls with pleasing Stealth beguiling: Ah that such
shews of Joys shou'd be all Joys exiling! Lower two Breasts stand all their Beauties
bearing, Two Breasts as smooth and soft;—but oh alas! Their smoothest Softness far
exceeds comparing: More smooth and soft—but naught that ever was, Where they are
first, deserves the second Place: Yet each as soft, and each as smooth as other; But
when thou first try'st one, and then the other, Each softer seems than each, and each
than each seems smoother.*

These Lines (pretty as they are) would be unsufferable in a large and serious Work, nay, there are some People who tax them with being too extravagant even for the Poem where they stand; and in truth, their warmest Admirer can say no more than this:

Nequeo Monstrare, & Sentio tantum.

So far am I from reproaching *Waller* with putting too much Wit in his Poems; that on the contrary, I have found too little, though he continually aims at it. They say that Dancing Masters never make a handsome Bow, because they take too much Pains. I think *Waller* is often in this Case; his best Verses are studied; one finds he quite tires himself to find that which presents itself so naturally to *Rochester*, *Congreve*, and to so many more, who with all the Ease in the World, write these Bagatelles better than *Waller* did with Labour.



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I know it signifies very little to the Affairs of the World, whether *Waller* was or was not a great Genius; whether he only made a few pretty Things, or that all his Verses may stand for Models. But we who love the Arts, carry an attentive Eye on that which to the rest of the World is a Matter of mere Indifference. Good Taste is for us in Literature, what it is for Women in Dress; and provided we don't make our Opinions an Affair of Party, I think we may boldly say, that there are few excellent Things in *Waller*, and that *Cowley* might be easily reduced to a few Pages.

It is not that we would deprive them of their Reputation; 'tis only to inquire strictly what brought them that Reputation which is so much respected; and what are the true Beauties which made their Faults be overlooked. It must be known what ought to be followed in their Works, and what avoided; this is the true Fruit of a deep Study in the Belles Lettres; it is this that *Horace* did, when he examined *Lucilius* critically. *Horace* got Enemies by it, but he enlightened his Enemies themselves.

This Desire of shining, and to say in a new Manner what others have said before, is the Foundation of new Expressions, as well as of far-fetched Thoughts.

He that cannot shine by a Thought will distinguish himself by a Word. This is their Reason for substituting Placid for Peaceful, Joyous for Joyful, Meandering for Winding; and a hundred more Affectations of the same kind. If they were to go on at this Rate, the Language of *Shakespear*, *Milton*, *Dryden*, *Addison* and *Pope*, would soon become quite superannuated. And why avoid an Expression in use, to introduce one which says precisely the same Thing? A new Word is never pardonable, but when it is absolutely necessary, intelligible and sonorous; they are forc'd to make them in Physics: A new Discovery, or a new Machine demands a new Word. But do they make new Discoveries in the human Heart? Is there any other Greatness than that of *Shakespear* and *Milton*? Are there any other Passions than those that have been handled by *Otway* and *Dryden*? Is there any other Evangelic Moral than that of Dr. *Tillotson*?

Those who accuse the *English* Language of not being copious enough, do, in Truth, find a Sterility, but 'tis in themselves.

Rem Verba Sequuntur.

When one is thoroughly struck with an Idea, when a Man of Sense, fill'd with Warmth, is in full Possession of his Thought, it comes from him all ornamented with suitable Expressions, as *Minerva* sprang out, compleatly arm'd, from the Head of *Jupiter*.

In short, the Conclusion of all this is, that you must never seek for far-fetch'd Thoughts, Conceits or Expressions; and that the Art of all great Works, is to reason well, without making many Arguments; to paint accurately, without Painting all; to move, without always exciting the Passions.



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[Illustration: Title page]

Sixtynine
ENIGMATICAL
Characters,
ALL
Very exactly drawn to the Life.

{ Persons,
From several { Humours,
{ Dispositions.

PLEASANT
And full of
DELIGHT.

* * * * *

The Second Edition by the Author R.F. Esquire.

* * * * *

London, Printed for *William Crook*, at the sign of the three Bibles on *Fleet Bridge*, 1665.

* * * * *

CHARACTER.

Of one that Zanys the good Companion.

He is a wit of an under Region, grosly imitating on the lower rope, what t'other does neatly on the higher; and is only for the laughter of the vulgar; whilst your wiser and better sort can scarcely smile at him: He talks nothing but kennel-raked fluff, and his discourse is rather like fruit cane up rotten from the ground, than freshly gathered from the Tree. He is so far from a courtly wit, as his breeding seems only to have been i' th' Suburbs; or at best, he seems only graduated good company in a Tavern (the Bedlam of wits) where men are mad rather than merry; here one breaking a jest on the Drawer, or a Candlestick; there another repeating the old end of a Play, or some bawdy song; this speaking bilk, that nonsense, whilst all with loud houting and laughter confound the *Fidlers* noise, who may well be call'd a noise indeed, for no *Musick* can be heard for them; so whilst he utters nothing but old stories, long since laught thridbare, or some stale jest broken twenty times before: His *mirth* compared with theirs, new and at first hand, is just like *Brokers* ware in comparison with *Mercers*, or *Long-lane* compar'd unto



Cheap-side: his wit being rather the *Hogs-heads* than his own, favouring more of *Heidelberg* than of *Hellicon*, and he rather a drunken than a good companion.

* * * * *

CHARACTER.

Of a bold abusive Wit.

He talks madly, *dash, dash*, without any fear at all, and never cares how he *bespatters* others, or defiles himself; nor ceases he till he has quite run himself out of breath; when no wonder, if to fools he seems to get the start of those who wisely pick out their way, and are as fearful of abusing others as themselves: He has the *Buffoons* priviledge, of saying or doing anything without exceptions, and he will call a jealous man *Cuckold*, a childe of doubtful birth *Bastard*, and a *Lady* of suspected honor a *Whore*, and they but laugh at it; and all *Scholars* are *Pedants*; and *Physicians*, *Quacks* with him, when to be angry at it is the avowing it. Then in



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Ladies chambers, he will tumble beds, and towse your *Ladies* dress up unto the height, to the hazard of a *Bed-staff* thrown at his head, or rap o're the fingers with a *Busk*, and that is all; only is this he is far worse than the *Buffoon*, since they study to *delight*, this only to *offend*; they to make *merry*, but this onely to make you *mad*, whence wo be t' ye of he discovers and *imperfection* or *fault* in you, for he never findes a *breach* but he makes a *hole* of it; nor a *hole* but he *tugs* at it so long till he tear it quite; giving you for reason of his *incivility*, because (forsooth) *it troubled you*, which would make any civil man cease troubling you. So he wears his *wit* as *Bravo's* do their swords, to mischief and offend others, not as *Gentlemen* to defend themselves: and tis *crime* in him, what is *ornament* in others; he being onely a *wit* at that, at which a good *wit* is a *fool*. Especially he triumphs over your modest men; and when he meets with a *simple body*, passes for a *wit*, but a *wit* indeed makes a *simplician* of him; so goes he persecuting others till some one or other at last (as *chollerick* as he is *abusive*) *cudgel* him for his pains; when he goes *grumbling* away in a mighty *choler*, saying, *They understand not jest*, when indeed tis rather *he*.

* * * * *

THE ADVENTURER.

VOLUME THE FOURTH.

—Tentanda via est; qua me quoque possim
Tollere humo, victorque viram volitare per ora.— VIRG.

On vent'rous wing in quest of praise I go,
And leave the gazing multitude below.

A NEW EDITION, ILLUSTRATED WITH FRONTISPIECES.

LONDON: PRINTED FOR SILVESTER DOIG, ROYAL EXCHANGE, EDINBURGH.

1793.

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No. CXXVII. Tuesday, January 22. 1754.

—Veteres ita miratur, laudatque!—
HOR.

The wits of old he praises and admires.



“It is very remarkable,” says Addison, “that notwithstanding we fall short at present of the ancients in poetry, painting, oratory, history, architecture, and all the noble arts and sciences which depend more upon genius than experience; we exceed them as much in doggerel, humour, burlesque, and all the trivial arts of ridicule.” As this fine observation stands at present only in the form of a general assertion, it deserves, I think, to be examined by a deduction of particulars, and confirmed by an allegation of examples, which may furnish an agreeable entertainment to those who have ability and inclination to remark the revolutions of human wit.



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That Tasso, Ariosto, and Camoens, the three most celebrated of modern Epic Poets, are infinitely excelled in propriety of design, of sentiment, and style, by Horace and Virgil, it would be serious trifling to attempt to prove: but Milton, perhaps, will not so easily resign his claim to equality, if not to superiority. Let it, however, be remembered, that if Milton be enabled to dispute the prize with the great champions of antiquity, it is entirely owing to the sublime conceptions he has copied from the book of God. These, therefore, must be taken away before we begin to make a just estimate of his genius; and from what remains, it cannot, I presume, be said with candour and impartiality, that he has excelled Homer in the sublimity and variety of his thoughts, or the strength and majesty of his diction.

Shakespear, Corneille, and Racine, are the only modern writers of Tragedy, that we can venture to oppose to Eschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The first is an author so uncommon and eccentric, that we can scarcely try him by dramatic rules. In strokes of nature and character, he yields not to the Greeks: in all other circumstances that constitute the excellence of the drama, he is vastly inferior. Of the three moderns, the most faultless is the tender and exact Racine: but he was ever ready to acknowledge, that his capital beauties were borrowed from his favourite Euripides; which, indeed, cannot escape the observation of those who read with attention his Phaedra and Andromache. The pompous and truly Roman sentiments of Corneille are chiefly drawn from Lucretius and Tacitus; the former of whom, by a strange perversion of taste, he is known to have preferred to Virgil. His diction is not so pure and mellifluous, his characters not so various and just, nor his plots so regular, so interesting, and simple, as those of his pathetic rival. It is by this simplicity of fable alone, when every single act, and scene, and speech, and sentiment, and word, concur to accelerate the intended event, that the Greek tragedies kept the attention of the audience immoveably fixed upon one principal object, which must be necessarily lessened, and the ends of the drama defeated, by the mazes and intricacies of modern plots.

The assertion of Addison with respect to the first particular, regarding the higher kinds of poetry, will remain unquestionably true, till nature in some distant age, for in the present, enervated with luxury, she seems incapable of such an effort, shall produce some transcendent genius, of power to eclipse the Iliad and the Edipus.

The superiority of the ancient artists in Painting, is not perhaps so clearly manifest. They were ignorant, it will be said, of light, of shade, and perspective; and they had not the use of oil colours, which are happily calculated to blend and unite without harshness and discordance, to give a boldness and relief to the figures, and to form those middle Tints which render every well-wrought piece a closer resemblance

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of nature. Judges of the truest taste do, however, place the merit of colouring far below that of justness of design, and force of expression. In these two highest and most important excellencies, the ancient painters were eminently skilled, if we trust the testimonies of Pliny, Quintilian, and Lucian; and to credit them we are obliged, if we would form to ourselves any idea of these artists at all; for there is not one Grecian picture remaining; and the Romans, some few of whose works have descended to this age, could never boast of a Parrhasius or Apelles, a Zeuxis, Timanthes, or Protogenes, of whose performances the two accomplished critics above mentioned, speaks in terms of rapture and admiration. The statues that have escaped the ravages of time, as the Hercules and Laocoon for instance, are still a stronger demonstration of the power of the Grecian artists in expressing the passions; for what was executed in marble, we have presumptive evidence to think, might also have been executed in colours. Carlo Marat, the last valuable painter of Italy, after copying the head of the Venus in the Medicean collection three hundred times, generously confessed, that he could not arrive at half the grace and perfection of his model. But to speak my opinion freely on a very disputable point, I must own, that if the moderns approach the ancients in any of the arts here in question, they approach them nearest in The Art of Painting, The human mind can with difficulty conceive any thing more exalted, than "The Last Judgment" of Michael Angelo, and "The Transfiguration" of Raphael. What can be more animated than Raphael's "Paul preaching at Athens?" What more tender and delicate than Mary holding the child Jesus, in his famous "Holy Family?" What more graceful than "The Aurora" of Guido? What more deeply moving than "The Massacre of the Innocents" by Le Brun?

But no modern Orator can dare to enter the lists with Demosthenes and Tully. We have discourses, indeed, that may be admired, for their perspicuity, purity, and elegance; but can produce none that abound in a sublime which whirls away the auditor like a mighty torrent, and pierces the inmost recesses of his heart like a flash of lightning; which irresistibly and instantaneously convinces, without leaving, him leisure to weigh the motives of conviction. The sermons of Bourdaloue, the funeral orations of Bossuet, particularly that on the death of Henrietta, and the pleadings of Pelisson, for his disgraced patron Fouquet, are the only pieces of eloquence I can recollect, that bear any resemblance to the Greek or Roman orator; for in England we have been particularly unfortunate in our attempts to be eloquent, whether in parliament, in the pulpit, or at the bar. If it be urged, that the nature of modern politics and laws excludes the pathetic and the sublime, and confines the speaker to a cold argumentative method, and a dull detail of proof and dry matters of fact; yet, surely, the Religion of the moderns abounds in topics so incomparably noble and exalted as might kindle the flames of genuine oratory in the most frigid and barren genius much more might this success be reasonably expected from such geniuses as Britain can enumerate; yet no piece of this sort, worthy applause or notice, has ever yet appeared.

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The few, even among professed scholars, that are able to read the ancient Historians in their inimitable, originals, are startled at the paradox, of Bolingbroke who boldly prefers Guicciardini to Thucydides; that is, the most verbose and tedious to the most comprehensive and concise of writers, and a collector of facts to one who was himself an eye-witness and a principal actor in the important story he relates. And, indeed, it may be well presumed, that the ancient histories exceed the modern from this single consideration, that the latter are commonly compiled by recluse scholars, unpractised in business, war, and politics; whilst the former are many of them written by ministers, commanders, and princes themselves. We have, indeed, a few flimsy memoirs, particularly in a neighbouring nation, written by persons deeply interested in the transactions they describe; but these I imagine will not be compared to "The retreat of the ten thousand" which Xenophon himself conducted and related, nor to "the Galic war" of Caesar, nor "The precious fragments" of Polybius, which our modern generals and ministers would not have discredited by diligently perusing, and making them the models of their conduct as well as of their style. Are the reflections of Machiavel so subtle and refined as those of Tacitus? Are the portraits of Thuanus so strong and expressive as those of Sallust and Plutarch? Are the narrations of Davila so lively and animated, or do his sentiments breathe such a love of liberty and virtue, as those of Livy and Herodotus?

The supreme excellence of the ancient Architecture the last particular to be touched, I shall not enlarge upon, because it has never once been called in question, and because it is abundantly testified by the awful ruins of amphitheatres, aqueducts, arches, and columns, that are the daily objects of veneration, though not of imitation. This art, it is observable; has never been improved in later ages in one single instance; but every just and legitimate edifice is still formed according to the five old established orders, to which human wit has never been able to add a sixth of equal symmetry and strength.

Such, therefore, are the triumphs of the Ancients, especially the Greeks, over the Moderns. They may, perhaps, be not unjustly ascribed to a genial climate, that gave such a happy temperament of body as was most proper to produce fine sensations; to a language most harmonious, copious, and forcible; to the public encouragements and honours bestowed on the cultivators of literature; to the emulation excited among the generous youth, by exhibitions of their performances at the solemn games; to an inattention to the arts of lucre and commerce, which engross and debase the minds of the moderns; and above all, to an exemption from the necessity of overloading their natural faculties with learning and languages, with which we in these later times are obliged to qualify ourselves, for writers, if we expect to be read.



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It is said by Voltaire, with his usual liveliness, "We shall never again behold the time, when a Duke de la Rochefoucault might go from the conversation of a Pascal or Arnauld, to the theatre of Corneille." This reflection may be more justly applied to the ancients, and it may with much greater truth be said; "The age will never again return, when a Pericles, after walking with Plato in a portico, built by Phidias, and painted by Apelles, might repair to hear a pleading of Demosthenes, or a tragedy of Sophocles."

I shall next examine the other part of Addison's assertion, that the moderns excell the ancients in all the arts of Ridicule, and assign the reasons of this supposed excellence.

No. CXXXIII. Tuesday, February 12. 1754.

*At nostri proavi Plautinos et numeros et
Laudeveres sales; nimium patienter utrumque,
Ne dicam stule, mirati; si modo ego et vos
Scimus inurbanum lepido seponere dicto.*

HOR. "And yet our fires with joy could

Plautus hear;
Gay were his jests, his numbers charm'd their ear."
Let me not say too lavishly they prais'd;
But sure their judgment was full cheaply pleas'd,
If you or I with taste are haply blest,
To know a clownish from a courtly jest.

FRANCIS.

The fondness I have so frequently manifested for the ancients, has not so far blinded my judgment, as to render me unable to discern, or unwilling to acknowledge, the superiority of the moderns, in pieces of Humour and Ridicule. I shall, therefore, confirm the general assertion of Addison, part of which hath already been examined.

Comedy, Satire, and Burlesque, being the three chief branches of ridicule, it is necessary for us to compare together the most admired performances of the ancients and moderns, in these three kinds of writing, to qualify us justly to censure or commend, as the beauties or blemishes of each party may deserve.

As Aristophanes wrote to please the multitude, at a time when the licentiousness of the Athenians was boundless, his pleasantries are coarse and impolite, his characters extravagantly forced, and distorted with unnatural deformity, like the monstrous caricaturas of Callot. He is full of the grossest obscenity, indecency, and inurbanity; and as the populace always delight to hear their superiors abused and misrepresented, he



scatters the rankest calumnies on the wisest and worthiest personages of his country. His style is unequal, occasioned by a frequent introduction of parodies on Sophocles and Euripides. It is, however, certain, that he abounds in artful allusions to the state of Athens at the time when he wrote; and, perhaps, he is more valuable, considered as a political satirist than a writer of comedy.



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Plautus has adulterated a rich vein of genuine wit and humour, with a mixture of the basest buffoonry. No writer seems to have been born with a more forcible or more fertile genius for comedy. He has drawn some characters with incomparable spirit: we are indebted to him for the first good miser, and for that worn-out character among the Romans, a boastful Thraso. But his love degenerates into lewdness; and his jests are insupportably low and illiberal, and fit only for “the dregs of Romulus” to use and to hear; he has furnished examples of every species of true and false wit, even down to a quibble and a pun. Plautus lived in an age when the Romans were but just emerging into politeness; and I cannot forbear thinking, that if he had been reserved for the age of Augustus, he would have produced more perfect plays than even the elegant disciple of Menander.

Delicacy, sweetness, and correctness, are the characteristics of Terence. His polite images are all represented in the most clear and perspicuous expression; but his characters are too general and uniform, nor are they marked with those discriminating peculiarities that distinguish one man from another; there is a tedious and disgusting sameness of incidents in his plots, which, as hath been observed in a former paper, are too complicated and intricate. It may be added, that he superabounds in soliloquies; and that nothing can be more inartificial or improper, than the manner in which he hath introduced them.

To these three celebrated ancients, I venture to oppose singly the matchless Moliere, as the most consummate master of comedy that former or latter ages have produced. He was not content with painting obvious and common characters, but set himself closely to examine the numberless varieties of human nature: he soon discovered every difference, however minute; and by a proper management could make it striking: his portraits, therefore, though they appear to be new, are yet discovered to be just. The Tartuffe and the Misanthrope are the most singular, and yet, perhaps, the most proper and perfect characters that comedy can represent; and his Miser excels that of any other nation. He seems to have hit upon the true nature of comedy; which is, to exhibit one singular, and unfamiliar character, by such a series of incidents as may best contribute to shew its singularities. All the circumstances in the Misanthrope tend to manifest the peevish and captious disgust of the hero; all the circumstances in the Tartuffe are calculated to shew the treachery of an accomplished hypocrite. I am sorry that no English writer of comedy can be produced as a rival to Moliere: although it must be confessed, that Falstaff and Morose are two admirable characters, excellently supported and displayed; for Shakespear has contrived all the incidents to illustrate the gluttony, lewdness, cowardice, and boastfulness of the fat old knight: and Jonson, has, with equal art, displayed the oddity of a whimsical humourist, who could endure no kind of noise.



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Will it be deemed a paradox, to assert, that Congreve's dramatic persons have no striking and natural characteristic? His Fondlewife and Foresight are but faint portraits of common characters, and Ben is a forced and unnatural caricatura. His plays appear not to be legitimate comedies, but strings of repartees and sallies of wit, the most poignant and polite indeed, but unnatural and ill placed. The trite and trivial character of a fop, hath strangely engrossed the English stage, and given an insipid similiarity to our best comic pieces: originals can never be wanting in such a kingdom as this, where each man follows his natural inclinations and propensities, if our writers would really contemplate nature, and endeavour to open those mines of humour which have been so long and so unaccountably neglected.

If we proceed to consider the Satirists of antiquity, I shall not scruple to prefer Boileau and Pope to Horace and Juvenal; the arrows of whose ridicule are more sharp, in proportion as they are more polished. That reformers should abound in obscenities, as is the case of the two Roman poets, is surely an impropriety of the most extraordinary kind; the courtly Horace also sometimes sinks into mean and farcical abuse, as in the first lines of the seventh satire of the first book; but Boileau and Pope have given to their Satire the Cestus of Venus: their ridicule is concealed and oblique; that of the Romans direct and open. The tenth satire of Bioleau on women is more bitter, and more decent and elegant, than the sixth of Juvenal on the same subject; and Pope's epistle to Mrs. Blount far excels them both, in the artfulness and delicacy with which it touches female foibles. I may add, that the imitations of Horace by Pope, and of Juvenal by Johnson, are preferable to their originals in the appositeness of their examples, and in the poignancy of their ridicule. Above all, the Lutrin, the Rape of the Lock, the Dispensary and the Dunciad, cannot be paralleled by any works that the wittiest of the ancients can boast of: for, by assuming the form of the epopea, they have acquired a dignity and gracefulness, which all satires delivered merely in the poet's own person must want, and with which the satirists of antiquity were wholly unacquainted; for the Batrachomomachia of Homer cannot be considered as the model of these admirable pieces.

Lucian is the greatest master of Burlesque among the ancients: but the travels of Gulliver, though indeed evidently copied from his true history, do as evidently excel it. Lucian sets out with informing his readers, that he is in jest, and intends to ridicule some of the incredible stories in Ctesias and Herodotus: this introduction surely enfeebles his satire, and defeats his purpose. The true history consists only of the most wild, monstrous, and miraculous persons and accidents: Gulliver has a concealed meaning, and his dwarfs and giants convey tacitly some moral or political instruction. The Charon, or the

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prospect, (Greek: epischoyntes) one of the dialogues of Lucian, has likewise given occasion to that agreeable French Satire, entitled, "*Le Diable Boiteux*," or "The Lame Devil;" which has highly improved on its original by a greater variety of characters and descriptions, lively remarks, and interesting adventures. So if a parallel be drawn between Lucian and Cervantes, the ancient will still appear to disadvantage: the burlesque of Lucian principally consists in making his gods and philosophers speak and act like the meanest of the people; that of Cervantes arises from the solemn and important air with which the most idle and ridiculous actions are related; and is, therefore, much more striking and forcible. In a word, Don Quixote, and its copy Hudibras, the Splendid Shilling, the Adventures of Gil Blas, the Tale of a Tub, and the Rehearsal, are pieces of humour which antiquity cannot equal, much less excel.

Theophrastus must yield to La Bruyere for his intimate knowledge of human nature; and the Athenians never produced a writer whose humour was so exquisite as that of Addison, or who delineated and supported a character with so much nature and true pleasantry, as that of Sir Roger de Coverly. It ought, indeed, to be remembered, that every species of wit written in distant times and in dead languages, appears with many disadvantages to present readers, from their ignorance of the manners and customs alluded to and exposed; but the grossness, the rudeness, and indelicacy of the ancients, will, notwithstanding, sufficiently appear, even from the sentiments of such critics as Cicero and Quintilian, who mention corporal defects and deformities as proper objects of raillery.

If it be now asked to what can we ascribe this superiority of the moderns in all the species of ridicule? I answer, to the improved state of conversation. The great geniuses of Greece and Rome were formed during the times of a republican government: and though it be certain, as Longinus asserts, that democracies are the nurseries of true sublimity; yet monarchies and courts are more productive of politeness. The arts of civility, and the decencies of conversation, as they unite men more closely, and bring them more frequently together, multiply opportunities of observing those incongruities and absurdities of behaviour, on which ridicule is founded. The ancients had more liberty and seriousness; the moderns have more luxury and laughter.

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[Illustration: Title page]

THE *Gentleman's Magazine*. OR, MONTHLY INTELLIGENCER,

For the YEAR 1732.



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OF WIT

WIT in K. *Charles* II's Reign, seem'd to be the Fashion of the Times; in the next Reign it gave way to Politicks and Religion; while K. *William* was on the Throne, it reviv'd under the Protection of Lord *Somers* and some other Nobleman, and then those Geniuses received that Tincture of Elegance and Politeness which afterwards made such a Figure in the *Tatlers, Spectators, &c.* thro' the greatest Part of the Reign of Q. *Anne*: But since it has broke out only by Fits and Starts. Few People of Distinction trouble themselves about the Name of Wit, fewer understand it, and hardly any have honoured it with their Example. In the next Class of People it seems best known, most admired, and most frequently practiced; but their Stations in Life are not eminent enough to dazzle us into Imitation. Wit is a Start of Imagination in the Speaker, that strikes the Imagination of the Hearer with an Idea of Beauty, common to both; and the immediate Result of the Comparison is the Flash of Joy that attends it; it stands in the same Regard to Sense, or Wisdom, as Lightning to the Sun, suddenly kindled and as suddenly gone; it as often arises from the Defect of the Mind, as from its Strength and Capacity. This is evident in those who are *Wits* only, without being grave or wise, Just, solid, and lasting Wit is the Result of fine Imagination, finished Study, and a happy Temper of Body. As no one pleases more than the Man of Wit, none is more liable to offend; therefore he shou'd have a Fancy quick to conceive, Knowledge, good Humour, and Discretion to direct the whole. Wit often leads a Man into Misfortunes, that his



Prudence wou'd have avoided; as it is the Means of raising a Reputation, so it sometimes destroys it. He who affects to be always witty, renders himself cheap, and, perhaps, ridiculous. The great Use and Advantage of Wit is to render the Owner agreeable, by making him instrumental to the Happiness of others. When such a Person appears among his Friends, an Air of Pleasure and Satisfaction

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diffuses itself over every Face. *Wit*, so used, is an Instrument of the sweetest Musick in the Hands of an Artist, commanding, soothing, and modulating the Passions into Harmony and Peace. Neither is this the only Use of it; 'tis a sharp Sword, as well as a musical Instrument, and ought to be drawn against Folly and Affectation. There is at the same time an humble Ignorance, a modest Weakness, that ought to be spar'd; they are unhappy already in the Consciousness of their own Defects, and 'tis fighting with the Lame and Sick to be severe upon them. The Wit that genteely glances at a Foible, is smartly retorted, or generously forgiven; because the Merit of the Reprover is as well known as the Merit of the Reproved. In such delicate Conversations, Mirth, temper'd with good Manners, is the only Point in View, and we grow gay and polite together; perhaps there's no Moment of our Lives so sincerely happy, certainly none so innocent. Wit is a Quality which some possess, and all covet; Youth affects it, Folly dreads it, Age despises it, and Dulness abhors it. Some Authors wou'd persuade us, that Wit is owing to a double Cause; one, the Desire of pleasing others, and one of recommending ourselves: The first is made a Merit in the Owners, and is therefore rang'd among the Virtues; the last is stiled Vanity, and therefore a Vice; tho' this is an erroneous Distinction, as *Wit* was never possess'd by any without both; for no Man endeavours to excell without being conscious of it, and that Consciousness will produce Vanity, let us disguise it how we please. Upon the whole, Vanity is inseparable from the; Heart of Man; where there is Excellency, it may be endur'd; where there is none, it may be censur'd, but never remov'd.

(From *The Weekly Register*, July 22, 1732, No. 119, as reprinted in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, II, July, 1732, pp. 861-2.)

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