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Claude and Ted-Larry's Excellent Adventure

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Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, eds., *The Wit of Seventeenth-Century Poetry*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1995. 222 pages, Index.

For those not familiar with the movie, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* begins with two young surfer dudes confronted with a history examination they are unquestionably incapable of passing. The boys are approaching despair, pondering their dilemma in the parking lot of a convenience store late on the eve of their exam, when out of nowhere, with a blinding flash of light, a telephone booth appears. It is no ordinary telephone booth, however, because once closed inside its Plexiglas doors, the boys find themselves riding a time machine. They hurtle through the annals of history, pausing only occasionally to play a little air guitar, visiting the eras and individuals that are covered on their impending exam (back in the Twentieth Century). Before they finish, their telephone booth is crowded, literally, with the likes of Socrates, Ghengis Khan, and Napoleon. Along the way the boys' minds, like their formerly empty telephone booth, become filled with enough information from their time-travel to return to their own time and take their examination.

Good books and time-traveling telephone booths have much in common, and Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth have been creating for their more discriminating audience some of the finest collections of Renaissance scholarship available over the last two decades, not only individually in their own fine monographs, but also together in collecting, editing, and publishing the proceedings from the

last eight of ten biennial conferences held at the University of Michigan–Dearborn. Along the way some of the best minds and best essays in the field have been presented, greatly benefiting those who are confronted with examinations as well as those who give them. Each of these publications is celebrated in its own right, but considered as a group, these texts do represent an excellent adventure in Renaissance scholarship. Because of the merit of this series overall, it is worthwhile to list the texts individually:

1. 1974: *"Trust to Good Verses": Herrick Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Roger Rollin and J. Max Patrick (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978).
2. 1976: Special Issue, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 10:2 (1977), ed. William A. Sessions and James S. Tillman.
3. 1978: *"Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne": Essays on George Herbert*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980).
4. 1980: *Classic and Cavalier: Essays on Jonson and the Sons of Ben*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982).
5. 1982: *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).
6. 1984: *"Bright Shootes of Everlastingnesse": The Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987).
7. 1986: *"The Muses Common-Weale": Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988).
8. 1988: *On the Celebrated and Neglected Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992).
9. 1990: *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

10. 1992: *The Wit of Seventeenth Century Poetry*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

Their most recent conference publication, addressing the many definitions and opinions of wit in the Seventeenth Century, is a fitting tenth text in the Dearborn series. Wit is an evasive topic throughout the Renaissance, since the word was used both as praise and insult, indicating in the former an unique power of intellect and appropriate expression of it, yet in the latter indicating mere facetiousness or false humor, such as the pun which elicits groans only. Since such "contraries meet in one," the merit of this study is apparent. The next time a student asks what "wit" meant for the Seventeenth Century, one of the most thorough answers available might be "Read this book." As if delighting in difficulty, the editors posit the synchronic disagreement on the meaning of wit, commenting in their introduction how "vexed and slippery a topic" wit is to study, and also assert its diachronic shift: "wit is itself an important marker of historical change; it is always historically and culturally (as well as individually) specific..." (2). As one might expect, with the door thus fully opened to permit all possible meanings of wit, virtually all God's creatures can enter this telephone booth. This variety is both a strength and a weakness: at times inconsistent and even contradictory of each other, the collected essays educate through their provocative diversity and wide-ranging potential for application.

The choice of Helen Wilcox's essay, "'No More Wit Than a Christian?': The Case of Devotional Poetry" to lead the collection is astute. Not only does it range widely through devotional works by Donne, Herbert, An Collins, Vaughan, Eldred Revett, Crashaw, and others, but it offers definitions that are valuable to the reader throughout the collection. Wilcox develops terms and the meanings of "structural wit" (involving page layout and acrostics) "explicit wit" (as in wordplay) and "devotional wit" (which uses both to invoke shared ideas of faith and tradition). The problem, of course, is the frequent allusion in verse to how wit opposes the intent of devotional works. A

prominent example is Herbert's "Jordan II" which states "So did I weave my self into the sense," making the poem at least partly a celebration of his wit rather than a complete surrender to God. The word "wit," she notes, does not even appear in the Authorized Version of the Bible. In defense of wit her argument asserts a distinction according to the purpose—comparing wit employed for its own sake to wit employed in devotion to God for purposes of praise, revelation or inspiration. She emphasizes that many of the qualities of wit are shared by prayer: "creativity, self-expression, newness of perspective, identification, transformation, revelation, and abandonment" (16). Finally she concludes that wit in devotional verse "finds its fulfillment not in keeping control but in abandoning it, surrendering to the faith that it seeks to express and serve" (20). The result, then, is to appreciate more fully the poet's struggle to employ all the dimensions of wit to glorify God, yet not to allow "self into the sense."

In accord with Wilcox's definitions, P. G. Stanwood and Lee Johnson develop the significance of structural wit in their essay, "The Structure of Wit: 'Is all good structure in a winding stair?'" They also encompass the larger concept of metaphysical wit, employing A. J. Smith's durable definition, and also examining it in contrast with Philip Sidney's "metaphorical wit," both to refine their concept and to exclude the latter from consideration. They take Herbert and Milton as their poets for close examination, but first begin with acrostics by Optatian, as an example of "premetaphorical" poetry by Smith's definition, and Hrabanus Maurus, as a more immediately visual yet related sort of wit. These authors are very useful as extremes of purely structural wit, thus helping reveal similar characteristics in seventeenth-century texts. Such patterning is obvious in "Our Life is hid with Christ in God," with its diagonal sentence slashing left to right through the poem, but less so in "Trinitie Sunday" with its multiple patterning of threes. Similar readings of "Aaron" and "Man" follow—with a continued careful focus on the contribution structure makes.

As for Milton, Stanwood and Johnson assert that in his works one can find poetic architecture "most perfectly and subtly managed: he is often a metaphysical poet in the richest sense" (34), and take a number

of examples from *Paradise Lost* to illustrate. (There is a misprint on p.34 regarding the Father's speech in *PL* Book 3; ll.8-134 should be 80-134). Particularly interesting is the analysis of Uriel's speech to a disguised Satan at the end of Book 3, ll.694-735, patterned as three consecutive blank verse sonnets, with even finer detailed patterning of threes within. In each case, one wishes this careful analysis would continue and work more comprehensively with each text, but the authors' exclusive focus on structure is admirably handled. Their association of structural wit with metaphysical wit (and in contrast with metaphorical) is highly useful.

Erna Kelly's essay, "Women's Wit" covers a great deal of territory (one need only imagine the corresponding "Men's Wit" as a title), which requires a great deal of generalized comment pertaining to gender and writing within the hostile environment that the Seventeenth Century presented to women's writings. Such generalities are, of course, necessary in the abbreviated format of conference papers, from which all these essays are derived, but the way the essay is premised on generality is a problem. She identifies, for example, four different responses of women writers to cope in the atmosphere of "gender awareness": 1.) they "avoided problematic genres" like elegy or epic, 2.) or applied those genre conventions to an unproblematic topic or in a manner that circumvented "'uncomfortable' implications," 3.) engaged in "self-effacement, deprecating their poetic skills" or 4.) "used wit to prove the unfairness" of "ambivalence and hostility" toward their writings (45-46). These observations seem at first both logical and likely, even useful for classifying authors, perhaps; but as a result, her subject authors are reduced to a uniformly and equally stymied, predictably responding group, not individuals. It seems simply an oversimplification; surely these authors evinced greater variety. And are these responses really related to authorial gender? Neither Donne nor Herbert wrote epics; were they responding to some hostile audience? Donne wrote especially self-effacing apologies for his verses, notably verse letters such as "To Mr. T. W." ("All hail, sweet poet"):

> Now if this song be too'harsh for rime, yet, as
> The Painters bad god made a good devill,
> 'Twill be good prose, although the verse be evill,
> If thou forget the rime as thou dost passe.
> Then write, that I may follow, and so bee
> Thy debtor, thy'eccho, thy foyle, thy zanee.
> I shall be thought, if mine like thine I shape,
> All the world's Lyon, though I be thy Ape. (25-32)

And more than one male author of the period wrote prefatory notices against unfavorable interpretations or reviews. But beyond these categorizations the essay offers many intelligent readings of verse, heeding particularly how meanings and sounds of words are employed to good effect, reading selections from Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn, and Anne Bradstreet. Kelly describes Bradstreet's witty accusation of ill readers in "The Prologue" to *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung up in America* as an example:

> If what I doe prove well, it won't advance,
> They'll say its stolne, or else, it was by chance.

Her assertion that all her detractors are either misogynists or liars or both, preventing her from achieving her due recognition, is an example of the fourth kind of response.

But Kelly continues to work in questionable generalizations: "One could say that in consummating a heterosexual relationship, men attain the object of their desire, while women yield to their desire. Men gain control; women, because they become emotionally involved, lose control" (55). Why deal in stereotypes? When she uses male authors to point out differences in their verse, she again oversimplifies. At one point in her poetic reading of Carew's "A Rapture" she notes the "aggressive" descriptions of his "enjoyment of Celia" and states that "All of Celia's actions, on the other hand, are dictated by him" and provides lines 87-92 of the poem:

> My Rudder, with thy bold hand, like a tryde,
> And skilfull Pilot, thou shalt steere, and guide

> My Bark into Loves channell, where it shall
> Dance, as the bounding waves doe rise or fall:
> Then shall thy circling armes, embrace and clip
> My willing bodie.

She makes no mention of the obvious limit to his dictating: all he dictates is her complete control as "skilfull Pilot" of his "Bark" and his willingness for her to "embrace and clip" him (*to clip* as in "to disable from flight, to check aspirations and ambition"—*OED*). Control is at least pretty ambiguous here, if not in the woman's "bold hand"—and is far more "interdependent" than Kelly allows in her description and comparison to Behn (59-60). Her readings display a theorist's myopia, missing or omitting textual complexities in the interest of applying the theory neatly. This Procrustean tendency of cutting off significant details limits the potential of her essay.

Jim Ellis takes up an unlikely topic in "The Wit of Circumcision, the Circumcision of Wit," noting that Renaissance religious art was uniquely positioned not only due to its "desire for descriptive naturalism," and "newfound interest in the human body," but foremost because "the Church was free to emphasize the miracle of Christ's incarnation in the flesh" (64). These factors led to the artistic interest in Christ's genitals and the corresponding community's different standard of discretion regarding the subject. Twentieth-century responses are sure to range widely, even to the practical matter of whether or not to circumcise. Many medical professionals have argued that no physical health benefits are gained by strapping down newborn boys and, without anesthesia, excising the foreskin, and that doing so to be like Dad isn't sufficient justification. But this contemporary dilemma resembles the one posed by Ellis' argument: using Thomas Hobbes' definition of wit emphasizing judgment and discretion, he renders circumcision metaphorically as symbolic of submission and obedience to God. Thus, for Christ and all believers, "the first shedding of blood prefigures and guarantees the last" (69). He sets the Jews of the Old Testament apart as naïve or literal in circumcision, while Donne and Herrick are described as New Covenant believers circumcised in

"heart." Ellis notes that Donne says in a sermon, "we are no longer to read circumcision literally" after Christ (66). Although Ellis is suggesting a somewhat different distinction from Wilcox—Ellis asserts an obedient circumcision (control, discretion) of wit is necessary while Wilcox posits the goal of glorifying God will assure the godly use of wit—both assert that the overriding matters are obedience and submission.

Catherine Gimelli Martin's essay is so complex that it stymies the reader. "Pygmalion's Progress in the Garden of Love, or the Wit's Work is Never Donne" begins with Freud's theory of play, specifically from *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, drawing the distinction that although Freud suggests in some jokes, as in dreams, nonsense displaces ridicule and often succeeds because we don't understand the source of the humor, in Donne's secular lyrics "we know exactly what conventions are being ridiculed and who we are laughing at" (78). The perpetual debates over meaning in so many Donne poems makes Martin's statement hard to accept—many times Donne laughs at the reader, anticipating or thwarting interpretation—but even more difficult to follow is why, if Donne "seems to challenge the Freudian model," she nonetheless applies it to Elegy: "To his Mistress Going to Bed" and other poems. She asks, "why does he [Donne], as Freud might query, openly flaunt the aggressive strategies of the joke work at the risk of exposing the imaginative pleasures of the dream work?" (79). To approach this question she parallels Donne with Heinrich Heine, who possessed a "similarly sophisticated tendentious wit" (81).

She then strains to apply to this complex theoretical comparison/contrast two opposing views of Donne's poems. The first is Jonathan Goldberg's theory of how the inflated and deflated tropes of Donne inflate his ego and despite appearing politically subversive, actually reinstate the male hierarchical domination, specifically that of James I, that it satirizes. The idea likens the royal mystery asserted by James to the body's mystery asserted by Donne. Thus, while praising the woman Donne is actually exercising power in total disregard of her will and desires. The second is Thomas Docherty's theory that this

hierarchy is premised on an intrinsically flawed, rather one-sided form of communication that is basically "colonialist," in which The Other must be tamed, controlled, and remade into a harmless model of the Self: thus Donne creates the "colonized woman." Martin's summary asserts Donne "deconstructs the 'naturalness' of the female body," ultimately creating "a new, neither exclusively masculine not feminine sense of sexual identity, but also imagines a constantly shifting, 'eccentric' or de-centered 'site' of mutual identity," where shifting social place is accepted (83). Martin then claims that these two theories imply an "excluded middle" ground, while also admitting that the polarities suggested in them have proven "remarkably resistant to modification" (83). This is all a bit much for one essay to bear, but this is not all. Her argument is based on many questionable or debatable premises that require explanation, not only from the competing theories presented, but also from her own declarations, such as how Donne "exposes Petrarchan fictions of feminine idolatry and masculine conquest, revealing them as thinly veiled figures of male aggression, dominance, and undisguised lust" (80). The essay does not make all these disparate elements come together and is not convincing.

Robert Evans, in "Wit and Power in Jonson's *Epigrammes*," asserts that Jonson's own refined sense of what was and was not wit (and its importance) is a key to the quality of his work while limiting the popularity of his work. Wit was a combination of "prodigious invention and apt expression" and not "mere verbal play or linguistic self-indulgence" (102). And Jonson, ever the classicist, relied upon Quintilian as a source for this thinking, in whose writings the Latin for wit, *ingenium*, carries connotations associated with its origin in a verb meaning "to beget" (103). Therefore Jonson's concept of wit affords possible meanings of social as well as individual power. That this high standard for wit was not commonly held explains much about the difference it caused in much of Jonson's work and his occasional unfavorable reception. The validity of Evans' ideas can be seen in *Ep.* 2: "He that departs with his own honesty / For vulgar praise, doth it too dearely buy" (13-14). Most notably, outside of Evans' study of

Epigrammes, was Jonson's "Ode to Himself" after the poor reception of *The New Inn* in 1629:

> Come leave the loathed Stage,
> And the more loathsome Age,
> Where pride and impudence in faction knit,
> Usurpe the Chaire of wit:
> Inditing and arraigning every day,
> Something they call a play. (1-6)

In light of Evans' study, one may appreciate Jonson's integrity and perseverance in his craft even more. Evans appropriately concludes that Jonson's wit was apparently an attempt to make a social statement, if not to suggest change in the meaning of wit itself.

M. C. Allen's essay, "George Herbert's Pastoral Wit" answers one of the questions that may puzzle some students reading *The Temple*: for a poet capable of such theological and structural complexity, why are certain of his works so simple? Since many students come to Herbert immediately after the intense complexity of Donne, they are either relieved or annoyed by the occasional relative simplicity of some Herbert selections. Allen's essay emphasizes that the intent of Herbert's work is pastoral, which is to write not as a courtier or a scholar but as a priest. Thus the wit evinced adopts and fulfills the various offices of the priest: "preaching, catechizing, admonishing, praying" (125). And as the priest must provide for the variety of needs in his parish, so Herbert occasionally writes, for example, to the young. As Allen asserts, the simple but witty "Charms & Knots" has serious moral lessons beneath the play: "That to my broken heart he was *I ease you*, / And to my whole is JESU." Since "I" and "J" were not always differentiated in Herbert's day, this is more or less a child's pun—which proves Allen's point well. Many of these poems are designed not only to win young hearts but then to instruct them in an entertaining way. Using *The Country Parson* as a commentary on the poems, Allen successfully details Herbert's pastoral intent.

Roger B. Rollin, in "Witty by Design: Robert Herrick's *Hesperides*, describes wit as "apt expression" and "witty design," focusing on design as it pertains to the layout of a book of poems, ultimately arguing that the sort of internal contradictions, ironies, self-referentiality and dialectic created through the sequence of poems is a "special kind" of wit. In fact, the "horticultural" metaphor that Rollin asserts as the design of *Hesperides* is that of a garden walk, an arrangement which he surprisingly remarks "goes beyond that of any other poetry collection of the time," and takes for contrast Herbert's *The Temple* (141, 139). The patterning is convincing in the first and finishing groups of eight poems in the collection, but the over 1,000 poems intervening are more difficult to assess. At times the frequent shifts in poetic address from Julia to Silvia to Perilla to Julia again suggest either extreme promiscuity or "male fantasy run rampant," or the grouping of poems to flowers can be taken as poetic "bouquets" (146), but at times the intention of the arrangement seems "simply for the sake of variety," intentionally placing poems of opposing moods or tone in juxtaposition (147). It may be that Rollin has found in Herrick another possibility for what Alexander Pope meant when he wrote in *Essay on Criticism* "True wit is nature to advantage dressed, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed."

Sharon Cadman Seelig comments of the less appealing aspects of Lovelace's verses in "My Curious Hand or Eye: The Wit of Richard Lovelace." She focuses on the frequent suggestive ambiguities in Lovelace and examines the darker potential meanings that have generally been treated more playfully by other critics. The Lovelace she depicts through carefully reading some of his complex verses is still a sensuous romantic who frequently describes mutual pleasures in love, but also revealed is a dominating, sometimes erotically brutal male figure who verbally controls women, sexually and intellectually. She shows how, "with a wink and a witty turn," the admiration of the woman and her apparent superiority are undercut by a reassertion of masculine control (157). In "Her Muffe" she notes how the reversal originates in the speaker's subordination to his mistress:

destiny Decreed
That Beasts to thee a sacrifice should bleed,
And strip themselves to make you gay.

Superficially concerned with animals as "willing sacrifices" to create her muff (157), it also invites an interpretation of the aggressive Lovelace as "Beast" who wants to "strip" in order to "make" his mistress "gay." He presents himself not only as a physical lover, but as an animal "sacrifice" presented to honor her as goddess—he is willing to "bleed" and die for her (a potential of the text that Seelig overlooks), simultaneously a cavalier and somewhat romantic sentiment that complicates the poem immeasurably. But this worship is revised:

This for Lay-Lovers, that must stand at dore,
Salute the threshold, and admire no more:
But I, in my Invention tough,
Rate not this outward bliss enough
But still contemplate must the hidden Muffe.

The worship and willing self-sacrifice pivots here to ravishing the goddess, the last line's syntax pointedly revealing the *double entendre* and the speaker's urgent desire. Yet all transpires "in my Invention tough," qualifying the assault to idea, not action. Seelig, like Kelly, offers a reading that ignores possibilities of the text in order to apply her theory more convincingly. Still, it is the "reassertion of masculine control" and sexual mastery that Seelig uncovers.

Lorraine Roberts, in "The 'Truewit' of Crashaw's Poetry" argues for a definition of wit that far exceeds mere conceit, much like the impressions of Jonson's wit argued by Evans and the distinction of metaphorical and metaphysical made by Stanwood and Johnson. In her focus on Crashaw, she contends that his wit is best appreciated in its overall structure, "in its subtle unveiling of a theme" (174), and makes a contrast between "surface" wit (images and rhetorical devices) and "structural" wit. To define her idea of "structural" she turns to sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini's concept of how a work of art must be controlled by a theme, or *concetto*, that interweaves and informs the

whole. She defends several of Crashaw's poems against unfavorable readings, demonstrating how in each a governing *concetto* unites the images into an effective whole. For example, she defends "The Weeper" against Laurence Lerner's accusation that the poem is "about tears *and nothing else*." She points out how the verb "conspire" in the opening line and the "ancient Christian tradition of the 'wound of love'" point out the *concetto* of "conspiracy between Christ's love that wounds and the sinner's contrition that heals" (178). Thus Magdalen, wounded by God's signal act of love, weeps tears of repentance that will unite her to God. Roberts effectively demonstrates that beneath the effusiveness of image in Crashaw's verse is a structural wit that is intended to reveal the "'True wit' of God—Christ and his love for mankind" (182). Her distinction of wit is parallel to that of Wilcox, and the *concetto* functions within individual poems much like Rollins' concept encompassing the whole of *Hesperides*.

In "Marvell's Mower: The Wit of Survival," W. A. Sessions claims that Marvell's poems transform their readers, pointing them "toward enactment of social or communal goals after the self-interrogation and reformation (through text) of the ego, personal and social" (186). This transformation is achieved through the poems' dialectic, derived from Vergil and Bacon, which creates, in effect, a "cathartic process." According to Sessions this catharsis is created through a carefully articulated design centered in the Mower poems, in which appear "clues for the enactment of healing and for the catharsis required for entering history and transforming it as did Aeneas" (189). The exact meanings of "entering history" and "transforming it" as and the other impulses or empowerment attained from poetry are highly abstract and not worked out clearly. This catharsis seems to be used in the classic sense, but how the poem effects the reader so is not explained. While the essay is grandly sweeping and provocative in statement, his meanings are occasionally lost. Of the application of biography to Marvell's poems he states, "Like a good mother, Marvell's ritualizing ironizing wit will not abandon his text or its language, for which no biography can answer. The form of the text simply cannot be revised" (188). Such figurative and subtle expression runs through the essay,

making clarity and precision only occasional events, and unnecessarily obscuring its meaning.

Katherine M. Quinsey, in "*Religio Laici?*: Dryden's Men of Wit and the Printed Word," captures Dryden's argument in *Religio Laici,* noting that its consideration of the nature of religious authority and considerations of the nature of wit both raise the same questions reegarding the stability and reliability of language and truth. The focus, of course, is on the difficulty in discovering and judging truth in Scripture, necessarily problematized as "the result of various fallible modes of production: authorship, translation, commentary, and print technology" (203), as well as resulting from the instability of language, particularly since "the language of poetry and wit . . . points in the direction of meaning, depending on the response of the reader to complete *poesis*" (201). Taken to its extreme, as Dryden depicts in his attack on Dissenters, God's Word becomes devoured by maggots, replacing it with themselves. The solution proposed in *Religio Laici* emphasizes the nature of truth to endure over time (as Donne put it, "Though truth and falshood bee / Neare twins, yet truth a little elder is"—"Satyre III") and the ability of "men of Wit," applying a sound methodology of interpretation, to develop scripture commentary, "Tradition written" as a "guide to truth" (210).

What is interesting to note is that this proposal sounds very Catholic since the Church Fathers created a "Tradition written" to accompany and explain Scripture followed for more than a millennium. Despite Dryden's criticism of Catholics in *Religio*, he seems to be moving in their direction some three years before Charles II was succeeded by James II and Dryden's later conversion. In comparison with the other essays, Quinsey implies a definition of wit that fits well with those offered by Wilcox, Stanwood and Johnson, Ellis, Allen, and Roberts: that wit in Seventeenth Century poetry was motivated by a desire to speak effectively and properly of God.

Summers and Pebworth have again gathered a useful collection of criticism on a topic relevant to all students of the period's literature. This study provides both careful readings and provocative ideas, which, despite occasional lapses, refine and assert the literary potential

of wit within this historical context. Although one might have expected a collection with more attention given to the humorous works of the era, these studies reveal that humor is merely one aspect of the multifaceted concept of wit which pervades the political, amorous, and religious poetry of the Seventeenth Century. Though this is not the best collection of scholarship produced from the Dearborn conference series, the standard of excellence set by its predecessors is precisely the reason this volume, while valuable for many reasons, seems diminished in comparison. Even so, its merits far outweigh its faults, and the result is a text worthwhile as much for its variety of authors and meanings of wit as for its insights into the poetry considered.

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