



Scène
Européenne

Regards croisés
sur la Scène européenne

Divertir, instruire, célébrer
Études sur le théâtre et la théâtralité
dans l'Europe prémoderne
à la mémoire d'André Lascombes

***To entertain, instruct
and celebrate***
*Studies in early modern theatre and
theatricality in memory of André
Lascombes*

Textes réunis par
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Référence électronique

[En ligne], Roberta Mullini, « The language of (allegorical) women's rivalry in Wit and Science », dans *Divertir, instruire, célébrer : études sur le théâtre et la théâtralité dans l'Europe prémoderne à la mémoire d'André Lascombes - To entertain, instruct and celebrate : studies in early modern theatre and theatricality in memory of André Lascombes*, éd. par J.-P. Bordier, J. C. Garrot Zambrana, R. Hillman, P. Pasquier, « Scène européenne, Regards croisés sur la scène européenne », 2023, mis en ligne le 10-02-2023,

URL : <https://sceneeuropeenne.univ-tours.fr/regards/hommage-lascombes>

La collection

Regards croisés sur la Scène européenne

est publiée par le Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance,
(Université de Tours, CNRS/UMR 7323)
dirigé par Elena Pierazzo & Marion Boudon-Machuel

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ISSN
2107-6820

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The language of (allegorical) women's rivalry in *Wit and Science*

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Introduction

In no other early modern English interlude besides John Redford's *Wit and Science* (datable about 1534-1540 and written to be performed by St Paul's choristers)¹ do women play the role of lovers.² Lady Science is, from the beginning of the text, promised to Wit, and in the end the two get married, after Wit has killed the monster Tediousness at his second attempt. During an initial fight, though, Wit is struck dead by the monster and is brought back to life by Honest Recreation with music and dancing.³ Idleness lulls him when, after the dance, he sits down, too tired to keep standing, and falls in her lap. This part of the plot is fundamental for the development of the story, so much so that the two "offshoots" of *Wit and Science* (*The Marriage of Wit and Science*, attributed to Sebastian Westcott, c. 1569, and Francis Merbury's *The Marriage*

1 The text, of which some pages are missing at the beginning, is contained in the British Library Additional MS. 15233.

2 CARTWRIGHT, 1999: 73, observes that "One of the interesting developments in humanist dramaturgy is the way that women, portrayed as whores and virgins at the beginning of the sixteenth century, become objects of knowledge by its end". Lucrece, in *Fulgens and Lucrece* by Henry Medwall (the play was performed at Cardinal Morton's house about 1497), is certainly the first woman in humanist drama who escapes Christian allegories, but she is not "in love" in a "traditional" way. Like the whole play, the first secular one in English drama, she is innovative, though, because she decides to get married to a man of her choice, refusing her father Fulgens's decision. (The studies of this interlude are numerous; for a multifaceted approach, see CARTWRIGHT, 1999.)

3 Generally, this reviving has been read as an appropriation of the "hero-combat" play, where a quack doctor resurrects the hero killed by a monster. But see TWYXCROSS, 2010 for an interesting interpretation of the episode as connected to early medical practices of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

of *Wit and Wisdom* c. 1579)⁴ keep it—with variations—in their adaptations of Redford's original.⁵ What these later plays leave out, though, is the cheeky dialogue between Honest Recreation and Idleness, who quarrel about which of them is dearer to Wit. In a sense, the two (allegorical) women are in love with the same young man, reciprocally jealous, and, therefore, they exchange rough words and also threaten each other with physical attack. The specific characteristic of Redford's play that I would like to highlight is that, contrary to most Tudor moral interludes, female characters are depicted as agents in a love story, and not as either saints or reprobates.⁶ The following will investigate the dialogue between Honest Recreation and Idleness from a pragmatic point of view, reading it as a series of reciprocal insults and offences—in other words, as a case of deliberate impoliteness.

As stated above, Redford composed this interlude to be played by the boys of St Paul's choir, that is, by his own young students. Education, generally speaking, is at the basis of the play, in which Tediousness is considered the worst enemy of a boy's *Bildung*, and Study, Instruction and Diligence offer the best help in the conquest of knowledge (Lady Science). In *Wit and Science*, there are none of the traditional sins and virtues of the morality play, since its purpose is to stress the role of education and not the strife between good and evil over eschatological salvation, "secular knowledge replacing divine grace as the goal" (CARTWRIGHT, 1999: 50). The fact that Redford, as an educator, wrote for his pupils has been underlined by all scholars who have analysed the play. They have also argued about the emotional investment of both students and teacher. For example, some have stressed the parody of classroom situations, when Ignorance (Idleness's son) is unsuccessfully taught to spell his own name (ll. 441-551),⁷ and the presentation of Tediousness as a childishly boasting monster.

What critics have less seen, but not totally overlooked, are the nearly hidden sexual undertones of certain passages and situations. SCHELL, 1976: 189 recognises "sexual connotations" in the play, adding later (192) that "[h]aving been a devoted suitor to Lady Science, Wit becomes an indiscriminate lover when Reason goes, floating from woman to woman." Student life, therefore, is mirrored in the play not only as school activity and as educational process, but also as emotional and sexual growth.⁸

4 See LENNAM, 1975 for Westcott. The three plays are discussed by many scholars: see BEVINGTON, 1962: 22-25; HABICHT, 1968: 184-191; HAPPÉ, 1999: 144-149; MILLS, 2007; TWY-CROSS, 2012.

5 I examined the character of the monster Tediousness in the three Wit plays in MULLINI, 2009.

6 The presence of romance features is highlighted by many scholars (see SCHELL, 1976: 199, who speaks of "chivalric romance"; NORLAND, 1995: 161 ("romance quest"); TWY-CROSS, 2012: 233 ("romance form").

7 Quotations from the play are from the text published in HAPPÉ, ed., 1972.

8 "[I]t would be unwise to assume that the immature boy-actor was innocent of the sexual resonances of the play. Whatever experience or specific knowledge he might lack, the play provided him with space for a knowing innuendo" (MILLS, 2007: 169-170).

Flyting

When Honest Recreation and Idleness start quarrelling and calling each other names, the text offers its young actors the possibility not only to imitate female characters (perhaps a common joke in all-male communities such as St Paul's school), but also to use vulgar and strong language almost certainly forbidden inside their institution. Acting these female characters, then, might have been an allowed outlet for the two boys impersonating them and for those in the audience.

The encounter of Honest Recreation and Idleness is labelled “a female flyting” and “a humorous flyting” by CARTWRIGHT, 1999: 57 and 65, and again by SCHERB, 2005: 279, with the addition of a gloss: “a flyting, a kind of insult contest that had both popular and courtly antecedents”. The sort of confrontation Scherb points to is usually discussed by critics either in Old English texts such as *Beowulf*, that is, in the context of Anglo-Saxon heroic literature, or at the Scottish court, especially in the sixteenth century (BAWCUTT, 1983). PARKS, 1986: 440 defines what can be found in early epic as “an openly bellicose exchange of insults between warriors who frequently cap their argument with a martial encounter”. On the other hand, he calls “ludic flyting” the literary phenomenon of poetic and playful verbal exchange attested in sixteenth-century Scottish poetry. Insults from Old English epic to twentieth-century sounding and flaming are also studied by JUCKER and TAAVITSAINEN, 2000, while FLYNN and MITCHELL, who study this topic in parallel even with contemporary rap, also underline that “the [Scottish] poets who engaged in these public invectives were actually amicable rivals competing for increased court status and wealth” (2014: 69).⁹ Besides literary flyting, though, historical research has shown that more popular forms of verbal contests existed also between women in everyday life (see BAWCUTT, 1983: 7, and TODD, 2002: 232-236); therefore, the aggressive exchange between Idleness and Honest Recreation might be considered a “copy” of abusive language used by coeval (perhaps also stereotyped) women in their street quarrels within a popular community.¹⁰

Idleness and Honest Recreation's exchange, however, does not seem to have anything ritual or playful about it; on the contrary, it starts and develops as a reciprocal attack by two jealous women “in love” with the same man, till the end when, also threatened with physical attack by the other, Honest Recreation leaves the field (*Exeat*): “syns Wit lyethe as wone / That neyther hearth nor seeth, I am gone” (ll. 421-422). Certainly the exchange is not gentle at all, nor is it polite, so that it can be read by using the pragmatic principles of (historical) impoliteness, since the usual rhetorical patterns applied by flyters (alliter-

9 See also ARNOVICK, 1999: 15-40 for the connections of flyting and sounding to ancient and contemporary oral traditions.

10 For a general assessment of “Flyting” see HUGHES, 2005: 173-177.

ation, metrical inventiveness, complex rhyme schemes) are absent, the intention to abuse the other prevailing over the formal care of their speeches (keeping in mind, of course, that Redford created his two allegorical ladies in this way for his dramatic purposes).

Impoliteness

Historical pragmatics has long shown that plays are very useful texts for studying the spoken language of the past, given that actual recordings do not exist and that dialogue in dramatic texts always tries to imitate natural spoken language. As JUCKER AND TAAVITSAINEN observe (2013: 24),

Drama texts represent fictional data as well and consist of fictional dialogues. In many respects they provide excellent material for historical pragmatics, and drama has a special place in the data selection as it gives ample context for utterances.

The aim of pragma-linguistics, that is, the study of language usage in specific contexts, then, is attained, because the necessary context in which language is used is offered by the situations displayed in dramatic texts. Together with other contextualised written texts, such as courtroom transcripts, drama can be quite useful in analysing pragmatic language phenomena, their changes and developments over time, even if we must always be aware that

we analyse them within their own contexts and within the constraints of their specific genres, but we do not take them to be more or less suitable substitutes for spoken, freeflowing conversations. Drama and fiction are important data sources for historical pragmatics but it is important to bear their special nature in mind. They can tell us a great deal about human interactions but in a condensed or typified form. (JUCKER AND TAAVITSAINEN, 2013: 25)

In this framework, the study of impoliteness (CULPEPER, 1996)—grounded on BROWN AND LEVINSON's seminal work on politeness (1978 and 1987) but aiming at redefining some controversial tenets—seems to be a suitable tool to investigate the verbal exchange between Idleness and Honest Recreation in *Wit and Science*. While Brown and Levinson study how speakers avoid offending their interlocutors by hedging possible threats to the latter's face,¹¹ Jonathan Culpeper has always focused his research on the opposite pole, that is, on how people use their language to offend and to attack the

11 For the sociological concept of face, see GOFFMAN, 1967.

hearer, both in violent verbal quarrel and in banter (CULPEPER, 1996 and 2013).¹² Insults, as they are used in *Wit and Science*, clearly manifest the speakers' voluntary offending of the adversary and their will to abuse the interlocutor.

Whereas Shakespearean drama has previously been investigated against the background of (im)politeness studies,¹³ the application of this approach to early Tudor drama is nearly non-existent. The following section will try to read the lively and pert exchange between Idleness and Honest Recreation by employing this theory, together with other basic pragmatic principles.

"Yt ys an harlot, may ye not see?" (l. 337): jealousy and sexual undertones

The dramatic context of the verbal abuse

As already stated, after his first combat with Tediousness, Wit is killed, but to his rescue there arrives Honest Recreation, as the Stage Direction reads, accompanied by "*Cumfort, Quycknes, and Strenght* [sic]", who "*go and knele about Wyt*" (l. 224). They sing a song that revives the young man, then he and Honest Recreation dance together, after the lady has ordered her "men" to play (l. 330).¹⁴ In order to understand the verbal contest between Honest Recreation and Idleness better, a brief contextualisation of the events prior to the "flyting" is necessary. Before dancing, Honest Recreation asks Wit how he feels:

Honest Recreation. Now Wyt, how do ye? Will ye be lustye?

Wyt. The lustier for you needes be must I.

Honest Recreation. Be ye all hole yet after your fall?

Wyt. As ever I was, thanks to you al. (ll. 261-264)

Then Reason, Lady Science's father, comes on stage to urge Wit to continue his journey and try a second fight with Tediousness if he wants to conquer his beloved. But the young man is reluctant and would like to rest a while in the company of Honest Recreation:

12 (Im)politeness studies are a still growing research field as an interdisciplinary approach to interpersonal behaviour. Given the limited scope of this article and its stress on historical pragmatics, suffice it to mention CULPEPER, HAUGH AND KÁDÁR, eds, 2017.

13 See, just to cite one of the first and one of the most recent studies, respectively, BROWN AND GILMAN, 1989 and DEL VILLANO, 2018.

14 All scholars studying *Wit and Science* have highlighted the fact that for Redford, as choir master of St Paul's, it was easy to rely on musicians and a fairly large number of boy-actors chosen among his choristers. For the educational role of music, see SCHERB, 2005.

Wyt. Good Father Reson, be not to hastye.
 In honest cumpany no time wast I;
 I shall to yowre dowghter all at leyser. (ll. 275-277)

Reason is “angry”, as Honest Recreation remarks (l. 286), and leaves Wit, who shows no concern about this; in fact, he rather flippantly comments, “Ye, let hym be”. Besides this reaction of his, what follows is still more relevant in the construction of Wit as a young man exposed to sexual temptation; he suddenly asks Honest Recreation for a kiss: “Cum now, a basse” (l. 288). After the woman’s remonstrance that

Nay, syr, as for bassys,
 From hence none passys
 But as in gage
 Of mary-age. (ll. 289-293)

and that Lady Science’s permission would be required, Wit confesses that “I never lovde her” (l. 298), thus showing the instability of his feelings and his readiness to betray his fiancée. It is after this quick exchange that Honest Recreation, revealing her “honesty” completely by refusing to approve Wit’s lusty offer, asks him, “Can ye dawmse than?” (l. 316), a request he accepts after taking off his gown (the highly metaphorical garment Science has given him, probably during an encounter at the very beginning of the play contained in the missing manuscript pages). No longer “protected” by the garment of Science, Wit starts dancing with Honest Recreation, “*and in the mene-whyle Idellnes cumth in and syttth downe; and when the galyard is doone, Wyt saith as folowyth, and so falyth downe in Idellnes lap*” (l. 330 SD).

After the galliard, Wit thanks the lady with “Sweete hart, gramercys” (l. 331): he uses a clear term of endearment, which adds to his previous request for a kiss and reveals his undercurrent of emotions towards Honest Recreation and his—at least now—feeble attraction to Science. Wit’s subsequent words connote, once again, the sexual urge he is feeling at this moment, since he refuses to go on dancing because “with wery bones ye have posses’t me” (l. 333). SCHELL, 1976: 189, comments on the verb “to possess” in connection with the final marriage between Wit and Science: “Only when he possesses Science can Wit be Wit, and only when she is possessed by Wit can Science be Science. The *sexual connotations of that verb* or any other we might choose to express their normative relationship are inescapable, for Wit and Science are in fact, as well as in Redford’s fable, male and female, each the enabling complement of the other” (my emphasis). We could say that Wit has now been “possessed” by Honest Recreation, that is, that he is sentimentally frail and unstable, so much so that he cannot distinguish between Honest

Recreation and Idleness, in whose lap he is now on the point of slumbering. It is now that Honest Recreation's (jealous?) reaction and the repartee start.¹⁵

The dialogue includes six speeches by Honest Recreation (HR), four by Idleness (I), plus another once her rival has gone, and three by Wit (W). What characterises both women's speeches is the colloquial shortness of their first and last exchanges (1. HR → 2. I; 4. I → 6. HR), and the complex length of their respective argument and counterargument (3. I and 5. HR). What stands out is the shortness of Wit's interventions: he seems to lose interest in the quarrel and does not react after Honest Recreation's fifth speech, so that she notices his falling asleep (ll. 421-422). At the beginning Wit fires up the confrontation soon after 1. HR and 1. I, and appoints himself as a judge: "Lo now, for the best game! / Whille I take my ese, youre toonges now frame" (ll. 341-342). He names the situation "the best game" and specifies the weapons to be used for the duel ("youre toonges"), preparing to be a spectator of the women's combat, actually calling for it. It will be a "game", thus reminding the audience of sophisticated court entertainments such as flytings. The language he uses in his three speeches posits him as the umpire of the verbal duel; moreover, this is a role to which he is also invited by Idleness ("Now iud[ge], Wy[t]" [l. 385]).¹⁶ Even if we consider the episode as a case of flyting, it is worth trying to read it by applying some principles of impoliteness, in particular the use of second person singular pronouns and address terms, and name-calling.

Thou-ing the other and the use of demeaning address terms

In early modern times the use of "you" forms had become standard, so that when employing "thou" the speaker meant either endearment or insult (BROWN AND GILMAN, 1960).¹⁷ In Honest Recreation's and Idleness's first short speeches, the standard form prevails: both women use the second person plural pronoun, even when Idleness calls the other "quene" (l. 340, from "quean", meaning prostitute). This speaker's aggressive attitude in 2. I, in spite of the "polite" pronoun, is quite visible through the presence of the abusive term and the repetition of the pronoun itself, which we can

15 The whole text of the exchange is reproduced in the Appendix to this article. To help in the analysis, the speeches of the interactants are numbered and additional line numbers are introduced.

16 Notice that the verb "judge" (with its derivative noun) appears three times consecutively at ll. 385-387, used by all participants.

17 For brevity, the theoretical principles on which the analysis is based will be only named and not presented in their development. In any case, the relevant bibliographical references will always be mentioned. BUSSE, 2006 has studied the Shakespearean corpus according to the distribution of the address pronouns. Personally, I have studied the use of thou/you in Tudor interludes (MULLINI, 2005) and in Shakespeare's *Richard III* (MULLINI, 2012).

imagine accompanied by a menacing pointing finger in performance (and, of course, spoken at the top of her voice).¹⁸ But it is Honest Recreation who starts the quarrel by labelling Idleness “harlot” when trying to involve Wit in the contest. Two words referring to debauched female behaviour are then introduced from the very beginning, even if in 1. HR the speaker is not talking directly to her adversary. That both interlocutors do not mind being impolite but, on the contrary, want to be impolite to each other is thus soon evident. In CULPEPER’s terminology (2015, 425), they perform a “bold-on-record impoliteness” FTA (Face-Threatening-Act),¹⁹ “in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimized”. Culpeper, at least partially adopting BROWN AND LEVINSON’s terminology (1978; 1987), considers that a speaker who wants to offend another person does not refrain from performing FTAs; neither does s/he hedge them: on the contrary s/he builds up layers of insults. In our case, this will be seen especially in 3. I.

Before that, though, let us examine a general attitude of the speakers involved in this dialogue: Honest Recreation addresses Idleness directly only at the very end of the confrontation, when—almost hesitatingly—she calls her rival “drab”, using a second person singular possessive and requiring her to “let hym go out of thy clawse” (l. 418). In all her other speeches, she always talks *to* Wit, speaking *of* Idleness, rather than speaking *to* her. It sounds as if she, instead of attacking her rival straightaway, rather prefers to deny her presence (to a certain extent, of course), thus employing a different FTA: this is what CULPEPER calls the superstrategy of “positive impoliteness”, including “*Ignore, snub the other*—fail to acknowledge the other’s presence” (2015: 425). Contrarywise, Idleness soon reacts by addressing Honest Recreation directly in 2. I; she is also very quick to retort her rival’s words by using the latter’s last terms to begin her own speech, thus contributing to the colloquial liveliness of the dialogue (e.g., “What meane you” at l. 341 in 2. I, “Wyll I mar hym” at l. 355 in 3. I, and “Thes clawes” at l. 420 in 4. I).

Honest Recreation’s indirectness, then, sees Wit as the addressee of the lady’s words (for him are reserved all the “you/ye/your” pronouns). Nevertheless, in 3. HR and in 5. HR she piles up many disparaging terms meant to destroy Idleness’s bad (in the former’s opinion) reputation even more: “harlot” (l. 337) introduces the “semantics” of her speeches, followed by “[C]ommon strumpet” (l. 345), “viciousness” (l. 346), “Dystruccion” (l. 353),

18 I have seen two modern performances of *Wit and Science*: one, in the 1980s, directed by Meg Twycross, was performed by the “Joculatores Lancastrienses” (a male and female group), and one in 2019, directed by Perry Mills, assisted by Elisabeth Dutton, was performed by the “Edward’s Boys” (an all-male ensemble).

19 The phrase “Face-Threatening-Act” is borrowed from BROWN AND LEVINSON, 1978 and 1987, where it means a speech act damaging the interlocutor’s social face.

and “abhomyngacion” (l. 412). Furthermore, Honest Recreation apparently reminds Wit of what she has done for him (5. HR), rather than attacking her rival, but this is what once again serves to destroy Idleness’s “face” in Wit’s (and in the audience’s) opinion.

Idleness, besides calling Honest Recreation names from the very beginning of the interaction (2. I), passes from the “you” form to the “thou” form in 3. I, thus showing her contempt for her interlocutor. Actually, “thou/thee/thy” are used twelve times in sixteen lines (355-370), which strengthens the violence of her attack. The verbal abuse (quite evident during the performance, we can imagine) is reinforced by the semantic choice of “drab” and “calat” (l. 355), and by the phrase “the swyngyng there of thy taylor” (l. 360) to describe Honest Recreation’s dancing, with a pointedly offensive downgrading of the dance and a sexual innuendo attached to the purpose of dancing itself (a meaning also implicit in Idleness’s accusation against Honest Recreation of “laming” Wit during the dance). Idleness also accumulates negative terms in this part of 3. I: the “dyvyll” is mentioned three times (ll. 368, 369, and 370); “evyll” is present at l. 367 and “vyce” at l. 366. From l. 373, Idleness involves Wit, requiring him to “Mark her dawnsyng, her maskyng, and mummyng”—that is, starting a long list of activities she finds more dangerous than what Honest Recreation accuses her of.

Lawful and unlawful games and social critique

This part of Idleness’s speech has been examined by critics because it lists many (lawful and unlawful) games popular in Tudor society (see in particular SCHERB, 2005: 280-282), some of which nobles and courtiers were allowed to play, while they were prohibited to the rest of the population by royal bills. Taverns (here mentioned by Idleness at l. 381) were places people had to abhor because they were considered as the den of all possible unlawful games.²⁰ Even though some of these pastimes are mentioned in another interlude, *The Play of the Wether* by John Heywood (1533), apparently no critic has highlighted any possible parallel. When Heywood’s play was printed, John Redford was already master of the choristers at St Paul’s choir school, where he remained from 1531 to 1534, and, for a period, “he was an associate of John Heywood” (HAPPÉ, 1972: 183).²¹ In Heywood’s play, a Gentlewoman and a Launder invoke Jupiter’s intervention to obtain

20 Taverns as morally dangerous places often recur in Tudor interludes: e.g., in *Youth* (c. 1513-1514), and *Impatient Poverty* (printed in 1560 but datable earlier). On the Tudor legislation concerning games, see EVANS *et al.* eds, 1836.

21 Both Heywood and Redford were musicians who, in various ways, contributed to court entertainments. RAYMENT 2011 shows many possible elements which connect Heywood’s and Redford’s lives. Furthermore, the BL Additional MS 15233 containing the text of *Wit and Science* also contains poems by the two authors, thus allowing the hypothesis of a cultural network.

the weather fit for their quite different activities, and they quarrel because the sunshine necessary to dry the Launder's clothes is opposite to the cloudy sky the lady would like in order not to get tanned. When asked how she spends her time, the lady answers:

One parte of the day for our apparelynge,
 Another parte for eatynge and drynkyng,
 And all the reste in streets to be walkyng,
 Or in the house to passe time with talking. (ll. 837-841)²²

These are a daytime's activities, while nights pass "In dansynge and syngynge / Tyll mydnyght and then fall to slepyng." (ll. 844-845). When the confrontation explodes, the Launder accuses the Gentlewoman (and the gentry generally) of idleness:

It is not thy beauty that I dysdeyne
 But thyne ydyll life that thou hast rehersed,
 Whych any good womans hert would have perced.
 For I perceive in daunsynge and syngynge,
 In eatyng and drynkyng and thyne apparelynge
 Is all the joye wherein thy herte is set.
 But nought of all this doth thyne owne labour get.
 For haddest thou nothing but of thyne own travayle,
 Thou myghtest go as naked as my nayle. (ll. 913-921)

I do not intend to speculate on a possible case of plagiarism (especially because the exact dates of composition of the two texts are unknown), but simply highlight how two nearly contemporary plays converge in discussing the social issue of labour versus idle inactivity: in *Wether* a working woman blames the aristocracy for the same faults as those with which Idleness in *Wit and Science* charges Honest Recreation, who certainly possesses a higher status. One might also hear Thomas More's words at the back of all this, when, in the First Part of *Utopia*, the speaker criticises the nobles because "First, there is a great number of gentlemen which cannot be content to live idle themselves, like dorrers [drones], of that which other have laboured for—their tenants, I mean; whom they poll and shave to the quick, by raising their rents" (MORE, 1878: 25-26). Topical social critique, then, is obliquely introduced into *Wit and Science* in line with decades of Tudor dramatic productions, from Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucre*s (1497?) to John Rastell's *Gentleness and Nobility* (1527-1530). The disquieting aspect of Redford's play is that, paradoxically, the condemnation of idle practices comes from Idleness herself, as if the playwright ironically wanted to point his finger at his own activity, partly at least,

22 The text is quoted from AXTON AND HAPPÉ, eds, 1991.

since “dawnsyng, [...] maskyng, and mummyng” (l. 373) and “syngyng, pypyng, and fydlyng” (l. 379) were his stock-in-trade in his capacity as a choir master.

I have already noted how Honest Recreation's fifth speech (5. HR) summarises her intervention in favour of Wit. However, she also intersperses accusations against Idleness, while always addressing Wit. In the verbal duel she prefers to talk to the judge rather than counterattack her rival on the same level: in a way, we might say that she “ignores” Idleness's being there, thus showing her own impoliteness, without thou-ing and without name-calling, at least until the last line of this speech: “Hence, drab, let hym go out of *thy* clawse” (l. 418, my emphasis). With a quick reprisal, in 4. I Idleness takes the dialogic floor again and repeats Honest Recreation's word, and, even if she goes back to the “you” form (in a way refusing her rival's previous pronominal approach), she passes to physical threatening: “Thes clawes shall clawe you by youre drabbes face” (l. 420), that is, a menace which names both the target to be hit and the weapons to be used. After that, Honest Recreation, commenting on Wit's being asleep and insensible (6. HR), exits. Idleness, though, takes advantage of the other's leaving to boast of her victory both in the verbal duel and in getting Wit to sleep (5. I). But, in the absence of one of the two contestants, the verbal abuse cannot turn into a real fight.

Conclusion

Flying in the Anglo-Saxon tradition foreshadows a duel, whereas in sixteenth-century Scottish court poetry nothing menacing is really meant in the abusive exchanges of the participants. In *Wit and Science*, the action is brought to the brink of physical combat, but the plot does not need it, so nothing of this sort happens. In fact, a new character must enter, Idleness's son Ignorance, for the merriest episode of the play, when—in a parody of school life—the mother tries to teach her son how to spell his name. So, the dialogue between the former and Honest Recreation is soon left behind, the only consequence being that Wit—let alone and asleep in Idleness's arms—is ready to fall victim to Idleness's mocking jokes.²³

The humanistic educational interlude has played its role so far, though, by showing the importance of recreation in avoiding idleness and tediousness, but also the reviving function of music and singing (quite relevant, since the play was composed for choristers). The confrontation between Idleness and Honest Recreation has offered the players a safety valve for a harmless combat, on the one hand, and, on the other, for a linguistic outlet that also uses “forbidden” language. The verbal struggle analysed here is structured as a burst of impoliteness strategies in an allegorical female rivalry which was performed

23 The face of the unconscious Wit will be blackened, and he will be dressed in Ignorance's clothes, so that when Lady Science arrives, he will not be recognised because of his foolish look.

by an all-male cast. It can be called “flyting” only in the very general sense of verbal fight, given that the rhetorical form of the ancient contest is not observed, the author’s interest being apparently focussed rather on the fighters’ emotional reactions.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Shakespeare seems to remember this sequence from *Wit and Science* (or other similar, but lost, texts), when, in the wood outside Athens, Hermia and Helena—already affected by the consequences of Puck’s mistake in distributing the love juice—start quarrelling (Act III, Scene ii).²⁴ Like Idleness and Honest Recreation, they call each other names (Hermia to Helena: “juggler” and “cankerblossom” [l. 296]; Helena to Hermia: “counterfeit” and “puppet” [l. 303]). Furthermore, in the heat of the moment Hermia “thous” her rival, and adds a disparaging term of address—“thou painted maypole” (l. 311)—just before arriving at the physical threat, with a crescendo very similar to Idleness’s reaction: “How low am I? I am not yet so low / But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes.” (ll. 312-313). Hermia also makes use of another impoliteness strategy, i.e., by avoiding speaking straight to her rival. Lysander and Demetrius are onstage, and she speaks to them instead of addressing Helena:

Now I perceive that she hath made compare
Between our statures; she hath urged her height,
And with her personage, her tall personage,
Her height, forsooth, she hath prevailed with him. (ll. 305-308)

Only later will she talk to her and go back to the “you” form. In the Shakespeare play, as well as in *Wit and Science*, one of the “fighters”—Helena—leaves the place, thus retreating safely from a very possible bodily contact. It is interesting to see that the two play-texts share the same impoliteness strategies, and that the most easily assailable body part in a female struggle, at least in these plays, is the eyes, and that the weapons—once again—are the ladies’ nails.

I am not suggesting that the Elizabethan author “copied” the early Tudor one, but simply that similar situations (two women quarrelling over a man) are dealt with in very similar ways. Very probably both playwrights drew on real life and on the stereotypes deriving from it. Women, in any case, even when allegorical, are portrayed as able speakers and skilful verbal fighters. The merit of *Wit and Science*, even considering that Idleness and Honest Recreation are not the female protagonists of the interlude (a role reserved for Lady Science), is also “the unveiling of new possibilities in the dramatic representation of women” (CARTWRIGHT, 1999: 74).

24 Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is quoted from the Folger Shakespeare Library version of the play.

Appendix²⁵

1. *HR - Honest Recreation*. Yt is an **harlot**, may ye not see?
1. *I - Idlenes*. As honest a Woman as **ye** be!
2. *HR - Honest Recreation*. Her name is Idlenes. Wyt, what mene you?
2. *I - Idlenes*. Nay, What meane you to scolde thus. **you quene, you?** 340
1. *W - Wyt*. Ther, go to! Lo now, for the best game!
Whille I take my ese, youre toonges now frame.
3. *HR - Honest Recreation*. Ye, Wyt, by youre faith, is that youre facion?
Wyll ye leave me, Honest Recreation,
For that **common strumpet** Idellnes 345
The verye roote of all vyciousnes?
2. *W - Wyt*. She saith she is as honest as ye.
Declare your-selves both now as ye be.
4. *HR - Honest Recreation*. What woolde ye more for my declaracion
Then evyn my name, Honest Recreation? 350
And what wold ye more her to expres
Then evyn her name, to, Idlenes,
Dystruccion of all that wyth her tarye?
Wherfore cum away, Wyt; she wyll mar ye!
3. *I - Idlenes*. Wyll I mar hym, **drab, thow calat, thow,** 355
When **thow** hast mard hym all redye now?
Cawlyst **thow thy** sealfe Honest Recreation?
Ordryng a poore man after thys facion,
To lame hym thus and make his lymmes fayle
Evyn wyth the **swyngyng there of thy tayle!** 360
The dyvyll set fyre one **the!** For now must I,
Idlenes, hele hym agayne, I spye.
I must now lull hym, rock hym, and frame hym
To hys lust agayne, where **thow** didst lame hym.
Am I the roote, sayst **thow**, of vyciousnes? 365
Nay, **thow** art roote of all vyce dowteles.
Thow art occacion, lo, of more evyll
Then I, poore gerle, nay more then the dyvyll.
The dyvyll and hys dam cannot devyse
More devlyshnes then by **the** doth ryse. 370
Under the name of Honest Recreation:
She, lo, bryngth in her abhominacion.
Mark her dawnsyng, her maskyng, and mummyng.

25 The personal pronouns (and adjectives) and the insults used by Honest Recreation and Idleness are in bold.

Where more concupyscence then ther cummyng?
 Her cardyng, her dicyng, dayly and nyghtlye— 375
 Where fynd ye more falcehod then there? Not lightly.
 Wyth lyeng and sweryng by no poppetes,
 But teryng God in a thowsand gobbetes.
 As for her syngyng, pypyng, and fydlyng,
 What unthryftynes therin is twydlyng! 380
 Serche the tavernes, and ye shall here cleere
 Such bawdry as bestes wold spue to heere.
 And yet thys is kald Honest Recreation,
 And I, poore Idlenes, abhominacion.
 But whych is wurst of us twayne? Now iud[ge], Wyt[t]. 385
 3. *W - Wyt*. Byrladye, not thow, wench, I iudge yet.
 5. *HR - Honest Recreation*. No? Ys youre iudgment such then that ye
 Can neyther pe[r]seve that best how she
 Goth abowte to dyceve you, nor yet
 Remembre how I savyd youre lyfe, Wyt? 390
 Thynke you her meete wyth mee to compare,
 By whome so manye wytes curyd are?
 When wyll she doo such an act as I dyd,
 Savyng your lyfe when I you revyved?
 And as I savyd you, so save I all 395
 That in lyke ieoperdy chance to fall.
 When Tediousnes to grownd hath smytten them
 Honest Recreation up doth quyken them
 Wyth such honest pastymes, sportes, or games,
 As unto myne honest nature frames, 400
 And not, as she sayth, wyth pastymes suche
 As be abusyd, lytell or muche.
 For where honest pastymes be abusyd,
 Honest Recreation is refused.
 Honest Recreation is present never 405
 But where honest pastymes be well usyd ever.
 But in-deede Idlenes, she is cawse
 Of all such abuses. She, lo, drawes
 Her sort to abuse myne honest games,
 And therby full falsly my name defames. 410
 Under the name of Honest Recreation
 She bryngth in all her abhomynacion,
 Dystroyng all wytes that her imbrace,
 As youre-selfe shall see wyth-in short space.
 She wyll bryng you to shamefull end, Wyt, 415
 Except the sooner from her ye flyt.
 Wherefore cum away, Wyt, out of her pawse.
 Hence, **drab**, let hym go out of **thy** clawse.

4. *I - Idlenes*. Wyll ye get ye hence? or, by the mace,
Thes clawes shall clawe you by youre **drabbes** face. 420

6. *HR - Honest Recreation*. Yt shall not neade: syns Wyt lyethe as wone
That neyther heerth nor seeth, I am gone.

Exeat

5. *I - Idlenes*. Ye, so, fare-well! and well fare **thow**, toonge!
Of a short pele this pele was well roong
To ryng her hence and hym fast a-sleepe 425
As full of sloth as the knave can kreepe.

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