

“These wild shows”: Shakespearean wit in *The Duke of Parma*

[“These wild shows”:
engenho shakespeariano em *The Duke of Parma*]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, William Shakespeare, Wit, Irony, Neo-Elizabethan drama.

Abstract

The essay examines Fernando Pessoa's *The Duke of Parma* through its Shakespearean and early modern dramatic features, focusing on the construction of the Duke's “other” nature, linked to alterity and insanity. It argues that Pessoa shapes identity through linguistic excess, with wit as a central device. Drawing on Renaissance and later theories of irony, wit operates as discursive strategy, theme, performance, and meta-reflection. Through soliloquies, debates, and fool figures, it mediates power, probes sanity, and questions reality. Language drives the drama, but wit—while heuristic—fails to secure stable knowledge, often reduced to “exterior wit.” This tension situates the play between Renaissance drama and Romantic and post-Romantic irony. Ultimately, the play becomes a mechanism of endless questioning, where language yields only partial access to reality, and wit stands as both its structural force and its tragic limit.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, William Shakespeare, Engenho, Ironia, Drama neo-Elisabetano.

Resumo

O ensaio examina *The Duke of Parma*, de Fernando Pessoa, à luz dos seus traços dramáticos shakespeariano e do início da modernidade, centrando-se na construção da “outra” natureza do Duque, associada à alteridade e à loucura. Defende-se que Pessoa modela a identidade através de um excesso linguístico, tendo o engenho (*wit*) como dispositivo central. Convo-cando concepções renascentistas e posteriores da ironia, o engenho funciona como estratégia discursiva, tema, performance e meta-reflexão. Por meio de solilóquios, debates cortesãos e figuras de bobo, media o poder, sonda a sanidade e interroga a realidade. A linguagem impulsiona o drama, mas o engenho – embora heurístico – não assegura um conhecimento estável, sendo frequentemente reduzido a “engenho exterior”. Esta tensão situa a peça entre o drama renascentista e a ironia romântica e pós-romântica. Em última análise, a peça surge como um dispositivo de questionamento incessante, em que a linguagem oferece apenas um acesso parcial ao real, e o engenho se afirma simultaneamente como força estrutural e limite trágico.

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In his biography of Pessoa, Richard Zenith defines *The Duke of Parma* as an undeviatingly, pervasively Shakespearean exercise: "If its title sounds like it belongs to a play Shakespeare could have written, it is because the author was aiming for precisely that" (ZENITH, 2021: 303). In addition, the play's "main subject" is "Fernando Pessoa" himself, since it focuses on "the duke's obsessive character, his sexual neuroses [...] derived from Pessoa's own imagination—or rather, from Pessoa's *literary* imagination" (ZENITH, 2021: 304). While such remarks open up valuable biographical insights by emphasising the duke's traits as reflections of the author, in view of Pessoa's maze-like heteronymic architectures, the biographer carefully qualifies his approach by noting that that of the duke is not "an autobiographical portrait" (ZENITH, 2021: 305). In turn, these observations point to ways of attending, in countervailing fashion, to the duke's own self (his "nature") as a pivotal component of the play, crucially connected to its textual, thematic-ideological, dynamics.

In Act I, scene 1, the courtier M observes: "The Duke's nature is other. This is madness" (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-5^r). Such lapidary statements do double work through a fittingly ambiguous formulation that signals not only changes in the character's personality, but also his alterity (a connotation that may gesture towards Pessoaan heteronymism), while simultaneously linking that alterity to insanity. In other words, from the outset Pessoa casts the protagonist's identity as inseparable from the unsettling depths of an otherness understood both as a condition (being other) and a process (becoming other). Moreover, because this condition is framed in terms of insanity, whether genuine or feigned, the play taps into a thematic vein typical of early modern English drama. Yet, rather than simply reproducing Renaissance models, Pessoa's *Duke* both mirrors and modifies them, reworking their structures through a heightened attention to language.

Drawing on the textual materials made available by the international project "Fernando Pessoa's *The Duke of Parma*: An Unpublished Shakespearean Tragedy"², this essay argues that Pessoa's unfinished neo-Renaissance play constructs the duke's identity – as well as the relational dynamics structuring the play's courtly setting – through a sustained investment in linguistic excess. Central to this analysis is the category of wit, both in light of its Renaissance conceptions and as part of post-Romantic theories of irony, which functions as a crucially multivalent concept and practice in the tragedy. As the following pages will show, Pessoa deploys wit as a discursive strategy, a thematic concern, a performative act, and an object of meta-reflection. Through wit, characters exert or negotiate power, probe the limits of sanity, and interrogate reality—deploying it as a heuristic tool that ultimately delivers neither resolution nor closure. From this perspective, as this essay suggests, Pessoa's fragmentary play acquires a degree of cohesiveness, though never a final one, as a

² <https://www.dukeofparma.unipr.it>

dramatic and theatrical instrument of ongoing enquiry, in which language affords only a partial and deferred purchase on the real.

"Worse than all that is strange": language and othering

Throughout *The Duke of Parma*, Pessoa fashions moments of striking linguistic complexity, which both mimic and amplify early modern rhetorical patterns. This is particularly evident in those passages where the duke engages in an intricate and self-reflective reasoning:

So I, though to confess it flatters not
 My value of my self, ere I come to him
 Am ill _____ and when ~~with him~~ ^{on the abyss}
 Of ~~his~~ ^{his} every impending ~~act or word~~ ^{act or word}.
 Say, even when at last freed of his presence,
 I _____ with a backward terror
 Lest some more monstrous ~~offspring~~ ^{offspring} offspring of his wit
 May take me unaware.
 [...]
 —'Tis very strange!

= Worse than all that & strange,

(BNP/E3, 11⁴ D-11^r)

Thought unfolds through accumulation, hesitation, and revision, generating a mode of discourse that resists resolution. The duke's language does not simply articulate an already formed interiority, but produces a self that is unstable and vulnerable to the linguistic agency of others. Particularly striking is the image of a "more monstrous offspring" seemingly produced by another's wit: language is presented as generative, but also as potentially threatening, capable of exceeding the speaker's control or, indeed, of placing the self-analyzing subject at the mercy of another. Radicalizing a key feature of dramatic soliloquy in early modern drama—that is, its use as a space for self-examination—in these lines, Pessoa intensifies linguistic density to the point where reflection becomes estrangement, and control over language turns into subjection to someone else's linguistic power.

Such moments are not confined to the duke alone, since other characters, too, engage in similarly intricate forms of reasoning. Witness, for instance, the council scene devoted to diagnosing the duke's condition, in which Alberto argues:

A. Will your lordships permit me to be subtle?...
 Your silence is consent; so I will be it.
 The intimate question that we here are at
 Is that the duke is too sane to be mad
 And ~~that he is~~ too mad to be sane.

All we doubt is
 If this state, contrary unto itself,
 points a & distinguishing name
~~Or nominal definition~~
 That in the definition we may find
 That course of action and of that fits it.
 In the first point, my lords, how is he ~~sane~~ ^{mad}?
 In the 2nd, my lords, ~~who~~ how is sane?
 All that we argue is but argument.
 Why; ~~he is~~ ^{he} is mad [therefore] he acts most strangely
 And he is sane [therefore] he knows it well —
 Knows the strangeness as strangeness, for ~~he~~ ^{if} strangeness
 Be in his wit, yet he knows all 'tis into
 ('Twas if he knew it not that it were madness);
 Or if the strangeness is within his wisdom,
 In his philosophy of life and man,
~~Or~~ Either my lords he knows it or not knows it.

(BNP/E3, 114 D-56^r)

Alberto's reasoning proceeds through paradox and recursive qualification, producing not clarity but further instability. The pivotal polyptoton argue / argument puts a seal on the circularity of his wit-powered remarks on the duke's wits. Contradiction or the possibility of ambivalence emerge when he defines the duke's condition as "contrary unto itself," that is radically othered, while the attempt to name or classify its nature results in linguistic proliferation and dispersal. What is staged here is not a diagnosis but a performance of reasoning—a demonstration of language at work upon a problem that it cannot fully contain.

This episode also makes visible a shift from the individual self, foregrounded in Zenith's reading, to a broader, communal, and interpersonal context. The entire ducal court participates in what might be described as a sustained game of linguistic intricacy. Heightened and densely textured language functions as a medium of self-expression, though also as a means of interaction, confrontation, and negotiation. It is through language that characters examine themselves and others, engage in power struggles, and navigate the unstable hierarchies of the court—an environment that, in Renaissance English theatre, regularly constitutes a linguistically powered context of rhetorical competition and discursive manoeuvring, where corruption, ambition, factionalism, diplomacy, and conflict are played out.

In keeping with Renaissance precedents, the interactions between individual and collectivity are conveyed through the exercise of wit, which *The Duke of Parma* deploys in multiple and overlapping ways. Wit is a recurrent lexical item; a discursive strategy shaping soliloquies, monologues, and conversations; and an object of reflection in its own right, as the play repeatedly turns back upon the nature and operation of wit itself. Pessoa stages both wit in action and a meta-discourse on wit, when moments of self-analysis and interpersonal sparring simultaneously enact and

interrogate the very mechanisms they deploy. The following, brief exchange between the duke and M illustrates this reflexivity: "What kind of wit **was** ^{is} that?" – I "Absence of it, my lord" (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-23^v). The apparent simplicity of these lines conceals a more complex operation: wit is defined through its absence, and the failure of wit is translated into material for a witty response. Moments such as this encapsulate the play's broader logic, in which wit functions not as a stable attribute but as a shifting, self-cancelling, and self-renewing force.

Pessoa's pervasive emphasis on wit suggests that his play's central concern lies not only in the representation of character or action, and, from a perspective exemplified by Zenith, their potential to produce biographical mirrorings and refractions. It also lies in an exploration of language as a medium that constructs and destabilizes reality at the same time. Wit becomes the means through which the play engages with the tensions between self and other, sanity and madness, expression and concealment. By the same token, the play exposes the limits of linguistic mastery, revealing a world in which meaning is always provisional, contested, and subject to reversal. In what follows I read some manifestations of wit across the fragments of Pessoa's *The Duke of Parma* in connection with early modern wit and Romantic and post-Romantic irony in order to reconstruct the multifaceted manifestation of wit in Pessoa's text(s) and its varying importance.

Wit in early modern drama: concept, practice, and courtly dynamics

Exploring the centrality of wit in *The Duke of Parma* must be situated within the convoluted conceptual and theatrical history of the term in early modern drama. Indeed, as Simon Trussler notes, in the Renaissance, "wit" is an unstable notion, the meanings of which evolve significantly over the course of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. In its earlier usage, it denoted primarily "knowledge" (from the Anglo-Saxon *witan*, to know), or more precisely "the appropriate application or use of knowledge, through intelligence and a lively mind" (TRUSSLER, 1989: 180); whereas, by the later seventeenth century, the term had come to signify "the dexterity of thought [...] needed for the turning of a conceit" (1989: 180), an acceptance that foregrounds its association with verbal ingenuity and rhetorical performance.

This semantic shift reflects a broader transitional condition. In the Renaissance, wit occupies an intermediate space between what Trussler identifies as "high, inventive talent (*ingenium*), especially in literature" and "verbal ingenuity, with an intonation of jesting" (TRUSSLER, 1989: 181). It is both a mental faculty and a mode of linguistic display. And one of its most characteristic manifestations in dramatic practice is the "wit-combat," defined as "a conventionalized debate or argument in which facility with language or the employment of skill in rhetoric was the predominant requirement" (1989: 181). Such exchanges—whether between fools and nobles, or among socially matched interlocutors, such as Beatrice and Benedick in Shakespeare's

Much Ado About Nothing—transform language into a competitive arena in which status, intelligence, and authority are negotiated.

In addition, as Indira Ghose observes, the early modern concept of wit is inseparable from contemporary understandings of cognition. Originally referring to intellectual capacity, in the Renaissance the term also encompassed the inward faculties of perception (imagination, memory, fantasy, and common sense) collectively known as the five wits. These faculties were often subsumed under the broader category of imagination, suggesting that wit operates at the intersection of cognition and creativity. At the same time, wit increasingly came to denote linguistic adeptness – the ability to manipulate words with elegance, speed, and precision. In this latter sense, wit corresponds to the Aristotelian virtue of *eutrapelia*, a socially embedded form of wittiness that regulates interaction and facilitates exchange, and thus constitutes a social virtue that, in drama, becomes especially relevant to courtly environments and behaviour (GHOSE, 2023).

Shakespeare's plays offer some of the most sustained explorations of these multiple dimensions of wit. In a comedy such as *Love's Labour's Lost*, for instance, wit is explicitly tied to questions of ethics and social performance. The characters' relentless pursuit of verbal brilliance, manifested in elaborate displays of rhetorical skill, reveals both the allure and the limitations of wit. Their linguistic virtuosity is driven by a desire for prestige, yet is also marked by competitiveness and aggression, often taking the form of playful but pointed antagonism. Ultimately, the play exposes the superficiality of such performances, suggesting that wit, when detached from ethical substance, risks collapsing into mere display. At the same time, this comedy gestures towards an alternative function of wit as a means of fostering social cohesion through shared laughter. Tellingly, this dynamic unfolds within a courtly setting—the court of Navarre—underscoring the close connection between wit and the structures of power and sociability.

In contrast, the darker side of this kind of relationship becomes visible in *Hamlet*, where wit functions simultaneously as a weapon and a disguise within a court defined by surveillance, duplicity, and moral corruption. Hamlet's linguistic agency—characterised by puns, equivocation, and sudden shifts in register—allows him to articulate truths that cannot be spoken directly. Thus, his "antic disposition" (I.5.180, SHAKESPEARE, 1989: 226) functions both as a strategy of concealment and as a mode of critique through which he exposes the hypocrisy and violence permeating the Danish court. By the same token, the court itself attempts to interpret, control, and contain his speech, deploying its own forms of wit in the service of power.

A paradigmatic instance of this dynamic occurs in several of Hamlet's exchanges with Polonius—and perhaps most markedly in their wit-combat in Act II, sc. 2. There, rather than engaging in straightforward dialogic exchange, Hamlet destabilizes communication through a series of linguistic displacements. He addresses Polonius as a "fishmonger" (II.2.174, SHAKESPEARE, 1989: 246), a term that operates

as insult, pun, and social reclassification, collapsing distinctions between profession, socio-economic status, and moral character. When Polonius seeks clarification, Hamlet responds by complicating further the exchange, shifting from general statements about honesty to oblique allusions involving decay, sexuality, and generative processes ("conception," II.2.184, SHAKESPEARE, 1989: 247). Each utterance multiplies possible meanings while refusing to stabilize any single one. Thus, what is at stake in this exemplary battle of wits is not merely verbal dexterity but control over interpretation. Polonius attempts to anchor meaning, repeatedly asking for an explanation ("What is the matter?" II.2.193, SHAKESPEARE, 1989: 247), yet Hamlet repeatedly deflects these attempts, turning language into a field of semantic excess. His responses are "pregnant" (II.2.208, SHAKESPEARE, 1989: 248)—as Polonius himself recognizes—yet their productivity lies precisely in their resistance to closure.

Wit, in this instance, operates as a form of epistemological disruption: it reveals the inadequacy of straightforward interpretation while exposing the fragility of the court's discursive regime. Moreover, the exchange underscores the unstable boundary between wit and madness. Hamlet's speech appears disordered, while also exhibiting a high degree of rhetorical control. Polonius's famous aside—"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (II.2.205-6, SHAKESPEARE, 1989: 248)—captures such ambiguity: wit and madness become indistinguishable at the level of linguistic performance. As a result, the court's attempt to categorize Hamlet mirrors the very instability it seeks to resolve. Wit, in this context, is both the symptom and the instrument of disorder.

More broadly, *Hamlet* provides emblematic instances of how, in Renaissance drama, the court functions as the privileged habitat of wit. It is a space structured by observation, interpretation, and concealment—a site pervaded by forms of surveillance, in which language functions as both mask and weapon. Characters must navigate this environment through indirect expression, deploying wit as a means of managing risk, while this same mechanism throws into relief the underlying corruption of the system, revealing the disjunction between superficial protocol and codified behaviour, on the one hand, and hidden intentions, on the other.

Early modern configurations of wit – as cognitive faculty, social practice, and linguistic strategy – provide a crucial framework for addressing some of the challenges posed by Pessoa's *Duke*. For, even as the play inherits the Renaissance association between wit, madness, and courtly interaction, it also intensifies and transforms it. Wit becomes not only a mode of interpersonal exchange, but also a principle of textual organisation, a force that structures both subjectivity and dramatic progression. By foregrounding the instability of language and the multiplicity of meaning, Pessoa's tragedy extends the early modern exploration of wit: no longer merely mediating between thought and expression, wit calls into question the very possibility of such mediation. As the following sections will show, Pessoa's deployment of wit both draws on and reconfigures this tradition, transforming it into a tool

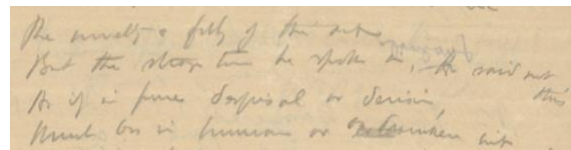
for probing the limits of knowledge, identity, and representation. It is this unstable, self-reflexive conception that Pessoa radicalizes through his endless, recursive, uses of wit in *The Duke of Parma*.

Wit in action in *The Duke of Parma*

Wit constitutes the main starting point of events in Pessoa's tragedy, and one of the principal drivers of its dramatic progression, at least insofar as that progression can be pieced together from the extant fragments. In *The Duke of Parma*, wit operates across multiple levels: as an expression of individual subjectivity, as a medium of interpersonal exchange, and as a structuring force within the courtly environment. Conveying tensions internal to characters as well as tensions between and among them, wit produces humour while simultaneously generating unease. In addition, it informs the power dynamics between characters, while also functioning as a heuristic instrument for probing and exposing the intentions of others.

At its most immediate level, wit functions as a trigger for action. From the outset, a verbal intervention on the duke's part, an instance of aggressively deployed wit, provokes a reaction that sets events in motion. Alberto's account of the duke's initial slight against him underscores the importance of tone and intention in the recourse to wit:

The novelty & folly of the act
But the strange tone he spoke in, He said not this
As if in pure despal or derision,
Much less in humour or $\neq$ as drunken wit



(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-3^r)

The duke's expression of wit is not only unusual and unprecedented, but also excessively spiteful and derisory—a manifestation of otherness, "strange" and possibly unrelated to common behaviour ("humour," "drunken"). Alberto's response, articulated later, confirms the generative force of this initial moment: "The offense to me which ~~did~~ marked the beginning | Of his mad wit did instigate me to this" (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-24^v). Wit, in this instance, corresponds to what J. L. Austin would term a perlocutionary act: a linguistic utterance whose significance lies in its effects, in what it triggers—here, the provocation of offence and the initiation of a debate on how to address the problem ("to depose him," BNP/E3, 11⁴D-24^v) (MALMKJÆR 2002: 489-490). For, even as the duke's wit manifests his own (personal) state of mind, it also produces consequences, setting in motion a chain of individual and collective reactions that structure the play's unfolding. Thus, in this instance, Pessoa offers a *degree zero* of wit as action-generating speech and the minimal unit of dramatic causality.

However, wit in *The Duke of Parma* is not confined to this opening performative function. Its forms and roles are multiple and continuously shifting. If, on one

level, wit induces action, on another it reflects upon itself, becoming an object of inquiry as in those passages where Pessoa creates a meta-discourse on wit—that is, those moments in which linguistic ingenuity is both enacted and analysed, as in the following exchange:

M^s — What is prophet's language?
M — Lang Language obscurely meaning everything.
Ms — What? Have we wit? A — Wit [...]
which is an exterior thing
And take saying well for saying much.
M. — What then is, gracious sir, the mask of truth?
Broadcloth language, your lordship my lord & fustian phrase?
[...]
How likes your lordship this exterior wit?
A — Tolerably, sir.
M^s — Enough, this is amusement

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-3^v)

Admittedly, the meaning of this passage, as of so many others in Pessoa's tragedy, is hard to reconstruct; yet its very opacity is significant. Rather than offering a stable sequence of propositions, the exchange accumulates fragments of discourse that intersect and diverge in rapid succession. Words appear to gravitate towards one another only to slip apart again, producing a sense of semantic drift. A by-product of the manuscript's fragmentary state, this instability is intrinsic to the passage's engagement with language itself.

The opening question introduces a key thematic concern, as the mention of “Prophetic language” suggests a mode of speech that anticipates and conjures meaning, yet also one that gestures towards truth without fully articulating it. The response (“Language obscurely meaning everything”) captures the paradox at the heart of such discourse: language aspiring to totality tends towards obscurity, its production of meaning simultaneously giving rise to indeterminacy. Within this framework, wit emerges as both instrument and problem. The passage repeatedly returns to the term, beginning with wit and ending with wit, as if circling around an elusive definition. In addition, wit is associated with subtlety, captured in the adjective “nice,” which points towards precision, refinement, and discrimination; but, at the same time, wit in this dialogic exchange is also exposed as potentially superficial, reducible to “exterior wit,” a form of linguistic display devoid of depth. The opposition between “saying well” and “saying much,” as well as that between “Broadcloth language” and “fustian phrase,” encapsulate this tension: wit aspires to compression and exactness, but risks collapsing into ornamentation and bombast, mere amusement, or unrefined expression—forms of semantic depletion that stand in relation to the opening phrase “Language obscurely meaning everything,” in which fullness of meaning is dispersed into semantic impenetrability.

In this excerpt Pessoa stages a double movement. On the one hand, he presents wit as a privileged mode of engaging with reality, capable of mirroring its complexity through equally complex linguistic structures. On the other, he relentlessly subjects it to ironic deflation: the very discursivity that promises access to truth is dismissed as mere "amusement," as rhetorical play detached from substance. This apparent reduction, however, is in itself deeply ironic. Not simply rejecting wit, the passage exposes the conditions under which wit can be both meaningful and empty, both revelatory and superficial. In this sense, the play's meta-discursive strategy does not stabilize the concept of wit but renders it more problematic. It becomes a site of tension between interiority and exteriority, depth and surface, truth and performance. It is at once a tool for thinking and an instrument of obfuscation, a means of accessing reality and a mechanism that distances the subject from it.

Crucially, this ambivalence does not diminish the centrality of wit in *The Duke of Parma*. By staging both wit in action and reflection on wit, Pessoa posits it as a pivotally structuring principle of the play. The text's dynamics of action, power, and subjectivity are bound up with the operations of language, and wit becomes a major mode for enacting these operations. Moreover, the instability of wit signals a broader epistemological concern. If language is capable of generating increasingly complex configurations of meaning, it is also incapable of fully securing them. Wit produces insight, but also indeterminacy; it reveals, but also obscures reality. The result is a mode of discursivity in which meaning is perpetually in flux, subject to revision and reversal. This tension—between wit as access to reality and wit as its distortion—will become even more pronounced when, in the play, wit intersects with madness, irony, and the fragmentation of the self.

The fool, wit, and the epistemology of disorder

The irony inherent in Pessoa's treatment of wit takes centre stage when the play invokes the fool, one of the most emblematic figures of Renaissance drama. In *The Duke of Parma*, this character-type is not merely reproduced but reconfigured, as the role of the fool is imposed upon – and assumed, though also questioned by – Alberto, who brings into focus his metamorphosis from lord to fool in the following lines: "But yesterday I was chief counsellor | To-day I am, by the Duke's clear opinion, | 'Fool' – why 'fool'? – said he not fool?" (BNP/E3, 11⁴ D-6^r). The abruptness of this shift highlights a destabilization of social hierarchy as well as epistemic authority. Traditionally associated with reason and deliberation, the counsellor is recast as a persona embodying unreason. At the same time, Alberto's insistence ("said he not fool?") points to the performative force of language: the duke's designation is sufficient to set in train a transformative effect, once again providing an instance of perlocutionary language.

Interestingly, the character's assumption of the role is far from consistent. His performance of folly is discontinuous, oscillating between resistance and participation, an instability that reflects the fragmentary condition of the manuscript, but also appears thematically significant. In the following exchange, Alberto overtly resists the logic of wit that structures the interaction:

D — I am pleased to call the fool!

M — In that your lordship's pleasure is not mine.

[...]

A — I dreamed I saw with the ducal crown. This was a dream of Parma.

M — No, that was no dream of Parma, my Lord, it was a dream of Burgundy.

A — How of Burgundy, sir? I ~~do not~~ understand you not.

M — Pray you ^{then} bend your wit to this low point, sir.

A — My wit did not bend here [...] it bound up.

(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-3a^v)

The scene unfolds as an attempt to draw Alberto into a game of interpretative wit, led by M, who seeks to reframe his dream through linguistic manipulation. Alberto, however, refuses to "bend" his wit. He retorts that his wit, instead, "bound up" — a statement of resistance combining opposition to pliability and movement upwards, away from any "low point," through which Alberto voices his aversion to being incorporated into the discursive and behavioural protocols of the court. In other words, the exchange stages a failed wit-combat: one participant operates within the conventions of rhetorical play, while the other refuses them, producing a breakdown in communicative symmetry.

In another passage, however, in conversation with the duke, Alberto appears to embrace the role more fully, performing as a recognizable Renaissance fool:

D — I know him; 'tis a good man

A? — Ay, one side of him

[...]

A? — The unknown one, my lord.

D — Then, not wisdom's worth, Alberto. Is he like the moon?

A — Ay, that borrows the light of his worth from the sun of your lordship's believing it.

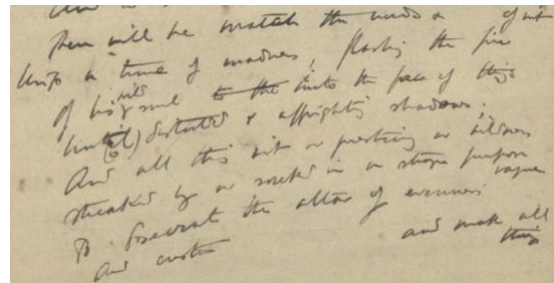
(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-9^r)

Here, Alberto's wit functions through indirection, paradox, and metaphor. His response — "one side of him" — fractures identity, while his phrase "the unknown one" introduces a degree of opacity that resists the duke's attempt at classification. The extended metaphor of borrowed light further complicates the exchange, suggesting that value is not intrinsic but dependent on perception — on "your lordship's believing it." In this moment, Alberto aligns closely with Shakespearean fools, whose apparent lightness, frivolity, and recourse to nonsense conceals a capacity for oblique

insight. Here, wit becomes a mode of epistemological intervention, revealing the instability of identity and the contingency of value.

In addition, the duke's reaction—"why was it | not a ^{solid} thing?"—is particularly revealing, since it figures the products of wit as something that might be grasped, fixed, and kept "in [the] hand" (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-9^r). But, as this solidity remains unattainable, the image encapsulates a major tension: witty language promises access to reality, but instead delivers a form of evanescence. As elsewhere in the play, reality appears not as a stable object but as a mirage of solidity, which dissolves under scrutiny – a concept that recurs in Pessoa's tragedy, as in the phrase "an appearance of reality" (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-3a^r). This tension between wit and reality is further developed in a passage explicitly linking wit to madness, when a character, possibly the duke himself, ponders the possibility of:

[...] match[ing] the words & of wit
 Unto a time of madness, flashing the fire
 Of his ^{wild} soul ~~to the~~ unto the face of things
 Unto distorted & affrighting shadows;
 And all this wit or questioning or wildness
 Streaked by or soaked in a strange purpose vague
 To desecrate the altar of evenness
 And custom and make all things



(BNP/E3, 11⁴D-11^v)

These lines present wit as the only adequate response to a disorderly and puzzling world, and "a time of madness" populated by "distorted & affrighting shadows." Language becomes an instrument of confrontation: wit flashes against the "face of things" by exposing and challenging the apparent order—in fact, the chaos—of reality. The expression "to desecrate the altar of evenness | And custom" underscores the subversive dimension of this operation. Wit is directed against normative structures, against the "evenness" of established forms, and against the authority of protocols or habits. At the same time, however, the passage leaves its own outcome suspended. The projected action ("[to] make all things") remains incomplete, its object unspecified. And this suspension is particularly valuable, because it figures wit as a causative force, capable of acting upon the world, yet the nature of this action is left indeterminate. The passage foregrounds the limits of wit's transformative power: it can disrupt, question, and expose, but it cannot fully determine what follows, in ways that are patently consonant with the incompleteness and fragmentary state of Pessoa's play.

This indeterminacy points towards a further dimension of wit in *The Duke of Parma*: its epistemic function. Wit does not resolve the chaos it confronts; instead, it engages with it, offering a mode of exploration rather than mastery. This is made explicit in another fragment—"Any & each day has a new wit, that we | may not

resolve a general way of answering | or a fixed formula of fixed accordance" (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-10^v)—which casts wit as inherently variable and resistant to systematization. There can be no "fixed formula," no stable model for interpreting or responding to the world. Instead, wit operates as a heuristic tool. It is a means of probing, testing, and reconfiguring understanding in response to ever-changing conditions. As such, it harks back to its function in Renaissance drama, where wit often enables characters to navigate uncertainty and ambiguity, even as it exposes the limits of knowledge.

Pessoa's play intensifies this function by positing wit as not only a means of engaging with reality but a mechanism that continually defers its resolution. It sets (linguistic, social, epistemological) processes in motion without ever bringing them to closure. Oscillating between insight and instability, the figure of the fool embodies this condition. Neither fully inside nor outside the structures of power, neither wholly rational nor wholly mad, the fool becomes the dramatic function at which the tensions of wit are most acutely realized. In turn, through Alberto's wavering personation of the fool, Pessoa reactivates this Renaissance figure as a tool to explore the limits of language, knowledge, and authority. In this context, wit is both a tool and a problem: a means of accessing reality and a force that renders such access perpetually uncertain.

Conclusion: wit, irony, and the limits of knowledge

If, in several respects, Pessoa remains faithful to Shakespearean and early modern configurations of wit, in others he reinterprets them through later, specifically post-Romantic lenses. In particular, his deployment of wit resonates with Friedrich Schlegel's recasting of irony as a fundamentally reflexive and generative principle, one that has been described as a "conceptual catalyst" for "reflections upon subjectivity, epistemology, and aesthetic representation" (HANDWERK, 2000: 208). Within this framework, irony is a rhetorical device which doubles as a mode of thinking and acting that unsettles the relationship between language, the subject, and the real. In this and several other ways, Schlegel's approach is a significant instance of wider-ranging Romantic reconfigurations not only of irony but also of wit, which neoclassical poetics tended to qualify restrictively as a term "never applied to an action nor to a passion, and as little to an external object," as well as a feature of "thought [...] words or expression" that is "of all the most elegant recreation," one which "gently elevates without straining, raises mirth without dissoluteness, and relaxes while it entertains" (KAMES, 2005: 173-4).

Schlegel's notion of "permanent parabasis" is especially pertinent to his revisionary re-elaboration of the concept and practice of irony, since, as Paul de Man explains, it reorients irony towards a radical disjunction between sign and meaning, which extends to the structure of subjectivity itself. The relation of the subject to its own linguistic or reflective consciousness is inherently discontinuous; in turn, the

self is no longer anchored in empirical reality but is, instead, constituted within and through language (HANDWERK, 2000: 205). This shift transforms language into a crucial, yet unstable, medium of self-relation, one that both enables and undermines the possibility of knowledge. Aptly, moreover, within Schlegel's theoretical and literary practice, irony operates in close conjunction with his reconceptualised notion of wit (Witz), understood as a combining spirit that produces dialectical interplay, challenges fragmentation, and informs an ongoing, open-ended semantic productivity. "Wit is absolute social feeling, or fragmentary genius," "Wit is an explosion of confined spirit," "wit is chemical [...] spirit," he writes in his *Athenaeum* fragments, suggesting a pervasive, generative principle that dissolves rigid distinctions between thought, language, and reality (SCHLEGEL, 1971: 144, 153, 221).

Pessoa's *Duke of Parma* both continues and modifies this tradition. Wit, in the play, simultaneously recalls early modern dramatic practice and engages with Romantic and post-Romantic redefinitions of irony and subjectivity. Pessoa was indeed conversant with the *Athenaeum* through a French edition of Novalis's fragments (SEPÚLVEDA, 2020), and as Caio Gagliardi argues:

Pessoa dá continuidade à tradição iniciada pelos irmãos Schlegel e pelo grupo de Iena, os quais, já no crepúsculo do século XVIII, ao refletirem a respeito dos jogos de dissimulação do autor, figurados na própria escrita, acabaram por suprimir do texto literário o seu disfarce realista, desfazendo a ilusão de verossimilhança. Esse exercício de desmistificação metalinguística associada à autorrepresentação literária passou a ser visto, em si mesmo, como essencialmente irônico [...] Por trás dessa visão, à qual se associa uma subjetividade hipertrofiada, se insinua a sensação de não pertencimento, de exílio, de descompasso entre o homem e a natureza. A ironia, como perspectiva distanciada de mundo, resulta justamente dessa fenda, e é nesse sentido que o desassossego pessoano apresenta consonância com o desconforto romântico.

(GAGLIARDI, 2024: 24-25)

[Pessoa continues the tradition initiated by the Schlegel brothers and the Jena group, who, already at the close of the eighteenth century, in reflecting on the author's games of dissimulation as staged within writing itself, ultimately stripped the literary text of its realist disguise, undoing the illusion of verisimilitude. This exercise in metalinguistic demystification associated with literary self-representation came to be regarded, in itself, as essentially ironic (...) Behind this view, linked to a hypertrophied subjectivity, there emerges a sense of non-belonging, of exile, of a disjunction between man and nature. Irony, as a distanced perspective on the world, arises precisely from this fissure, and it is in this sense that Pessoa's disquiet resonates with Romantic unease.]

On these premises, the operations of wit in *The Duke of Parma* extend beyond rhetorical performance to encompass a broader epistemological function, also articulated — albeit in a different register — in Pessoa's own reflections on irony in *The Book of Disquiet*, notably a passage dated 15.9.1931 where he remarks that "Irony is the

first sign that consciousness has become conscious," passing from the Socratic recognition of ignorance to a more radical uncertainty, in which "I do not even know that I know nothing" (PESSOA, 2010: 249). This formulation neatly encapsulates the movement from epistemic limitation to epistemic indeterminacy, a shift that finds a dramatic analogue in *The Duke of Parma*.

Marked by a conspicuous preoccupation with wit and irony, Pessoa's fragmentary tragedy reads as a kaleidoscopic textual device for continuous questioning and interrogation—operations that are pivotal to Pessoa's design, as highlighted in the resonant phrase "all this wit or questioning or wildness" (BNP/E3, 11⁴D-11^v). Wit pervades the play's episodes, governs its dialogic exchanges, and frames its engagement with reality. Language constitutes the primary medium through which it approaches both the internal world of subjectivity and the external world of social and political relations. And yet, this engagement presents a fundamental limitation: it does not confer mastery or control, but rather exposes the instability of both self and world. It is in this sense that Pessoa's avant-garde, though also late-nineteenth century neo-Elizabethan play, is simultaneously indebted to Renaissance, as well as Romantic and post-Romantic models and concepts (SAGLIA, 2024). Its modernity, in other words, results from a convergence of different modernities. It looks back to the early modern theatre, drawing on Shakespearean inflections of wit, madness, and courtly interaction, while repositioning them within more recent frameworks shaped by epistemological uncertainty and linguistic self-reflexivity, within which wit operates both as a tool of insight and as a source of dislocation in the context of the rigid structures of the court and the disorienting abysses of madness.

A mode of discourse that is subtle, elusive, and incisive, wit drives *The Duke of Parma*'s relentless verbal sparring—around and within the duke—offering only a measure of purchase on the real, one that is provisional and compromised. Owing to its multiple modernities as a neo-Renaissance work shaped by post-Romantic sensibilities, the play's engagement with reality can only be partial, deferred, and ultimately unattainable. And it is precisely in this tension (between access to the real and its elusiveness, linguistic mastery, and epistemological failure) that the play's distinctive power resides. Far from resolving the contradictions it articulates, wit sustains them, transforming the text into a space where meaning is endlessly produced and continuously undone. As one of the most conspicuous recurrent features bestowing a degree of intratextual coherence to what might otherwise seem a jumble of disjointed fragments, wit highlights some of the structural and thematic-ideological goals Pessoa was working towards during his protracted compositional process. And, because of their endlessly self-undermining and self-renewing nature, wit and irony ultimately suggest that Pessoa's *The Duke of Parma* is not only unfinished but was also, perhaps, impossible to finish.

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