

William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* edited by Helen Thaventhiran and Stefan Collini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 614pp.

Reviewed by **Hywel Dix**, Bournemouth University

The original occasion for this recently reissued classic of literary criticism (first published 1951) seems to have been a reaction against the doctrines of high modernism. The Anglo-American New Criticism had been the dominant trend in literary scholarship for over a decade, with a tendency to treat literary objects in glorious isolation from all other social, political or historical currents as if it were possible to make critical value judgments independent of these things. Meanwhile, in the work of those modernist poets who were also critics, there was a repeated assertion of the impersonality of poetry and the extinction of the poetic self. If poetic language existed outside of the personality of the poet, then it was logical to assume that language itself was above all a technical medium, with material properties and specifications that could be analyzed as such. By contrast, William Empson was interested in supplementing the technical approach to literary language with one based on cognition at the emotional level.

Thus, the starting point for *The Structure of Complex Words* is that poetic language conveys substantive content through participation in a web of communication that can be rigorously examined according to scientific principles, even as it also can be mined for its range of emotive association that is much freer and more indirect. That Empson ends up dismantling the quasi-scientific critical apparatus of New Criticism only to end up developing an alternative system of linguistic classification of his own gives the text an oddly paradoxical character.

To read *The Structure of Complex Words* in 2021 is to get a sense of how influential it was: it is possible to discern Empson's influence in the development in French thought of Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality (a word that has been used more recently to refer to something else altogether). In another context, Raymond Williams's *structure of feeling* is a direct heir to Empson's *structure of meaning* and Williams's own *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Society and Culture* (1973) trails in the wake of Empson's linguistic analysis (even though in a 'Comment' for the third edition of *The Structure of Complex Words* in 1977, Empson plays down the commonality of approach). Yet there are also various shortcomings in Empsonian thought, especially in his handling of constructions of race and gender. The result of these shortcomings is that arguably the most proper inheritor of Empson's work is a writer like Sianne Ngai, whose *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012) is no less interested in the evolution of complex words but who is considerably more attuned to the differences made by race and gender.

The central paradox of Empson then is this: a study devoted to exploring how archaic words become supplemented by new meanings in a way that linguistically marks moments of transition in social value ends up feeling historically remote. It is a paradox that can be seen in the different linguistic equations Empson proposes. Although we have become accustomed to thinking of the word *equation* as referring to a formula for resolving complex calculations, Empson applies the term much more loosely, to refer to the act of equating one thing with another. When applied to language, his equations amounted to a system of notations for the different senses of a given word. Moreover, he supplements the category of Senses with the further categories of Implication, Mood and Emotion (and he uses £ to express Mood because the £ key on his keyboard was the closest thing he could find to a notation that expresses value). These can then be supplemented almost infinitely as words acquire different meanings, implications and moods over time. Indeed, tracing the emergence of those different uses is in large part the purpose of the book.

For a work dedicated to replacing a rigorous impersonal theory of language with an emotive signifying one, this system sounds curiously rigorous and impersonal. Having established the overall schema, Empson goes on to apply it to readings of established texts within the literary historical canon. In the process, he effectively treats texts as discursive spaces in which the clash between different senses and implications of certain key words becomes particularly manifest. As a result, his main argument is that one prominent word used in a range of different senses holds the key to interpreting a given text.

For instance, his discussion of the concept of the Fool in *King Lear* argues that the play instantiates a gradual historical drift from Erasmus's renaissance understanding of the term *fool* (a normal man unencumbered by complex challenges who nevertheless has the ability to understand complicated matters in a way that his purported betters cannot) to a post-reformation one relating to the loss of wits and onset of insanity. But since the loss of wits is related to the shattering of natural order, its implication is that at stake is not merely the welfare of the individual but the end of the world. In other words, the conflict between different uses of the term *fool* (and there are clearly several others besides) enable Empson to situate *King Lear* in a post-reformation Christian orbit.

If basing this argument on one word seems a stretch, then the number of pages he then dedicates to Shakespeare's attitudes to dogs seems almost preposterous. Analyzing the use of the word *dog* in *Timon of Athens*, Empson attributes Shakespeare's apparent distaste for the animal to his not belonging to the hunting class. The particular irony is that whereas the word *dog* had mainly negative connotations when used in literary symbolism before Shakespeare's time, in his own time it was starting to take on a range of more positive virtues like loyalty and steadfastness. Apparently disliking dogs himself, Empson suggests, Shakespeare then seems to have used the

older application in *Timon* almost in spite of himself. But just as the reading of *fool* in *Lear* turned out to have implications for reformation doctrine, so in *Timon* Empson associates the growing reputation of dogs in literature with the development of Enlightenment humanism. He contends that recognizing human qualities in animals (and vice versa) made it possible to see the evolutionary potential in all living things in equal measure, thereby refuting the pre-reformation doctrine of the innate fallenness of man.

At times, Empson misleadingly gives the impression that rather than merely using certain suggestive words to illustrate broader social transformations over the longer term, Shakespeare actually wrote the plays about the words themselves. The discussion of *honest* in *Othello* is especially revealing because Empson explores how the play dramatizes a historical shift in meaning from *deserving honor* to *telling the truth* or even *keeping a promise*. In this latter, *honest* became related to *chaste* (especially when used by women). But because historically the consequences for being perceived unchaste were much more severe for women than men, women were less able to use the word in an ironic way and therefore could not activate the different senses of *honest* simultaneously as a means of refuting it. This accounts for the strenuous, resistant recurrence of the word throughout the play.

It must be said, however, that while Empson does not necessarily endorse the unequal applications of his key words when applied to men and women, he does not really interrogate or critique them either. His discussion of *sense* in *Measure for Measure* hinges on a critical reading of the construction of Isabella's chastity that directly recreates his discussion of *Othello*, yet his critique is more on the grounds that the category of chastity is so outmoded as to be meaningless than on the grounds that it treats genders unequally. It might be the case that our own gender politics has changed in the 70 years since the book first appeared, making it possible for women to use apparently insulting words to refer to each other ironically, thus subverting the original pejorative meaning, in a way that Empson found impossible for Shakespeare's Desdemona or Isabella.

If there is this predictable shortfall in his gendered reading of language, there is an even greater one in the area of race. For instance, in the discussion of the word *fool* mentioned above, Empson cites the contrasting example of the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, whom he describes as a "negro prince" (119). Admittedly the point of the discussion is to analyze varying connotations of the word *fool* but he nevertheless fails to examine the highly racialized implications of this other word and in fact passes it on unquestioned. Worse, he uses the other N-word when he refers to a novel by Ronald Firbank that uses that derogatory word in its title (199). Although he is quoting, it is nevertheless extraordinary that in a book specifically dedicated to exploring how the evolution of specific words indicates conflicts over social value this absolutely fundamental word should remain completely unexamined. Ania Loomba

has shown that how words to refer to colors came to acquire different human connotations is a linguistic history of racism. Failing to take account of the difference made by constructions of race and racism to evolving linguistic structures thus cannot fail to be one of Empson's more significant shortcomings.