the main characters and the general course of the action. In a typical play, a pair of young lovers outwit a rich old father ("Pantaloon"), aided by a clever and intriguing servant ("Harlequin"), in a plot enlivened by the buffoonery of "Punch" and other clowns. Wandering Italian troupes played in all the large cities of Renaissance Europe and influenced various writers of comedies in Elizabethan England and, later, Molière in France. The modern puppet shows of Punch and Judy are descendants of this old Italian comedy, emphasizing its components of *farce* and buffoonery.

See Kathleen M. Lea, *Italian Popular Comedy, 1560–1620* (2 vols.; 1934).

Conceit. Originally meaning a concept or image, "conceit" came to be the term for figures of speech which establish a striking parallel, usually ingeniously elaborate, between two very dissimilar things or situations. (See *figurative language.*) English poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries adapted the term from the Italian "concetto." Two types of conceit are often distinguished by specific names:

(1) The **Petrarchan conceit** is a type of figure used in love poems that had been novel and effective in the Italian poet Petrarch, but became hackneyed in some of his imitators among the *Elizabethan* sonneteers. The figure consists of detailed, ingenious, and often exaggerated comparisons applied to the disdainful mistress, as cold and cruel as she is beautiful, and to the distresses and despair of her worshipful lover. (See *courtly love.*) Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–42), for example, in the sonnet "My Galley Chargèd with Forgetfulness" that he translated from Petrarch, compares the lover's state in detail to a ship laboring in a storm. Another sonnet of Petrarch's translated by Wyatt begins with an *oxymoron* describing the opposing passions experienced by a courtly sufferer from the disease of love:

> I find no peace; and all my war is done;
> I fear and hope; I burn and freeze in ice.

Shakespeare (who at times employed this type of conceit himself) *parodied* some standard comparisons by Petrarchan sonneteers in his Sonnet 130, beginning

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

(2) The **metaphysical conceit** is a characteristic figure in John Donne (1572–1631) and other *metaphysical poets* of the seventeenth century. It was described by Samuel Johnson, in a famed passage in his "Life of Cowley," (1779–81), as "wit" which is

> a kind of *discordia concors;* a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. . . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.

The metaphysical poets exploited all knowledge—commonplace or esoteric, practical, theological, or philosophical, true or fabulous—for the vehicles of these figures; and their comparisons, whether succinct or expanded, were often novel and witty, and at their best startlingly effective. In sharp contrast to both the concepts and figures of conventional Petrarchism is John Donne's "The Flea," a poem that uses a flea who has bitten both lovers as the basic reference for its argument against the lady's resistance to an importunate male. In Donne's "The Canonization," as the poetic argument develops, the comparisons for the relationship between lovers move from the area of commerce and business, through actual and mythical birds and diverse forms of historical memorials, to a climax which equates the sexual acts and the moral status of worldly lovers with the ascetic life and heavenly destination of unworldly saints. The most famous sustained conceit is Donne's parallel (in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning") between the continuing relationship of his and his lady's soul during their physical parting, and the coordinated movements of the two feet of a draftsman's compass. An oft-cited instance of the chilly ingenuity of the metaphysical conceit when it is overdriven is Richard Crashaw's description, in his mid-seventeenth-century poem "Saint Mary Magdalene," of the tearful eyes of the repentant Magdalene as

> two faithful fountains
> Two walking baths, two weeping motions,
> Portable and compendious oceans.

The metaphysical conceit fell out of favor in the eighteenth century, when it came to be regarded as strained and unnatural. But with the great revival of interest in the metaphysical poets during the early decades of the twentieth century, a number of modern poets exploited this type of figure. Examples are T. S. Eliot's comparison of the evening to "a patient etherized upon a table" at the beginning of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and the series of startling figurative vehicles in Dylan Thomas' "In Memory of Ann Jones." The vogue for such conceits extended even to popular love songs, in the 1920s and later, by well-educated composers such as Cole Porter: "You're the Cream in My Coffee" and "You're the Top."

Refer to Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (1947), and K. K. Ruthven, *The Conceit* (1969).

Concrete and Abstract. In standard philosophical usage a "concrete term" is a word that denotes a particular person or physical object, and an "abstract term" denotes either a class of things or else (as in "brightness," "beauty," "evil," "despair") qualities that exist only as attributes of particular persons or things. A sentence, accordingly, is said to be concrete if it makes an assertion about a particular subject (T. S. Eliot's "Grishkin is nice . . ."), and abstract if it makes an assertion about an abstract subject (Alexander Pope's "Hope springs eternal in the human breast"). Critics of literature, however, often use these