

# The Restoration and “Wit”

## courtesy of Prof. R.F.W. Kroll

Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society* (1667) In England, Sprat writes,

[T]he study of *Wit*, and humor of *Writing* prevails so much, that there are very few conditions, or degrees, or Ages of Men who are free from its infection. I will therefore declare to all those whom this spirit has possess'd, that their is in the *Works of Nature* an inexhaustible Treasure of *Fancy*, and *Invention*, which will be reveal'd proportionably to the increas of their *Knowledge*.

To this purpose I must premise, that it is requir'd in the best, and most delightful *Wit*; that it be founded on such images which are generally known, and are able to bring a strong, and a sensible impression on the *mind*. The several subjects from which it has bin rays'd in all Times, are the *Fables*, and *Religions* of the *Antients*, the *Civil Histories* of all *Countries*, the *Customs* of *Nations*, the *Bible*, the *Sciences*, and *Manners* of *Men*, the several *Arts* of their hands, and the works of *Nature*. In all these, where there may be a resemblance of one thing to another, as there may be in all, there is a sufficient Foundation for *Wit*. (Public domain edition, 413, par. XXXV; I've simplified the typography.)

John Dryden defines wit as follows in “The Author’s Apology” to *The State of Innocence*:

. . . . [T]he definition of wit (which has so often been attempted, and ever successfully by many poets) is only this: That it is a propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject. (Scott-Saintsbury edition, vol. V.124)

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) from Book II, Chapter XI, “Of Discerning, and other Operations of the Mind”:

Another faculty we may take notice of in our minds is that of DISCERNING and DISTINGUISHING between the several ideas it has. . . . On this faculty of distinguishing one thing from another depends the evidence and certainty of several, even very general, propositions, which have passed for innate truths;—because men, overlooking the true cause why those propositions find universal assent, impute it wholly to native uniform impressions; whereas it in truth depends upon this clear discerning faculty of the mind, whereby it PERCEIVES two ideas to be the same, or different. . . . .

If in having our ideas in the memory ready at hand consists quickness of parts; in this, of having them unconfused, and being able nicely to distinguish one thing from another, where there is but the least difference, consists, in a great measure, the exactness of judgment, and clearness of reason, which is to be observed in one man above another. . . . .

For WIT lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy; JUDGMENT, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully, one from another, ideas wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another. This is a way of proceeding quite contrary to metaphor and allusion; wherein for the most part lies that entertainment and pleasantry of wit, which strikes so lively on the fancy, and therefore is so acceptable to all people, because its beauty appears at first sight, and there is required no labour of thought to examine what truth or reason there is in it. The mind, without looking any further, rests satisfied with the agreeableness of the picture and the gaiety of the fancy. . . . (Public domain ed., cf. also II.xi.par.2-5)