The word “wit,” which recurs so inevitably in any description of the metaphysical and neoclassic styles, is one of the most bewildering, and yet one of the most important, in the 17th-century critical vocabulary. Sometimes it means “general intelligence”; sometimes it means “repartee”; sometimes it means “recondite learning”; sometimes, any work of literature or amusement. Sometimes it includes a concept called “judgment,” and sometimes it is contrasted with and opposed to “judgment.” The passages reprinted here illustrate some of the various uses of the word, and some of the problems to which it gave rise. Francis Beaumont, for example, uses the term without any consistency at all, shifting from meaning to meaning, and trusting to the context to inform the reader of what is intended. Sir William Davenant is an almost classic case of confusion; his expressions are as cloudy as his thought is muddled, and it seems clear that Thomas Hobbes in his answer deliberately avoided the word “wit” just because it gave rise to such confusion. But the Hobbesian distinction between judgment and fancy was the cornerstone of a new aesthetic; one which indeed established what T. S. Eliot has called a separation between thought and feeling, a divided sensibility. John Dryden accepts this new position, but with typical caution; allowing that the judicious imitation of folly may be in one general sense, wit; but describing wit more particularly as the spaniel which finds ideas, which are then varied or molded by the judgment to accord with the subject. Finally, in Sir Richard Blackmore, we have an early analogue with Pope’s famous one-couplet definition:

True wit is nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed.

Wit is now frankly admitted to be a decorative quality, exterior to “judgment” or “good sense,” and subordinate to it. And the 18th century will be concerned with playing variations on this theme, until Wordsworth and Coleridge undertake to set up a whole new critical vocabulary, in which the old distinction between “wit” and “judgment” is replaced by a contrast between “imagination” and the inferior faculties.

From M. Francis Beaumonts Letter to Ben Jonson

Methinks the little wit° I had is lost
Since I saw you; for wit is like a rest
Held up² at tennis, which men do the best
With the best gamesters. What things have we seen
Done at the Mermaid! heard words that have been
So nimble, and so full of subtle flame
As if that every one from whence they came

1. In Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, the title goes on to say that the letter was “Written Before He and Master Fletcher Came to London, with Two of the Precedent Comedies Then Not Finisht, Which Deferred Their Merry Meetings at the Mermaid.”
2. A rally.
Had meant to put his whole wit\textsuperscript{o} in a jest, intelligence
And had resolved to live a fool the rest
Of his dull life; there where there hath been thrown ingenuity
Wit\textsuperscript{o} able enough to justify the town
For three days past: wit that might warrant be
For the whole town to talk foolishly,
Till that were cancelled; and when that was gone,
We left an air behind us, which alone
Was able to make the next two companies
Right witty\textsuperscript{o} though but downright fools, more wise.
When I remember this, and see that now
The country gentlemen begin to allow poetry
My wit\textsuperscript{o} for dry bobs,\textsuperscript{3} then I needs must cry,
I see my days of ballating\textsuperscript{4} grow nigh.

ca. 1608–10

SIR WILLIAM DAVENANT: From The Author's Preface to His Much Honored Friend Mr. Hobbes\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{* * *} Wit is the laborious, and the lucky resultances of thought, having towards its excellence (as we say of the strokes of Painting) as well a happiness, as care. It is a Web consisting of the subtillest threads, and like that of the Spider, is considerately\textsuperscript{6} woven out of ourselves; for a Spider may be said to consider, not onely respecting his solemnness and tacite posture (like a grave scout in ambush for his Enemy) but because all things done are either from consideration or chance; and the works of chance are accomplishments of an instant, having commonly a dissimilitude; but hers are the works of time, and have their contexts like.

Wit is not onely the luck and labour, but also the dexterity of the thought; rounding the world like the Sun with unimaginable motion; and bringing swiftly home to the memory universall surveys. It is the Souls Powder, which when supprest (as forbidden from flying upward) blows up the restraint; and loseth all force in a farther ascension towards Heaven (the region of God) and yet by nature is much lesse able to make any inquisition downward towards Hell, the Cell of the Devil; but breaks through all about it (as farre as the utmost it can reach) removes, uncoovers, makes way for Light, where darknesse was inclosed, till great bodies are more examinable by being scattered into parcels; and till all that find its strength (but most of mankind are strangers to Wit, as Indians are to Powder) worship it for the effects, as derived from the Deity. It is in Divines Humility, Exemplarinesse, and Moderation: in States-men, Gravity, Vigilance, Benigne Complacency, Secrecy, Patience, and Dispatch. In Leaders of Armies, Valour, Painfulnesse, Temperance, Bounty, Dexterity in Punishing and Rewarding, and a sacred Certitude of Promise: It is in Poets a

\textsuperscript{3} Rural jests, coarse and satirical.
\textsuperscript{4} Balladeering.
\textsuperscript{5} Prefixed to Davenant's Gondibert. Hobbes's reply was published in the same volume.
\textsuperscript{6} By consideration, artfully.
\textsuperscript{7} Note that for Davenant, wit is the principle of excellence in any activity; it is simply general intelligence. He is also thinking in terms of the Renaissance theory of epic vision.
full comprehension of all recited in all these; and an ability to bring those comprehensions into action, when they shall so far forget the true measure of what is of greatest consequence to humanity, (which are things righteous, pleasant, and useful) as to think the delights of greatness equal to that of Poesie; or the Chiefs of any Profession more necessary to the World then excellent Poets.

THOMAS HOBBES: From The Answer to Sir Will. D’Avenant’s Preface Before Gondibert

* * * Time and Education begets experience; Experience begets Memory; Memory begets Judgement and Fancy: Judgement begets the strength and structure, and Fancy begets the ornaments of a Poem. The Ancients therefore fabled not absurdly, in making memory the mother of the Muses.8 For memory is the World (though not really, yet so as in a looking glass) in which the Judgement (the severer sister) busieth herself in a grave and rigid examination of all the parts of Nature, and in registring by Letters, their order, causes, uses, differences, and resemblances; Whereby the Fancy, when any work of Art is to be performed, findeth her materials at hand and prepared for use, and needs no more than a swift motion over them, that what she wants, and is there to be had, may not lie too long unespied. So that when she seemeth to fly from one Indies to the other, and from Heaven to Earth, and to penetrate into the hardest matter, and obscurest places, into the future and into her self, and all this in a point of time; the voyage is not very great, her self being all she seeks;9 and her wonderful celerity, consisteth not so much in motion, as in copious Imagery discreetly ordered, and perfectly registred in the memory. * * *

ABRAHAM COWLEY: Ode of Wit1

Tell me, O tell, what kind of thing is Wit,
Thou who Master art of it.
For the First matter loves Variety less;
Less Women love’t, either in Love or Dress.
A thousand different shapes it bears,
Comely in thousand shapes appears.
Yonder we saw it plain; and here ’tis now,
Like Spirits in a Place, we know not How.

London that vents of false Ware so much store,
In no Ware deceives us more.

8. She was Mnemosyne, goddess of memory.
9. Here Hobbes is answering directly Davenant’s idea that Fancy is a swift traveler.
1. From Miscellanies, in Cowley’s Poems (1656); our text is from the posthumous Works (1668).
For men led by the Colour, and the Shape,
Like Zeuxis Birds fly to the painted Grape;²
Some things do through our Judgment pass
As through a Multiplying Glass.

And sometimes, if the Object be too far,
We take a Falling Meteor for a Star.

Hence 'tis a Wit that greatest word of Fame
Grows such a common Name.
And Wits by our Creation they become,
Just so, as Tit'lar Bishops made at Rome.³
'Tis not a Tale, 'tis not a Jest
Admir'd with Laughter at a feast,
Nor florid Talk which can that Title gain;
The Proofs of Wit for ever must remain.

'Tis not to force some lifeless Verses meet
With their five gowty feet.
All ev'ry where, like Mans, must be the Soul,
And Reason the Inferior Powers controul.

Such were the Numbers which could call
The Stones into the Theban wall.⁴

Such Miracles are ceast; and now we see
No Towns or Houses rais'd by Poetrie.

Yet 'tis not to adorn, and gild each part;
That shows more Cost, then Art.

Jewels at Nose and Lips but ill appear;
Rather then all things Wit, let none be there.
Several Lights will not be seen,
If there be nothing else between.

Men doubt, because they stand so thick i' th' skie,
If those be Stars which paint the Galaxie.

'Tis not when two like words make up one noise;
Jests for Dutch Men, and English Boys.
In which who finds out Wit, the same may see
In An' grams and Acrostiques Poetrie.⁵

Much less can that have any place
At which a Virgin hides her face,
Such Dross the Fire must purge away; 'tis just
The Author blush, there where the Reader must.

'Tis not such lines as almost crack the Stage
When Bajazet⁶ begins to rage.

2. Zeuxis, a celebrated Greek painter of the 5th century B.C., reportedly painted grapes so realistically that the birds pecked at them.
3. Certain churches in Rome have as their titular incumbents cardinals whose real duties are elsewhere; so men are often called "wits" by courtesy.
4. When Amphion and Zethus were fortifying Thebes, Amphion's performance on the lyre was so moving that the stones rose into place of their own accord.
5. Anagrams and acrostics never stood very high in critical theory; but Cowley here anticipates their rejection as "false wit," a rejection formalized fifty years later by Joseph Addison.
6. A grandiloquent character in Marlowe's Tamburlaine.
Nor a tall Meta' phor in the Bombast way,
Nor the dry chips of short lung'd Seneca.7
Nor upon all things to obtrude,
And force some odd Similitude.
What is it then, which like the Power Divine
We only can by Negatives define?

In a true piece of Wit all things must be,
Yet all things there agree.
As in the Ark, joyn’d without force or strife,
All Creatures dwelt: all Creatures that had Life.8
Or as the Primitive Forms of all
(If we compare great things with small)
Which without Discord or Confusion lie,
In that strange Mirror of the Deitie.9

But Love that moulds One Man up out of Two,
Makes me forget and injure you.
I took you for my self sure when I thought
That you in any thing were to be Taught.
Correct my error with thy Pen;
And if any ask me then,
What thing right Wit, and height of Genius is,
I’ll onely shew your Lines, and say, ’Tis This.

1656, 1668

JOHN DRYDEN: [Wit a Nimble Spaniel]1

The composition of all poems is, or ought to be, of wit; and wit in the poet,
or wit writing (if you will give me leave to use a school-distinction)2 is no other
than the faculty of imagination in the writer, which, like a nimble spaniel, beats
over and ranges thro’ the field of memory, till it springs the quarry it hunted
after; or, without metaphor, which searches over all the memory for the species
or ideas of those things which it designs to represent. Wit written is that which
written is well defin’d, the happy result of thought, or product of imagination. But to
proceed from wit, in the general notion of it, to the proper wit of an heroic or
historical poem, I judge it chiefly to consist in the delightful imaging of per-
sons, actions, passions, or things. ’Tis not the jerk or sting of an epigram, nor
the seeming contradiction of a poor antithesis, (the delight of an ill-judging
audience in a play of rhyme,) nor the jingle of a more poor paronomasia;3 nei-
ter is it so much the morality of a grave sentence, affected by Lucan, but more

7. Seneca’s influence tended to be toward short, epigrammatic statements.
8. It is hard to tell in what degree Cowley is describing here “the reconciliation of opposites” or a “thick, Dinglich texture” or any of the other attri-
    butes which modern criticism has found in metaphysical poetry.
9. Cowley posits here a kind of universal first matter, in which the Deity was once directly mirrored, and which contained, in embryo as it were, the whole cosmos.
1. This extract is taken from “An Account of the Ensuing Poem in a Letter to the Honorable Sir Robert Howard,” prefixed to Anns Mirabilis.
2. Such a distinction as the schoolmen (medieval theologians) used to make. Dryden is a gentleman, writing for gentlemen.
3. Pun.
sparingly us’d by Virgil; but it is some lively and apt description, dress’d in such colors of speech that it sets before your eyes the absent object as perfectly and more delightfully than nature. So then, the first happiness of the poet’s imagination is properly invention, or finding of the thought; the second is fancy, or the variation, deriving, or molding of that thought, as the judgment represents it proper to the subject; the third is elocution, or the art of clothing and adorning that thought, so found and varied, in apt, significant, and sounding words: the quickness of the imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility in the fancy, and the accuracy in the expression.

JOHN DRYDEN: From An Essay on the Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age

*** I should now speak of the refinement of Wit; but I have been so large on the former subject, that I am forced to contract myself in this. I will therefore only observe to you, that the wit of the last age was yet more incorrect than their language. Shakespeare, who many times has written better than any poet, in any language, is yet so far from writing with always, or expressing that wit according to the dignity of the subject, that he writes, in many places, below the dullest writer of ours, or any precedent age. Never did any author precipitate himself from such heights of thought to so low expressions, as he often does. He is the very Janus of poets; he wears almost everywhere two faces; and you have scarce begun to admire the one, ere you despise the other. Neither is the luxuriance of Fletcher (which his friends have taxed in him) a less fault than the carelessness of Shakespeare. He does not well always; and, when he does, he is a true Englishman; he knows not when to give over. If he wakes in one scene, he commonly slumbers in another; and, if he pleases you in the first three acts, he is frequently so tired with his labour, that he goes heavily in the fourth, and sinks under his burden in the fifth.

For Ben Jonson, the most judicious of poets, he always writ properly, and as the character required; and I will not contest farther with my friends who call that wit: it being very certain, that even folly itself, well represented, is with in a larger signification; and that there is fancy, as well as judgment, in it, though not so much or noble: because all poetry being imitation, that of folly is a lower exercise of fancy, though perhaps as difficult as the other; for ’tis a kind of looking downward in the poet, and representing that part of mankind which is below him. In these low characters of vice and folly lay the excellency of that inimitable writer; who, when at any time he aimed at wit in the stricter sense, that is, sharpness of conceit, was forced either to borrow from the Ancients, as to my knowledge he did very much from Plautus; or, when he trusted himself alone, often fell into meanness of expression. Nay, he was not free from the lowest and most grovelling kind of wit, which we call clenches, of which Every Man in his Humour is infinitely full; and, which is worse, the wittiest persons in the drama speak them.*** I have always acknowledged the wit of our predecessors, with
all the veneration which becomes me; but, I am sure, their wit was not that of
gentlemen; there was ever somewhat that was ill-bred and clownish in it, and
which confessed the conversation\(^7\) of the authors.

SIR RICHARD BLACKMORE: From An Essay upon Wit

* * * Tho perhaps the Talent which we call Wit, like that of Humour, is as
clearly understood by its simple Term,\(^8\) as by the most labour’d Description; an
Argument of which is this, That many ingenious Persons, by their unsuccessful
Essays to explain it, have rather obscur’d than illustrated its Idea; I will
notwithstanding adventure to give the Definition of it, which tho it may fall
short of Perfection, yet I imagine will come nearer to it, than any that has yet
appear’d. Wit is a Qualification of the Mind, that raises and enlivens cold Sentiments
and plain Propositions, by giving them an elegant and surprizing Turn.

It is evident, that Wit cannot essentially consist in the Justness and Propriety
of the Thoughts, that is, the conformity of our Conceptions to the Objects we
conceive; for this is the Definition of Truth, when taken in a Physical Sense; nor
in the Purity of Words and Expression, for this may be eminent in the Cold,
Didactick Stile, and in the correct Writers of History and Philosophy: But Wit is
that which imparts Spirit to our Conceptions and Diction, by giving them a lively
and novel, and therefore an agreeable Form: And thus its Nature is limited and
diversify’d from all other intellectual Endowments. Wit therefore is the Accomplishment
of a warm, sprightly, and fertile Imagination, enrich’d with great Variety of proper Ideas;
which active Principle is however under the Direction of a regular Judgment, that takes care of the Choice of just and suitable Materials,
prescribes to the lighter Faculties the due Bounds of their Sport and Activity, and
assists and guides them, while they imprint on the Conceptions of the Mind their
peculiar and delightful Figures. The Addition of Wit to proper Subjects, is like
the artful Improvement of the Cook, who by his exquisite Sauce gives to a plain
dish, a pleasant and unusual Relish. A Man of this Character works on simple
Propositions a rich Embroidery of Flowers and Figures, and imitates the curious
Artist, who studs and inlays his prepar’d Steel with Devices of Gold and Silver.
But Wit is not only the Improvement of a plain Piece by intellectual Enameling;
besides this, it animates and warms a cold Sentiment, and makes it glow with Life
and Vigor; and this it effects, as is express’d in the last Part of the Definition, by
giving it an elegant and surprizing Turn. It always conveys the Thought of the
Speaker or Writer cloath’d in a pleasing, but foreign Dress, in which it never
appear’d to the Hearer before, who however had been long acquainted with it;
and this Appearance in the Habit of a Stranger must be admirable, since Surprize
naturally arises from Novelty, as Delight and Wonder result from Surprize; which
I have more fully explain’d in the former Essay. * * *