

Some noteworthy definitions of “wit” in the Enlightenment:

tell you of what I design'd their substance, which is, *Wit*: And *Wit* is the labourious and the lucky resultances of thought, having towards its excellence (as we say of the strokes of Painting) as well a happiness, as care. *Wit* is not onely the luck and labor, but also the dexterity of thought, rounding the world, like the Sun, with unimaginable motion, and bringing swiftly home to the memory universal surveys.'—The Preface to *Gondibert*.

(Sir William Davenant, 1651)

the definition of wit (which has been so often attempted, and ever unsuccessfully 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.

(John Dryden, “The Author’s Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic License,” 1677)

men who have a great deal of wit, and prompt memories, have not always the clearest judgment or deepest reason. 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 labor of thought to examine what truth or reason there is in it.

(John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 2.9.2 [1689])

As true Wit generally consists in this Resemblance and Congruity of Ideas, false Wit chiefly consists in the Resemblance and Congruity sometimes of single Letters, as in Anagrams, Chronograms, Lipograms, and Acrosticks: Sometimes of Syllables, as in Ecchos and Doggerel Rhymes: Sometimes of Words, as in Puns and Quibbles; and sometimes of whole Sentences or Poems, cast into the Figures of Eggs, Axes, or Altars: Nay some carry the Notion of Wit so far, as to ascribe it even to external Mimickry; and to look upon a Man as an ingenious Person, that can resemble the Tone, Posture, or Face of another.

(Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 62, 11 May 1711)