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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

London, 1721

No 61. Thursday, May 10.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53633](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-53633)

*Pulpit, drum ecclesiastick,
Was beat with fist instead of a stick;*

and

*There was an antient sage Philosopher
Who had read Alexander Ross over,*

more frequently quoted, than the finest pieces of Wit in the whole Poem.

N^o 61. Thursday, May 10.

*Non equidem studeo, bullatis ut mihi nugis
Pagina turgescat, dare pondus idonea fumo.*

Perf.

THERE is no kind of false Wit which has been so recommended by the practice of all ages, as that which consists in a jingle of words, and is comprehended under the general name of *Punning*. It is indeed impossible to kill a weed, which the soil has a natural disposition to produce. The seeds of *Punning* are in the minds of all men, and though they may be subdued by reason, reflection, and good sense, they will be very apt to shoot up in the greatest genius, that is not broken and cultivated by the rules of art. Imitation is natural to us, and when it does not raise the mind to Poetry, Painting, Musick, or other more noble arts, it often breaks out in Punns and Quibbles.

Aristotle, in the eleventh chapter of his book of Rhetorick, describes two or three kinds of Punns, which he calls Paragrams, among the beauties of good writing, and produces instances of them out of some of the greatest Authors in the *Greek* tongue. *Cicero* has sprinkled several of his works with Punns, and in his book where he lays down the rules of Oratory, quotes abundance of sayings as pieces of Wit, which also upon examination prove arrant Punns. But the age in which *the Punn* chiefly flourished, was the reign of King *James* the First. That learned Monarch was himself a tolerable Punnster, and made very few Bishops or Privy-

Privy-Counsellors that had not some time or other signalized themselves by a Clinch, or a *Conundrum*. It was therefore in this age that the Pun appeared with pomp and dignity. It had before been admitted into merry speeches and ludicrous compositions, but was now delivered with great gravity from the pulpit, or pronounced in the most solemn manner at the Council-table. The greatest Authors, in their most serious works, made frequent use of Puns. The Sermons of Bishop *Andrews*, and the Tragedies of *Shakespear*, are full of them. The sinner was punned into repentance by the former, as in the latter nothing is more usual than to see a Heroe weeping and quibbling for a dozen lines together.

I must add to these great Authorities, which seem to have given a kind of sanction to this piece of false Wit, that all the writers of Rhetorick have treated of Punning with very great respect, and divided the several kinds of it into hard names, that are reckoned among the figures of speech, and recommended as ornaments in discourse. I remember a country school-master of my acquaintance told me once, that he had been in company with a Gentleman whom he looked upon to be the greatest *Paragrammatist* among the moderns. Upon enquiry, I found my learned friend had dined that day with Mr. *Swan*, the famous Punnster; and desiring him to give me some account of Mr. *Swan's* conversation, he told me that he generally talked in the *Paranomasia*, that he sometimes gave into the *Plocè*, but that in his humble opinion he shined most in the *Antanaclasis*.

I must not here omit, that a famous University of this land was formerly very much infested with Puns; but whether or no this might not arise from the fens and marshes in which it was situated, and which are now drained, I must leave to the determination of more skilful Naturalists.

After this short history of Punning, one would wonder how it should be so intirely banished out of the learned world, as it is at present, especially since it had found a place in the writings of the most ancient polite Authors. To account for this we must consider, that the first race of Authors, who were the great Heroes in writing, were destitute of all rules and arts of criticism; and for that reason, though they excel later writers in greatness of genius, they fall short of them in accuracy and correctness. The Moderns cannot reach their beauties, but can avoid their imperfections. When the world was furnished with these Authors of the first eminence, there grew up another set of writers, who gained themselves a reputation by the remarks which they made on the works of those who preceded them. It was one of the employments of these

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secondary Authors, to distinguish the several kinds of Wit by terms of art, and to consider them as more or less perfect, according as they were founded in truth. It is no wonder therefore, that even such Authors as *Isocrates*, *Plato*, and *Cicero*, should have such little blemishes as are not to be met with in Authors of a much inferior character, who have written since those several blemishes were discovered. I do not find that there was a proper separation made between punns and true wit by any of the ancient Authors, except *Quintilian* and *Longinus*. But when this distinction was once settled, it was very natural for all men of sense to agree in it. As for the revival of this false Wit, it happened about the time of the revival of letters; but as soon as it was once detected, it immediately vanished and disappeared. At the same time there is no question, but as it has sunk in one age, and rose in another, it will again recover it self in some distant period of time, as pedantry and ignorance shall prevail upon wit and sense. And, to speak the truth, I do very much apprehend, by some of the last winter's productions, which had their sets of admirers, that our posterity will in a few years degenerate into a race of Punsters: At least, a man may be very excusable for any apprehensions of this kind, that has seen *Acrosticks* handed about the Town with great secrecy and applause; to which I must also add a little *Epigram* called the *Witches Prayer*, that fell into verse when it was read either backward or forward, excepting only that it cursed one way and blessed the other. When one sees there are actually such pains-takers among our *British* Wits, who can tell what it may end in? If we must lash one another, let it be with the manly strokes of Wit and Satyr; for I am of the old Philosopher's opinion, that if I must suffer from one or the other, I would rather it should be from the paw of a Lion, than the hoof of an Ass. I do not speak this out of any spirit of party. There is a most crying dulness on both sides. I have seen Tory *Acrosticks* and Whig *Anagrams*, and do not quarrel with either of them, because they are *Whigs* or *Tories*, but because they are *Anagrams* and *Acrosticks*.

But to return to Punning. Having pursued the history of a Punn, from its original to its downfall, I shall here define it to be a conceit arising from the use of two words that agree in the sound, but differ in the sense. The only way therefore to try a piece of wit, is to translate it into a different language: if it bears the test, you may pronounce it true; but if it vanishes in the experiment, you may conclude it to have been a Punn. In short, one may say of a Punn as the country-man described

scribed his Nightingale, that is, *vox et præterea nihil*, a sound, and nothing but a sound. On the contrary, one may represent true Wit by the description which *Aristinetus* makes of a fine woman, when she is *dressed* she is beautiful, when she is *undressed* she is beautiful: Or, as *Mercurus* has translated it more emphatically, *Induitur, formosa est: Exuitur, ipsa forma est.*

N^o 62. *Friday, May 11.*

Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons. Hor.

MR. *Lock* has an admirable reflection upon the difference of Wit and Judgment, whereby he endeavours to shew the reason why they are not always the talents of the same person. His words are as follow: *And hence, perhaps, may be given some reason of that common observation, That 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 is therefore so acceptable to all people.*

This is, I think, the best and most philosophical account that I have ever met with of Wit, which generally, though not always, consists in such a resemblance and congruity of Ideas as this Author mentions. I shall only add to it, by way of explanation, That every resemblance of Ideas is not that which we call Wit, unless it be such an one that gives *Delight* and *Surprize* to the Reader: These two properties seem essential to Wit, more particularly the last of them. In order therefore that
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