

The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century

The period from 1660—when the English crown was restored as Charles II became king—to 1800 saw the vast transformation of English society and English politics as well as significant developments within English literature. Politically, the era followed nearly two decades of civil unrest and war. The return of the monarchy left many questions unanswered in terms of the king's power versus that of Parliament. While Charles II largely avoided the conflicts that might have brought the issue to a head, his successor, his brother James II, soon fell into trouble with Parliament in his attempt to strengthen the power of the Catholic church. In 1688, Parliament deposed James, replacing him with his Protestant daughter Mary and her husband, the Dutch William. In the process, through what has been called the Glorious Revolution, Parliament secured its authority. While James's son and grandson would threaten this settlement in the 18th century, the Glorious Revolution helped to initiate the modern system of limited monarchical power and led to the passage of England's Bill of Rights.

In 1707, the Act of Union joined Scotland and England into one nation (Great Britain), and in the century that followed, through economic and military advances, the British would establish the most powerful and far-reaching empire in the world, securing their dominance in India, their continued strength in North America, even after the American Revolution, and their presence in Africa, South America, and the Pacific Islands. Parliament's power increased during this era, in part due to the line of monarchical succession passing to the house of Hanover in 1714. George I and George II, who ruled from 1714-1760, identified more with their homes in Hanover in Germany than with the nation they ruled, allowing Parliament to more firmly establish its supremacy. During this time, the Whigs—the political party that identified with the rising middle classes and with commerce and that drew considerable support from those who opposed the Anglican church—were most often in power, while the Tories—the party that more closely identified itself with aristocracy, landed wealth, and traditional English society, including the Anglican church, most often found themselves criticizing the changes the Whigs were able to foster.

Culturally, the Restoration is best known as a backlash against the Puritan rule it followed. Specifically, society and culture around the king was characterized by loosened morals, more opulent displays of wealth and learning, and the celebration of the bawdy and the bodily. While much of that was limited to the court culture around London, Charles's court became the center of English culture, as he and his followers became the most important patrons of the arts. Charles chartered two theatre companies in 1660, reopening the English stage to dramatic productions, and the Royal Society, the most important scientific body of the era.

In the field of literature, the Restoration and the eighteenth century are often characterized in terms of neoclassicism. While this course will explore neoclassicism in more depth later in this unit, we can outline some of the chief features of neoclassicism here. The classicism in neoclassicism derived from many thinkers' and authors' sense

that the best models for literature came from the classical era, specifically from the Roman Augustan writers Horace, Virgil, and Ovid. Thus, while most writers of this era strove to make their works conform with nature, as did the preceding writers of the Renaissance and the romantics who followed, they thought that the rules and methods discovered by prior great artists provided the best route for doing so. Underlying that idea was a sense that human nature—and the art that attempted to capture it—was the same across time and space. The rules of art for one era, then, should be the same for any era. In keeping with this more conservative orientation towards literary innovation, English neoclassicism tended to stress balance and restraint and the correct and limited use of figurative language in terms of technique, and the depiction of general cases over the idiosyncratic or unusual in terms of theme and content. These ideals reiterated a broader philosophical emphasis on the limits of human knowledge and a certain skepticism about metaphysical questions. This literature tended to be very social in focus, attending to human flaws and attempting to correct them through satire, rather than celebrating or revealing a striving to exceed previous standards or ideals. This attitude can be summed up in the idea of decorum, of language and character keeping to within long-held standards.

Literary historians sometimes break up this era into three periods, the Age of Dryden, from 1660 to John Dryden's death in 1700, when English neoclassicism was being established; the Age of Pope and Swift, from 1700 to their deaths in 1744-45, when neoclassicism fully flowered; and the Age of Johnson, from 1744-45 until his death in 1784, when neoclassicism began to be more fully challenged by a variety of ideas and attitudes, including the rise of the novel as a popular form, the development of sentimentalism as a literary and philosophical movement, and the increasing optimism of Enlightenment thought. This unit (and the unit on the novel which follows) will complicate this outline of the era, but we can use it as basic guide for delineating some broad trends. During the Age of Dryden, the Restoration and the years immediately following the Glorious Revolution, literary culture was largely centered on the court. Patronage from aristocratic families remained the primary source of income for writers, and their subjects and attitudes reflected their attachment to the court. This age is particularly known for its witty and ribald drama, plays that displayed and sometimes satirized the debauched behavior of the upper classes. Reaction against Restoration excess set in in the 1690s, and the cynical comedy of manners began to fade. With the turn of the century, Enlightenment thought began to take more prominence and with it came an increasing optimism about human nature and the potential to reform human shortcomings. The Age of Pope and Swift that followed can be seen as marking a shift in the literary culture from the court to the coffee house, as these important social centers began to become central meeting places for politicians and writers. Many of the great writers of this era were directly engaged with politics, and satire became one of the central features of the age. It was also the age that gave rise to some of the most important journalistic literature in English history, most notably Addison and Steele's *Spectator*, which helped to establish a certain moral pose as well as restrained style as the model for the century that would follow. These authors were now writing for a broader audience, in part because patronage from the court and the aristocracy began to disappear and writers increasingly depended on publishers and the marketplace for their livelihood. With the middle of the century, many of these changes led to new and varied literary forms, in particular forms such as the novel that focused more squarely

on the individual and his or her feelings and experience. At the same time, thought, neoclassical ideals, as espoused most fully by Samuel Johnson, continued to reign.

Summary

- The period from the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660 to the end of the eighteenth century brought important political changes to the nation, including the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (and with it the limiting of monarchical power), the union with Scotland in 1707, and the expansion of the British empire.
- The era is usually seen as dominated by a neoclassical aesthetic and ethos that emphasizes decorum, general or universal truths, and the proper use of language and form as established by older models as opposed to innovation or the expression of individual or idiosyncratic feelings or ideas.
- Literary historians sometimes break the period into 3 eras: The Age of Dryden, 1660-1700, when neoclassicism began to become dominant and when literary culture centered on the court; the Age of Pope and Swift, when neoclassicism fully flowered, the great age of satire; and the Age of Johnson, when neoclassicism began to confront new ideas and genres as embodied in the sentimental novel