Restoration and Eighteenth-Century British Literature:
Historical, Cultural, and Political Contexts

Important Historical Dates:

1659  Abdication of Richard Cromwell; Anglican Church restored as national church.
1660  Charles II restored to the throne; Restoration of the English monarchy.
1660  Charles authorizes the King’s Players and the Duke’s Players, two new companies of actors.
1662  Book of Common Prayer reimposed nationally.
1662  Printing Act tightens licensing of all print materials.
1664  Nonconformists banned from gathering for worship. Lessening of religious freedom.
1673  Test Act imposed – requires all civil and military officers to take Anglican sacraments. Excludes nonconformist Protestants and Catholics from public service, university degrees, and military service.
1678  Report of the “Popish Plot”: a false report that Catholics were planning to murder Protestants.
1678–1681  Exclusion Crisis – Parliament tries to force Charles II from excluding his Catholic brother James from succession to the throne. Charles defeats the Exclusion Bill by dissolving Parliament. This crisis leads to two new political parties – the Tories (King’s supporters) and the Whigs (King’s Opponents).
1685  James II comes to the throne and suspends the Test Act (this is seen as a favorable gesture to Catholics).
1688  Crisis occurs when James has a son, threatening an ongoing Catholic monarchy.
1688–89  Glorious (Bloodless) Revolution. Deposition of James II and Accession of William of Orange and Mary, James’s Protestant daughter.
1689  Bill of Rights – revokes James’s actions and establishes some limits on monarchical power.
1689  Toleration Act – provides limited freedom of worship for Dissenters (not Catholics or Jews) if they swear allegiance to the King.
1695  Printing Act not renewed, leading to more freedom in the press (writers were still arrested for political reasons).
1698  Jeremy Collier attacks the stage in A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage.
1700  Death of John Dryden.
1701  Act of Settlement puts Protestant Sophia, Electress of Hanover, in line for the throne.
1702  Princess Anne, James’s youngest daughter, becomes Queen; reigns from 1702 – 1714.
1702  First daily London newspaper printed (The Daily Courant).
1702 – 13  War of the Spanish Succession: England and allies defeat France and Spain for monetary gain.
1707  Act of Union unites Scotland, England, and Wales, creating “Great Britain.”
1710  Queen Anne throws out her Whig advisors and forms a Tory ministry.
1712  The Stamp Act imposed; taxes all shorter printed material; results in increased wealth for government.
1713  Treaty of Utrecht ends War of Spanish Succession and establishes peace between all parties.
1714  Queen Anne dies, leading to a return to Whig power in the government.
1714  Rule by the House of Hanover begins with the accession of George I (Sophia’s son).
1714 – 27  Reign of George I.
1714 – 1730  Whig ministry constructed by “Prime Minister” Robert Walpole: stock market; South Sea Bubble; moneyed interests; rising middle class; patronage system in politics; political corruption.
1727 – 60  Reign of George II; Hanoverian monarchy is a period of relative political stability.
1730s  Evangelical revival is led by founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield.
1737  Walpole pushes through Stage Licensing Act, limiting number of London theaters to two.
1742  Robert Walpole falls from power over his refusal to support war with France and Spain.
1744–45  Deaths of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift.
1745  Failure of one last attempt to reimpose James II to the throne (by his “Jacobite” supporters).
1756 – 63  Seven Years’ War: French defeated.
1760 – 1820  George III reigns; period dominated by colonialism and revolution.
1763  British rule over Canada and India established in Peace of Paris.
1780  Gordon Riots put London temporarily under mob rule (Protestants turned against Catholics).
1788 – on  Porphyria, a disease, plagues King George III.
1784  Death of Samuel Johnson.
Three Broad Categories of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature

1. **1660 – 1700 – The Age of Neoclassicism**
   a. Refinement, Simplicity, Elegance
   b. Sound Principles of What is Fitting and Right
   c. Emphasis on Imitating the “Ancients”

2. **1700 – 1744/5 – The Great Age of Satire**
   a. Scathing Critiques of Society, Manners, and Politics
   b. Extended Readership; Rising Literacy Rates
   c. Rise of Periodicals
   d. Birth of the Modern Novel

3. **1744 – 1784/5 – The Age of Revolution, Sensibility, and Didacticism**
   a. New Standards of Ethics and Gentility
   b. New Concepts of Liberty and Individualism
   c. Revolutionary Political and Social Concepts

The Age of Neoclassicism (1660 – 1700):

- Characterized by a sudden change in literary and cultural taste
- Dryden inaugurated a **modern literature** combining cosmopolitan trends with English and classical literary styles
- Desire for **elegant simplicity**; reaction against extravagance of Renaissance, early modern, and metaphysical poetry.
- Led to an **“Augustan Age,”** named for the imitation of the writers who flourished under Augustus Caesar (Virgil, Horace, Ovid). Charles II seen as a “better Augustus.”
- “Neoclassical” literature was both “classical” and “new”: variety, fancy, humor retained from Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and Spenser, but blended with the styles and forms of the classical Greek or Latin writers.
- The new **simplicity of style** aimed to please readers
- Poetry was **highly visual** – heavy use of metaphors, visual descriptions
- **Wit** was revered – quickness of mind, inventiveness, facile ability to create metaphors and see connections between disparate things. **True wit** combined this intellectual quickness with sound judgment and decorum.
- Nature was seen as consisting of the universal, permanent elements of human existence.
- Poets “constructed” worlds out of words (term derives from the Greek for “maker”) and followed the criteria and styles of the **classical genres**: epic, tragedy, comedy, pastoral, satire, ode.
- Heavy use of 18th Century **“poetic diction,”** including artifice, personification
- Heavy use of **periphrasis**, a roundabout way of avoiding common or homely words: “household feathery people” instead of “chickens” or “finny tribes” instead of “fish.”
- Heavy use of **stock literary phrases**: “verdant mead,” “checkered shade,” “shining swords.”
- English sentences were often forced into **Latinate syntax**: “Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth/ A youth to fortune and to Fame unknown.”
- Heavy use of **versification – heroic couplets** (used most famously by Pope), rhymed iambic pentameter, **blank verse** (unrhymed iambic pentameter)
- Modern tension between high and low art – easier language, larger reading public, but adherence to classical heroic ideals
- Rise of **Restoration comedic drama** – witty, cunning, overtly sexual, humorous
The Great Age of Satire (1700 – 1744/5):

- Great age of satirists – Swift, Addison, Prior, Steele, Pope, Manley, and Haywood.
  - Satiric poems, essays, treatises, odes, plays, novels
- Age of moral reformation – writers were concerned with reforming public taste and manners
- Emphasis on political corruption – scathing denunciations and mocking satires
- Preservation of social graces, good sense, civilized values, and true wit
- Satirists were ideologically conservative but also playful, ironic, scathing, sexual, etc.
- Explosion of print culture – new forms of print emerged
  - Periodicals, political pamphlets, conduct books, epistolary novels, amatory fiction, romans a clef, biographies of notorious criminals, travel narratives, political allegories, gossip sheets, broadsides
- Birth of the modern novel
  - Behn’s Oroonoko was a 17th century precursor to the novel
  - Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders
  - Haywood’s Fantomina and Love in Excess
- The theater replaced comedies of manners with more refined “sentimental” plays
- Rise of piety and middle class virtues – the aristocracy was seen as morally corrupt, and the middle class was seen as virtuous and hard-working
- Landscape art and nature poetry came into fashion – rise of the concept of the sublime

The Age of Revolution, Sensibility, and Didacticism (1744 – 1784/5):

- Long prose dominated this period
- Male and female novelists populated the literary marketplace
- Prose essays and treatises were highly popular
- Dictionaries and conduct books were best-sellers
  - Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary (1755) helped to codify the English language
- Faith in common sense and in the common reader
- Edmund Burke (conservative writer) and Thomas Paine (revolutionary writer) both appealed to common sense and to the common man
- High moral tone dominated narrative fiction
- Richardson’s Clarissa (1747-8) and Pamela (1740)
  - Combined didacticism, sexual titillation, and intense focus on internal feelings of the individual
- Focus on the individual, on privacy, on memoirs and letters – emphasis on psychological development of characters
- Sentimental novels, including Henry Mackenzie’s The Man of Feeling (1771) became popular
- Henry Fielding popularized farcical, satirical novels, including Joseph Andrews (1742) and The History of Tom Jones (1749), a “comic epic-poem in prose”
- Poems tended to be melancholy, yearning for another time or place or regretting the losses brought about by industrialization
- Invention of the Gothic Novel
  - Emphasis on the supernatural, on medieval themes, on terror, superstition, ghosts, knights, castles, and ladies in distress
  - Fancy was embraced, perhaps in response to the emphasis on empiricism in the Enlightenment
- Experimentation in fiction, leading to narratives that seem Modernist or “postmodern”
  - Metafiction – novels that know they are novels
  - Sterne’s Tristram Shandy followed psychological time and included digressions, interruptions, chance associations, misplaced chapters
- Revolution, liberty, and individualism stressed in pamphlets, novels, poems, and treatises
The 18th Century: An Age Dominated by Conflict, Change, and Paradox

Explosive Growth in Population and New Focus on the Individual (Psychology, Personal Rights, etc.)
Rise of Money Markets, Wealth, Capitalism, Colonialism and Religious Revival, Evangelicalism, and Personal Piety
Rise of the Lucrative Slave Trade and Rise of Abolition Movement and Concepts of Individual Liberty
Emphasis on Scientific Enlightenment and Reason and Insistence on Retaining Older Beliefs and Customs
Codified Restriction of Women’s Rights and Activities and Increasing Inclusion of Women in the Public Sphere
Age of Reason and Age of Sensibility
Age of Decorum and Didacticism and Age of Amatory Fiction and Salacious Novels
The Last Classical Age and The First Truly Modern Age

Enlightenment Literary Terms and Concepts

- **Augustan** -- in English literary history, this term usually applies to the reign of Queen Anne (1702 – 1714), but can also refer to the first four decades of the 18th century. The term refers to the time of Caesar Augustus of Rome (27 B.C. to A.D. 14), when scholarship and letters were privileged and the writers Horace and Virgil were producing their epic works. English writers such as Addison, Swift, Pope, and Steele venerated these Augustan writers, imitated them, and revered works written in the “classical style” of high rhetoric and satire.

- **Concordia discors** – “friendly discord.” The idea, forwarded in the works of Pope and other Augustan writers, that in multiplicity and variety of experience one can find unity, balance, or harmony.

- **Empiricism** – the philosophical method by which truth is uncovered or discovered through scientific, empirical experimentation (the scientific method). Truth is revealed by the senses, by concrete experience, and by scientific experimentation. This philosophical method had been practiced by Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626) and John Locke (1632 – 1704) in the 17th century, and was influential during the Enlightenment.

- **Enlightenment** – a philosophical movement that flourished in 18th century Europe and England. This movement emphasized the primacy of reason in human conduct, celebrated the scientific method, and accepted the possibility of human refinement through the careful balance of reason and passion. Natural law and universal order were embraced, and philosophical and religious beliefs were held up to the strictures of science and reason in order to enlighten and clarify these beliefs. Science did not refute the validity of religion; rather, it was seen as a tool which revealed the divinely-created natural order of things.

- **Heroic Couplets** – two lines of closed, iambic pentameter verse. This style of verse became popular in the middle of the 17th century, remained popular throughout the 18th century, and was perhaps most famously used by Dryden and Pope. During the 18th century, heroic couplets were made up of rhymed end-stopped lines (two lines of verse that end with terminal punctuation). This form of verse had a very formal style, allowed for the frequent use of the epigram, and was well-suited to satire.

- **Irony** – a literary effect in which what is stated is the opposite of what is actually true or what is intended. Verbal irony occurs when the speaker asserts the opposite of what is meant. Dramatic irony occurs when the reader or listener understands a situation to be very different from what a character understands or states. Irony is usually detached, emotionally cool, and restrained. Ironic writers seem to
write with “tongue in cheek,” and attempt to reveal truth in an understated way. Often, it “speaks words of praise to imply blame and words of blame to imply praise” (Harmon and Holman 282).

- **Sarcasm** – a verbal form of irony in which a speaker states the opposite of what is meant. Sarcasm’s tone is harsh and sarcastic words are often meant to sting.

- **Latitudinarianism** -- a theological position, popular among some 17th century Protestant theologians, that called for tolerance and acceptance of doctrinal differences among the different sects of Protestantism.

- **Mock Heroic** -- the treatment of trivial and low subjects in the formal, high style of the heroic epic. In the mock heroic, many of the literary conventions of the epic, such as heroic warriors, battle scenes, invocations of muses, and extravagant spectacles, are all applied to subjects that are trivial or trite. Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* is one famous mock heroic poem; his poem treats in a high epic style the cutting of a curl from a young lady’s head.

- **Neoclassicism** – refers to the classical style that dominated English literature during the Restoration and the 18th century. This style was a reaction against the exuberant literary styles of the Renaissance and even the elaborate metaphysical conceits of the metaphysical poets. Neoclassicism featured ordered, regular meter in verse, and favored regularity of rhyme, decorum, verbal restraint, logical reason, and concision of expression. Neoclassical philosophers viewed humans as limited, flawed, and imperfect, and advocated the careful use of reason as a means of restraining dark and destructive passions. Humans were situated firmly in the middle of the great chain of being between God and the basest animals, and natural order and rules were assumed and embraced. Neoclassical poets, such as Pope, were fond of true wit, reason, and satire, and often wrote in heroic couplets. Eighteenth-century writers attempted to combine the wit, mirth, and creativity of Renaissance and early modern writers with the classical criteria and styles of the ancients, resulting in a “new” classicism.

- **Parody** – a piece of work which imitates another literary work in order to make fun of or critique its content or style. A parody often employs humor and can be a powerful tool for social or political critique.

- **Periodicals** – publications which occur in regular intervals, such as newspapers, dailies, journals, magazines, or reviews. The 18th century was the great age of the periodical; the *Tatler* and *The Spectator*, as well as numerous other periodicals written by both men and women, were wildly popular during the 18th century, and were read and shared in coffeehouses and in private homes.

- **Satire** – a work which attempts to critique and improve human behavior or institutions through ridicule, criticism, or humor. Satirists have as their aim the improvement of humans and human behavior. (Invective is writing that simply aims to tear down and destroy people, rather than critique and improve them.) Typically, satire critiques whole groups or institutions rather than individuals. Many satirists from classical antiquity, including Aristophanes, Juvenal, and Horace, were later revered and imitated by 17th and 18th century satirists such as Dryden, Swift, and Pope.

- **Scriblerus Club** – Jonathan Swift organized the Scriblerus Club in London in 1714. Its purpose was to critique and satirize literary incompetence and false wit, and its members included Pope, Arbuthnot, Gay, Bolingbroke, and Congreve.
