

Literary life in england in the 18th century



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Literary life in England flourishes so impressively in the early years of the 18th century that contemporaries draw parallels with the heyday of Virgil, Horace and Ovid at the time of the emperor Augustus.

The new Augustan Age becomes identified with the reign of Queen Anne (1702-14), though the spirit of the age extends well beyond her death. The oldest of the Augustan authors, Jonathan Swift, first makes his mark in 1704 with *The Battle of the Books* and *A Tale of a Tub*. These two tracts, respectively about literary theory and religious discord, reveal that there is a new prose writer on the scene with lethal satirical powers. The tone of oblique irony which Swift makes his own is evident even in the title of his 1708 attack on fashionable trends in religious circles - *An Argument to prove that the Abolishing of Christianity in England, may as Things now stand, be attended with some Inconveniences*. In the following year, 1709, a new periodical brings a gentler brand of humour and irony hot off the presses, three times a week, straight into London's fashionable coffee houses. The *Tatler*, founded by Richard Steele with frequent contributions from his friend Joseph Addison, turns the relaxed and informal essay into a new journalistic art form.

In 1711 Steele and Addison replace the *Tatler* with the daily *Spectator*. The same year sees the debut of the youngest and most brilliant of this set of writers. Unlike the others, Alexander Pope devotes himself almost exclusively to poetry, becoming a master in the use of rhymed heroic couplets for the purposes of wit. In 1711 he shows his paces with the brilliant *Essay on Criticism* (the source of many frequently quoted phrases, such as 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread'). He follows this in 1712 with a

miniature masterpiece of mock heroic, *The Rape of the Lock*. In *Windsor Forest* (1713) Pope seals the Augustan theme, using the poem to praise Queen Anne's reign just as Virgil celebrated that of Augustus.

Pope is so much in tune with the spirit of his age that he is able, in his mid-twenties, to persuade the British aristocracy to subscribe in large numbers to his proposed translation of Homer's *Iliad* into heroic couplets. The work appears in six volumes between 1715 and 1720, to be followed by the *Odyssey* (1725-6). The two projects bring Pope some £ 0, 000, enabling him to move into a grand riverside villa in Twickenham. This is just half a century after Milton receives £ 10 for *Paradise Lost*. The weapon of these authors is wit, waspish in tone - as is seen in *The Dunciad* (1728), Pope's attack on his many literary enemies.

The most savage in his use of wit is undoubtedly Swift. His *Modest Proposal*, in 1729, highlights poverty in Ireland by suggesting that it would be far better for everybody if, instead of being allowed to starve, these unfortunate Irish babies were fattened up and eaten. Yet, astonishingly, a book of 1726 by Swift, almost equally savage in its satirical intentions, becomes one of the world's best loved stories - by virtue simply of its imaginative brilliance. It tells the story of a ship's surgeon, Lemuel Gulliver. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*: AD 1719-1726 Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, has a genius for journalism in an age before newspapers exist which can accommodate his kind of material.

He travels widely as a semi-secret political agent, gathering material of use to those who pay him. In 1712 he founds, and writes almost single-handed, a

thrice-weekly periodical, the Review, which lasts only a year. But it is his instinct for what would now be called feature articles which mark him out as the archetypal journalist. A good example is the blend of investigative and imaginative skills which lead him to research surviving documents of the Great Plague and then to blend them in a convincing fictional Journal of the Plague Year (1722). Another work which could run week after week in a modern newspaper is his immensely informative Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain, published in three volumes in 1724-7.

But his instinctive nose for a good story is best seen in his response to the predicament of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who survives for five years as a castaway on a Pacific island before being discovered in 1709. Just as the plague documents stimulated a fictional journal, this real-life drama now prompts Defoe to undertake the imagined autobiography of another such castaway, Robinson Crusoe (1719). Defoe imagines in extraordinary detail the practical difficulties involved in building a house and a boat, in domesticating the local animals, and in coping with unwelcome neighbours. This is a cannibal island.

The native whom Crusoe rescues from their clutches on a Friday becomes his faithful servant, Man Friday. Defoe's interests seem to lie mainly in the theme of man's creation of society from primitive conditions, but meanwhile he almost unwittingly writes a gripping adventure story of survival. Robinson Crusoe is avidly read as such by all succeeding generations - and has a good claim to be considered the first English novel. Seven years later another book appears which immediately becomes one of the world's most popular stories, and again seems to do so for reasons not quite intended by its

author. Jonathan Swift, a man inspired by savage indignation at the ways of the world, writes *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) as a satire in which human behaviour is viewed from four revealing angles. When Gulliver arrives in Lilliput, he observes with patronising condescension the habits of its tiny inhabitants.

But in Brobdingnag, a land of giants, he is the midget. When he proudly tells the king about European manners, he is surprised at the royal reaction. The king says that humans sound like 'little odious Vermin'. Gulliver's next stop, the flying island of Laputa, is run by philosophers and scientists (as Plato might have wished); predictably they make a mess of things. Finally Gulliver visits a land ruled by intelligent horses (the Houyhnhnms, Swift's version of whinnying). The hooligans here are brutal and oafish beasts in human shape, the Yahoos.

Once again the sheer vitality of the author's imagination transcends his immediate purpose. Of the millions who enjoy Gulliver's fantastic adventures, few are primarily aware of Swift's harshly satirical intentions. Voltaire and the philosophes: AD 1726-1778 Though born within the 17th century, in 1694, Voltaire becomes - after a long life and a multifaceted career - the characteristic voice of the French 18th century. His early successes reveal an ambition to outdo literary giants of the past. When his tragedy *Oedipe* is a great success, in 1718, he is hailed as the new Racine.

His *Henriade* of 1723, an epic poem in praise of Henry IV, is a conscious attempt to become France's Virgil. But his lasting fame derives from his attack on the abuses of the present and his vision of a more rational future.

In this respect his exile from France in 1726, after a quarrel with a powerful nobleman, proves something of a turning point. Voltaire travels to England, where he is struck by a matter-of-fact frame of mind very different from the attitudes of France. In religion this results in Deism, an offshoot of the reasonable philosophy of John Locke; in social and political terms it seems to be expressed in a mercantile economy more open to new ideas and more capable of innovation than the feudal structures surviving in France. Voltaire is able to return to France in 1728.

In 1733 he publishes in English, and in 1734 in French, his *Lettres Philosophiques* - twenty-four letters praising English religion, institutions and even literature as a means, primarily, of attacking the French equivalents. The book provokes outrage and a warrant is issued for Voltaire's arrest - which he avoids only by escaping to the countryside. For the rest of his life, filled though it is with immensely varied literary activity, he is engaged in a crusade to reform the abuses of the French establishment (or the system which later becomes known as the *ancien regime*). Of these abuses he finds the influence of the Roman Catholic church, and in particular of the Jesuits, to be the most infamous. *Ecrasez l'infame* ('crush the infamous') is his battle cry.

In this campaign for reason against superstition, and for justice against privilege, Voltaire is joined by a younger generation. Together they become known as the *philosophes*. The greatest achievement of the *philosophes* is the *Encyclopedie*, edited by Denis Diderot and published in 28 volumes (17 of text, 11 of plates) between 1751 and 1772. This enterprise is originally inspired by Chambers' *Cyclopedia*, published in two volumes in London in <https://assignbuster.com/literary-life-in-england-in-the-18th-century/>

1728, but it far outdoes its model in scope and ambition. The *Encyclopédie* aims to be nothing less than a rational statement of contemporary knowledge and belief. It can be seen as the definitive statement of the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Jesuit influence twice halts publication, but the project is successfully completed and acquires great influence – being often pointed to subsequently as an important part of the build-up to the French Revolution. During the years when the *Encyclopédie* is being published a powerfully irrational event occurs. In 1755 an earthquake destroys much of Lisbon, killing many thousands. The disaster seems to mock the optimism which characterizes the rational 18th century. It prompts Voltaire to write the short satirical book, *Candide* (1759), which has proved the most lasting of his many works.

Candide is a pupil of an optimistic philosopher, Dr Pangloss. They undergo the most appalling sufferings in a series of fantastic adventures, but nothing can dent Pangloss's often repeated conviction that 'everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. It is not, says Voltaire – but if not best, it could at least be better. The English novel: AD 1740-1749 During a quarter of a century, from 1740, the novel makes great advances in England, with notable achievements in several different styles. Defoe has laid a foundation with *Robinson Crusoe*, and has followed this up with *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* in 1722.

Moll's story is more like a conventional novel than that of *Robinson Crusoe*, being set in the real world of low-life London and the plantations of Virginia.

It is full of vitality and incident, but it is basically – as the title states – a sequence of fortunes and misfortunes for the heroine. Crusoe had his isolation to give focus to the story. Moll has only her vivacious character. Of plot, in the normal sense, there is little.

This lack of focus is fully answered by Samuel Richardson, a novelist of much greater influence in his own time than today. *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) tells the story of Pamela Andrews trying to ward off the sexual advances of the young man of the house in which she is a maid. The narrative develops in the form of letters – most of them written by Pamela herself. The ability to unfold a plot through correspondence, spinning out the detail and viewing events from several different angles, is the pioneering discovery of Richardson.

He takes it to much greater length in *Clarissa* (7 vols, 1747-8), a novel of more than a million words and the longest in the English language. *Pamela* has a somewhat unconvincing happy ending. *Clarissa*, an altogether darker account of a relationship between two upper-class characters, ends in disaster for both. This account of psychological warfare between the sexes is much read throughout Europe. The brilliantly savage erotic novel by Laclos, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), can be seen as a direct descendant. A more cheerful offshoot of Richardson's efforts is the first novel by Henry Fielding, a magistrate in London's Bow Street court with an intimate knowledge of the city's low life.

Offended by the sentimental unreality of *Pamela*, he writes *Joseph Andrews* (1742) – the story of Pamela's brother, who is a minor character in

Richardson's book. Fielding finds virtue not in respectability (the ultimate yardstick in *Pamela*) but in the warm-hearted honesty of a group of ordinary and often unfortunate characters, in particular the absent-minded Parson Adams. His plot, loose and picaresque though it is in many respects, has its own logic and consistency. The ingredients pioneered in *Joseph Andrews* are deployed by Fielding with even greater success in *Tom Jones* (1749). The adventures in a vividly wicked world of the lusty but honest Tom, and the survival against all the odds of his love for Sophia Western, provide a novel of romance and adventure which has kept its power ever since - as is evident in its several incarnations on film.

The English novel: AD 1759-1766
The most original novel of the 18th century, and one of the most chaotically endearing books of any age, is published from 1759 by a clergyman on the staff of the cathedral in York. It is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Told as Tristram's autobiography, the book begins - logically but unconventionally - with the scene at his conception.

Thereafter, in a series of looping digressions interrupted with sudden surprises (such as a page of solid black in mourning for poor Yorick), Sterne dwells upon a small number of quite ordinary characters who come vividly alive thanks to their minor obsessions and eccentricities. We are well into Vol. 3 before the author is born.

Slightly before that event he at last has a moment to write his Preface.

Sterne's blend of fantasy and mock-learning owes much to Rabelais, but he adds an easy playfulness, a friendly teasing of the reader, which his contemporaries find immediately attractive. The success of the first two volumes in 1759 is so great that Sterne is able to retire to a quiet curacy in

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north Yorkshire. *Tristram Shandy* could go on for ever, but the story ends in the middle of nowhere after Vol. 7 (1767), merely because that is where its author stops writing.

Tristram Shandy – with its amused interest in the relationship between writer and reader, and in the nature of narrative – seems two centuries ahead of its time, resembling a modern demolition of the very idea of the novel. The next English novel to retain a devoted readership through the centuries is, by contrast, firmly in the mainstream of fiction. Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) tells the story of a simple and good-hearted vicar who puts up stoically with a series of disasters, mainly brought upon him by the vagaries of his children, until he eventually emerges unscathed. The events are more melodramatic than those which drive the plots of Jane Austen, but Goldsmith's unaffected prose and gentle irony prefigure later advances in the English novel. Between them, the experiments in English fiction in the mid-18th century make almost anything possible.

The Enlightenment: 17th – 18th century AD The term Enlightenment, applied to ideas which develop during the 17th century and are most clearly expressed by the 18th-century French philosophes, describes a tendency to make reason the guiding principle of life. This is accompanied by a conviction that the application of reason will guarantee progress in all aspects of human existence. In one sense this is yet another wave of reaction against the Middle Ages, when faith and authority are the prevailing themes. More positively it is an offshoot of 17th-century science (the discoveries of Galileo and Newton being based on rational assessment of

material evidence) and philosophy (following the example of thinkers such as Descartes). The Enlightenment has faith in a natural order.

Galileo and Newton have revealed the mechanics of the universe. These marvels of ethereal clockwork are taken by the Deists (the rational Christians of the day) as evidence of the genius of a rational creator. By the same token it is assumed that there is a natural structure for human society, in which individuals have both freedom and rights. The injustices visible everywhere in the world are seen as the result of corrupt and superstitious institutions, imposed by unenlightened priests and kings.

But human resolution can transform the political scene, as is made evident in the confident assertions of the American Declaration of Independence. It is an article of faith that in a rational society the people will choose what is good for them. The Enlightenment abounds in educational theories to speed up the spread of reason. But the education of the people must inevitably be a long process. This practical problem is taken as justifying one slightly paradoxical aspect of the Enlightenment - the acceptance of the enlightened despot, the all-powerful ruler who disregards the short-term wishes of his subjects and enacts, for their own good, often unpopular measures of social improvement.

There are many such rulers in the last decades of the 18th century, Frederick the Great in Prussia being merely an early and outstanding example. The passion of the Enlightenment for the improvement and reform of society makes it an important element of the climate of opinion which prevails in the early stages of the French Revolution (and survives today in the ideals of the

social services of democratic nations). But such principles contain their own flaws. The Enlightenment's optimism can be a recipe for disappointment and is easily mocked (as by Voltaire himself in *Candide*). And too much reason is dry fare.

People crave something more emotionally nourishing. This is provided in religious terms by the 18th-century revivalists. And the need to listen to the emotions is forcefully expressed by a child of the French Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.