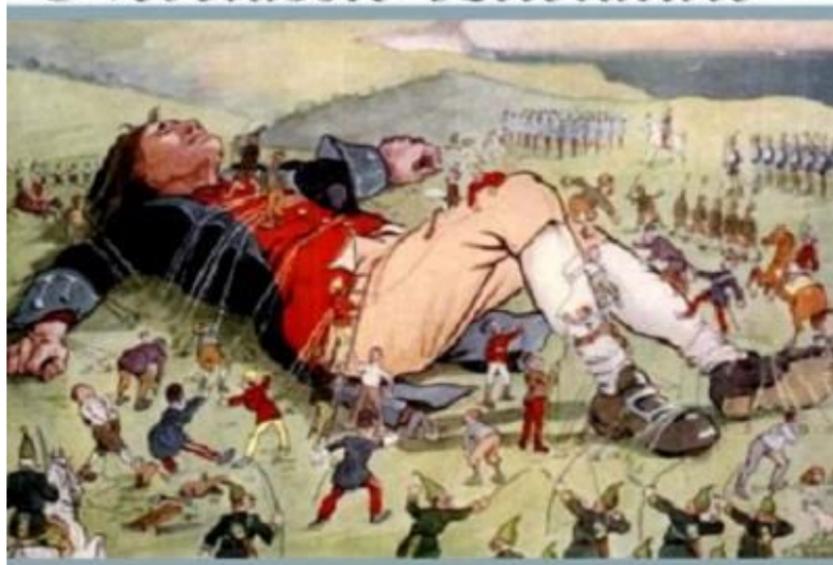


*Lectures on British  
Neoclassic Literature*



by the author of  
UNDERSTANDING  
SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

*Robert A. Albano*

LECTURES  
ON  
BRITISH  
NEOCLASSIC  
LITERATURE

LOBNL

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**MERCURYE PRESS**

**HUALIEN**

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# LECTURE 1

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY AND LITERATURE OF THE NEOCLASSIC PERIOD

### THREE LITERARY PERIODS IN ONE

The **Neoclassic Period** refers to that age of literature between the Renaissance and the Romantic period. Thus, the period begins in 1660 and ends sometime around 1785. Shifts in the trends and styles of literature, however, do not occur in any one specific year. Rather, the dates here are for general use and for the ease of categorizing and understanding the general trends or movements of the time.

The dates listed above, though, do mark specific events that relate to the trends in the literature of that time. The year **1660** is important because it marks the time when England brought back or restored its monarch or king. For a period of twelve years, from 1649 to 1660, England did not have a king. King Charles I had been executed; and England was ruled primarily by Oliver Cromwell, who used the title of Lord Protector of England. By 1660 England realized that the tyranny of Cromwell was as bad as that of any king. So, they restored the monarchy and put Charles II, the son of their former king, on the throne. And, so, the first part of the Neoclassic Period is often referred to as the **Restoration** because kingship was restored to England.

The 125 years of the Neoclassic Period contains three major subdivisions, each lasting approximately for 40 years. For each of these three shorter periods of literature, one or two influential or significant writers dominated or typified the literary scene. So, each of

these shorter periods can be referred to by these major writers:

<b>THE AGE OF DRYDEN</b>	<b>1660-1700</b>
<b>THE AGE OF POPE AND SWIFT</b>	<b>1700-1745</b>
<b>THE AGE OF JOHNSON</b>	<b>1745-1785</b>

John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson are clearly dominant forces in the literary scene during the Neoclassic Period. However, a number of other writers, to be discussed later, also contributed to shaping, influencing, and creating a body of literature at this time that is unique and significant to the history of English literature.

The literature of the Neoclassic Period often reflects and is shaped by political and historical events of that time. The student may find it useful to keep the following dates in mind:

<b>1649-1660</b>	<b>Interregnum (Oliver Cromwell Rules England)</b>
<b>1660</b>	<b>King Charles II Restored to Throne</b>
<b>1665</b>	<b>Plague in England</b>
<b>1666</b>	<b>Fire Destroys Much of London</b>
<b>1680</b>	<b>England Defeats Holland's Navy</b>
<b>1685</b>	<b>James II, King of England</b>
<b>1688</b>	<b>The Glorious Revolution; William of Orange, King (The Reign of William and Mary)</b>

<b>1689-1763</b>	<b>Major Victories in War Against France (Beginning of British Empire)</b>
<b>1700</b>	<b>Death of John Dryden</b>
<b>1702</b>	<b>Queen Anne</b>
<b>1707</b>	<b>Unification of England and Scotland (Great Britain)</b>
<b>1714</b>	<b>King George I (House of Hanover)</b>
<b>1727</b>	<b>King George II</b>
<b>1744</b>	<b>Death of Alexander Pope</b>
<b>1745</b>	<b>Death of Jonathan Swift</b>
<b>1760</b>	<b>King George III</b>
<b>1784</b>	<b>Death of Samuel Johnson</b>

The restoration of the king in 1660 did not solve all of England's political and social problems. England still had enemies in Europe, and within England itself the Protestants were still in conflict with the Catholics. England, of course, also had its share of natural setbacks as well. During the 1660s plague and fire devastated England and took many thousands of lives. Despite the problems it was experiencing internally, England defeated the navy of Holland in 1680. Once again, England was proving to be a dominant military force in Europe. And beginning around 1689 and continuing well past the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, England had a number of stunning victories against their foremost enemy, France. Moreover, one other source of conflict ended in 1707 when England finally unified with Scotland. This marks the formation of Great Britain and signifies the beginning of England as a more dominant force in European affairs.

The beginnings of the **British Empire** occur during the Neoclassic Period. With the conflicts against Scotland and France nearly over, England was able to begin exploring and fully colonizing new lands. The Peace of Paris treaty in 1763 allowed Britain to establish full control over both Canada and India. Other locales around the world would also soon fall under the authority of Great Britain.

The growth of England into a British Empire also marks a growth in its literary frontiers. After 1707, instead of referring to the writers of this land as English, the student should instead refer to them as **British**. Dominant and important literary figures during this time period come not only from England. They also come from **Scotland** (such as James Boswell and David Hume) and **Ireland** (such as Jonathan Swift and Oliver Goldsmith).

### **RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE AGE OF DRYDEN**

The **Age of Dryden**, also referred to as the time of the **Reformation**, was a period of religious conflict and political instability. During the 1660s and 1670s the **Anglican Church** finally asserted itself as the supreme religious power in England. Catholics and even the non-Anglican Protestants were excluded from public service. Neither a Catholic nor a Puritan could hold any public office in England. Moreover, anyone who was not an Anglican (a member of the Church of England) often found himself as the target of hate and prejudice. Many Catholics were forced to go into hiding or to deny their faith. Even King Charles II, who was secretly a Catholic, feared proclaiming his true religious beliefs.

He knew that the Anglicans controlled England and would not allow a Catholic to be their king.

Two political parties grew to power and prominence during the Age of Dryden: the **Tories** and the **Whigs**. During the early 1680s the differences between these two political parties were considerable. The Tories were loyalists. They were loyal to King Charles II and supported his decisions and policies. As time passed, the Tories developed into what could be called the Conservative Party. They continued to support the king of England, and they also promoted the cause of the Church of England (or the Anglican Church). The Tories were composed primarily of (1) the landed gentry (wealthy aristocrats who owned land) and (2) high officials (the Archbishops and some Bishops) of the Church of England.

The Whigs, on the other hand, opposed the policies and practices of King Charles II during the early 1680s. They developed into what might be called the Liberal Party. The Whigs were a mixed lot: a number of various individuals and groups were members. (1) There were some nobles and aristocrats in this party as well. These nobles were usually those who were not part of the court or the king's party. They were, perhaps, jealous of their fellow-aristocrats who received the favors of the king and held the power in the kingdom. (2) Members of the middle class or merchant class also joined the Whigs. Both bankers and merchants, especially those concerned with the economic policies of England and how those policies affected themselves, needed to protect their financial interests. (3) Some members of the Church of England also joined the Whigs. Some bishops and many ministers (or clergymen) disagreed with the political structure of their

Church. And finally (4) there were the religious Dissenters, Protestants who were not Anglicans and who were usually treated unfairly by the Anglican majority. Two principle policies dominated the philosophy of the Whig Party: (1) a policy of **toleration** for minority individuals, especially those in a religious minority; and (2) a policy supporting trade and commerce.

The conflicts between the Whigs and Tories became more heated in 1685 when **James II** (the brother of Charles II) became King of England. King James II was a Catholic, which was reason enough to many Anglicans to despise him. Moreover, James II sided with the Whigs. He wanted to oppose the policies and laws of Parliament (the governing body, which was dominated by the Tories). Especially, the new King wanted to abolish those laws that hurt or treated unfairly the Catholics and religious Dissenters. In other words, James II supported **religious toleration**.

Even before James II was made king of England, the Tories were plotting against him. First, they tried to prevent him from becoming king. When that did not work, they sought for a way to remove him. They finally succeeded in 1688. An event known as the **Glorious Revolution** (and sometimes as the Bloodless Revolution) occurred in that year. The Tories, of course, had wanted a Protestant king; and they found their champion in William of Orange (from Holland). William was married to Mary, the daughter of King James II. In addition, William was also the grandson to Charles I and the nephew to both Charles II and James II. William would have become the next king of England anyway except that in 1687 James II's wife gave birth to a son. The Tories definitely did not want an unending line of Catholic monarchs (or kings). So, in

1688 the Tories supported William's rebellion against James II. As William sailed to England with a small Dutch force (or army), the Protestants in England forced James II to flee to France. Thus, William and Mary were able to become the King and Queen of England in a remarkable revolution in which not a single drop of blood was shed.

James II continued to live in exile in France for the remainder of his life. However, after 1688, the Protestants of England feared that the heirs (or descendants) of James II would return from France with a French army and retake England. This belief became known as the **Jacobite Movement** because the name *Jacobus* is a Latin form of the name *James*. Thus, the fear of a Catholic king and the hatred of all Catholics persisted in England for many, many years. Initially, the fear was exaggerated; but as time progressed, such a fear was justified. In 1745 Prince Charles Edward, the grandson of James II, did lead an invading force into England. The invasion, however, was unsuccessful. Charles Edward's attempt, though, did become a popular one told in romance stories; and many people referred to the prince affectionately as "Bonnie Prince Charlie."

The reign of William and Mary, from 1689 to 1702, was largely a peaceful one for England. During this time the court supported religious toleration, and the Anglicans did not feel such a strong need to persecute the Catholics. However, like most periods of peace, this one was relatively short. Old conflicts (like the Jacobite Movement) would reappear, and new conflicts would emerge throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**THE AGE OF DRYDEN**

As noted previously, the literary period from 1660 to 1700 is often referred to as the **Age of Dryden** because John Dryden was the most notable and influential writer of that time. This literary period, though, also has several other names. First, we can call it the period of the **Restoration**, since it is historically set in the first few decades when the king was brought back or restored to the throne. The era or age can also be called the first part (or the first third) of the **Neoclassic Period**. Like the age of the Renaissance, many writers in this period looked back on the great writers of the Classical Age as sources of inspiration and as models to emulate (or follow). Thus, many writers at this time produced a body of literature that can be called neo-classical or newly classical. However, the Classical writers who inspired the writers of this time were mostly Romans who lived during the time of Augustus Caesar, the first Roman Emperor. And so, the Neoclassic Period can also be labeled as the **Augustan Age**. The most famous Roman writers during the reign of Augustus Caesar were Virgil (author of *The Aeneid*), Ovid (author of *The Metamorphoses*), and Horace (author of *Odes* and the critical work *Ars Poetica*). Augustus Caesar was important politically to the Roman Empire because he brought forth a reign of stability and peace (27 BC -- 14 AD) following a long period of civil conflict and bloodshed. The English also looked forward to a time of peace when their civil conflicts would be at an end. Finally, the Neoclassic Period can also be referred to as the **Age of Reason**. Many individuals in England felt that the period of civil war and power struggles in England during the 1640s and afterwards was the result

of emotional and irrational behavior and action. A return to reason, a return to self-control, discipline, law, and order, was needed, many people believed, to avoid such problems in the future. Not unexpectedly, much of the literature from this time period reflects a philosophy that includes reason, order, and discipline as key (or important) features.

During the Age of Dryden a strongly anti-European attitude was present in the literature. The Europeans of continental Europe, especially the French, were, in the eyes of the English, too flowery, ornate, or intricate (like the Elizabethans of 16<sup>th</sup> century England). The writers of England at this time preferred simplicity, clarity, and good sense as the guiding principles for their lives and for their literature. They were men of **reason** who promoted rational thinking in all endeavors, whether it was art or politics or anything else. They were certainly pro-peace and anti-extremism. The political problems and instability of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were caused by irrational and desperate men who took extreme measures (such as executing the king) to accomplish their goals. Simplicity and clarity and reason not only suggest a philosophical approach to the writing of this time. They also indicate the **style** of writing for many of the authors during Dryden's lifetime. Prose writing was becoming as prevalent and popular as poetry. And many prose works were written in a simple, clear, and unsophisticated manner.

As with any literary period, the ideas and trends that existed before still continued or at least influenced the writers of the current era. One example of this is the notion of the **heroic ideal** that played a significant role during the Renaissance (especially in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen*) and that continued into the Neoclassic

Period. The early plays by **John Dryden**, such as *The Indian Queen* (1664), also reflect the heroic ideal. In addition, Dryden's great poetic satire, *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), contains heroic elements. However, two new trends in literature, as our editors suggest, more accurately describe the literature during the Age of Dryden. First, there was a focus on **Nature**. Nature here, though, does not suggest the same idea as the Romantics would later use it. Rather, Nature here refers to human experience. Nature, or experience, was a teacher. One should learn from one's own experiences as well as the experiences of others (by reading). Second, there was a focus on **Wit**. Being clever or witty was becoming a social trend. The well-bred gentleman or lady in fashionable society would often strive to be witty. In literature, the trend led to the beginnings and growth of satire. Dryden's *MacFlecknoe* (1682), wherein Dryden humorously attacks his literary enemies, is a good example of the literary wit from the period.

In addition to Dryden, several other notable writers penned some great or significant literary works. The student of English literature should be familiar especially with the following three writers:

- (1) **Samuel Butler** was a writer of satire. His only significant literary work is *Hudibras* (1663), a mock romance that satirizes academia, theology, philosophy, society (especially marriage), and politics. (The student should not confuse this writer with the other Samuel Butler, a 19<sup>th</sup> century author of both fiction and non-fiction.)

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