

The Augustan Age

The eighteenth century in English literature has been called the Augustan Age, the Neoclassical Age, and the Age of Reason. The term 'the Augustan Age' comes from the self-conscious imitation of the original Augustan writers, Virgil and Horace, by many of the writers of the period. Specifically, the Augustan Age was the period after the Restoration era to the death of Alexander Pope (~1690 - 1744). The major writers of the age were Pope and John Dryden in poetry, and Jonathan Swift and Joseph Addison in prose. Dryden forms the link between Restoration and Augustan literature; although he wrote ribald comedies in the Restoration vein, his verse satires were highly admired by the generation of poets who followed him, and his writings on literature were very much in a neoclassical spirit. But more than any other it is the name of Alexander Pope which is associated with the epoch known as the Augustan Age, despite the fact that other writers such as Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe had a more lasting influence. This is partly a result of the politics of naming inherent in literary history: many of the early forms of prose narrative common at this time did not fit into a literary era which defined itself as neoclassic. The literature of this period which conformed to Pope's aesthetic principles (and could thus qualify as being 'Augustan') is distinguished by its striving for harmony and precision, its urbanity, and its imitation of classical models such as Homer, Cicero, Virgil, and Horace, for example in the work of the minor poet Matthew Prior. In verse, the tight heroic couplet was common, and in prose essay and satire were the predominant forms. Any facile definition of this period would be misleading, however; as important as it was, the neoclassicist impulse was only one strain in the literature of the first half of the eighteenth century. But its representatives were the defining voices in literary circles, and as a result it is often some aspect of 'neoclassicism' which is used to describe the era.

'Neoclassicism'

The works of Dryden, Pope, Swift, Addison and John Gay, as well as many of their contemporaries, exhibit qualities of order, clarity, and stylistic decorum that were formulated in the major critical documents of the age: Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), and Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711). These works, forming the basis for modern English literary criticism, insist that 'nature' is the true model and standard of writing. This 'nature' of the Augustans, however, was not the wild, spiritual nature the romantic poets would later idealize, but nature as derived from classical theory: a rational and comprehensible moral order in the universe, demonstrating God's providential design. The literary circle around Pope considered Homer preeminent among ancient poets in his descriptions of nature, and concluded in a circuitous feat of logic that the writer who 'imitates' Homer is also describing nature. From this follows the rules inductively based on the classics that Pope articulated in his *Essay on Criticism*:

Those rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are nature still, but nature methodized.

Particularly influential in the literary scene of the early eighteenth century were the two periodical publications by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Tatler* (1709-11), and *The Spectator* (1711-12). Both writers are ranked among the minor masters of English prose style and credited with raising the general cultural level of the English middle classes. A typical representative of the post-Restoration mood, Steele was a zealous crusader for morality, and his stated purpose in *The Tatler* was "to enliven Morality with Wit, and to temper Wit with Morality." With *The Spectator*, Addison added a further purpose: to introduce the middle-class public to recent developments in philosophy and literature and thus to educate their tastes. The essays are discussions of current events, literature, and gossip often written in a highly ironic and refined style. Addison and Steele helped to popularize the philosophy of John Locke and promote the literary reputation of John Milton, among others. Although these publications each only ran two years, the influence that Addison and Steele had on their contemporaries

was enormous, and their essays often amounted to a popularization of the ideas circulating among the intellectuals of the age. With these wide-spread and influential publications, the literary circle revolving around Addison, Steele, Swift and Pope was practically able to dictate the accepted taste in literature during the Augustan Age. In one of his essays for *The Spectator*, for example, Addison criticized the metaphysical poets for their ambiguity and lack of clear ideas, a critical stance which remained influential until the twentieth century.

The literary criticism of these writers often sought its justification in classical precedents. In the same vein, many of the important genres of this period were adaptations of classical forms: mock epic, translation, and imitation. A large part of Pope's work belongs to this last category, which exemplifies the artificiality of neoclassicism more thoroughly than does any other literary form of the period. In his satires and verse epistles Pope takes on the role of an English Horace, adopting the Roman poet's informal candor and conversational tone, and applying the standards of the original Augustan Age to his own time, even addressing George II satirically as "Augustus." Pope also translated the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and, after concluding this demanding task, he embarked on *The Dunciad* (1728), a biting literary satire.

The Dunciad is a mock epic, a form of satiric writing in which commonplace subjects are described in the elevated, heroic style of classical epic. By parody and deliberate misuse of heroic language and literary convention, the satirist emphasizes the triviality of the subject, which is implicitly being measured against the highest standards of human potential. Among the best-known mock epic poems of this period in addition to *The Dunciad* are John Dryden's *MacFlecknoe* (1682), and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714). In *The Rape of the Lock*, often considered one of the highest achievements of mock epic poetry, the heroic action of epic is maintained, but the scale is sharply reduced. The hero's preparation for combat is transposed to a fashionable boat ride up the Thames, and the ensuing battle is a card game. The hero steals the titular lock of hair while the heroine is pouring coffee.

Although the mock epic mode is most commonly found in poetry, its influence was also felt in drama, most notably in John Gay's most famous work, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). *The Beggar's Opera* ludicrously mingles elements of ballad and Italian opera in a satire on Sir Robert Walpole, England's prime minister at the time. The vehicle is opera, but the characters are criminals and prostitutes. Gay's burlesque of opera was an unprecedented stage success and centuries later inspired the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht to write one of his best-known works, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*, 1928).

One of the most well-known mock epic works in prose from this period is Jonathan Swift's *The Battle of the Books* (1704), in which the old battle between the ancient and the modern writers is fought out in a library between The Bee and The Spider. Although not a mock epic, the satiric impulse is also the driving force behind Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), one of the masterpieces of the period. The four parts describe different journeys of Lemuel Gulliver; to Lilliput, where the pompous activities of the diminutive inhabitants is satirized; to Brobdingnag, a land of giants who laugh at Gulliver's tales of the greatness of England; to Laputa and Lagoda, inhabited by quack scientists and philosophers; and to the land of the Houyhnhnms, where horses are civilized and men (Yahoos) behave like beasts. As a satirist Swift's technique was to create fictional speakers such as Gulliver, who utter sentiments that the intelligent reader should recognize as complacent, egotistical, stupid, or mad. Swift is recognized as a master of understated irony, and his name has become practically synonymous with the type of satire in which outrageous statements are offered in a straight-faced manner.

The Nature and Graveyard Poets

Neoclassicism was not the only literary movement at this time, however. Two schools in poetry rejected many of the precepts of decorum advocated by the neoclassical writers and anticipated several of the themes of Romanticism. The so-called nature poets, for example, treated nature not as an ordered pastoral backdrop, but rather as a grand and sometimes even

forbidding entity. They tended to individualize the experience of nature and shun a methodized approach. Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, was a rural poet in an urban era, and the poems of *Miscellany Poems by a Lady* (1713) were often observations of nature, largely free of neoclassical conventions. Her contemporaries regarded her as little more than a female wit, but she was highly praised by the Romantic poets, particularly William Wordsworth. A further influential poet of this school was James Thomas, whose poetical work *The Seasons*, which appeared in separate volumes from 1726 to 1730 and beginning with *Winter*, was the most popular verse of the century. In his treatment of nature, he diverged from the neoclassical writers in many important ways: through sweeping vistas and specific details in contrast to circumscribed, generalized landscapes; exuberance instead of balance; and a fascination with the supernatural and the mysterious, no name just a few.

This last was also the major concern of the poets of the Graveyard School. Foremost among them was Edward Young, whose early verses were in the Augustan tradition. In his most famous work, however, *The Complaint: or, Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742-45), the melancholy meditations against a backdrop of tombs and death indicate a major departure from the conventions and convictions of the preceding generation. While the neoclassicists regarded melancholia as a weakness, the pervasive mood of *The Complaint* is a sentimental and pensive contemplation of loss. It was nearly as successful as Thomas's *The Seasons*, and was translated into a number of major European languages.

The Rise of the Novel

The most important figure in terms of lasting literary influence during this period, however, was undoubtedly Daniel Defoe. An outsider from the literary establishment ruled by Pope and his cohorts, Defoe was in some ways an anomaly during a period defined as 'Augustan,' despite the fact that he was a writer of social criticism and satire before he turned to novels. He did not belong to the respected literary world, which at best ignored him and his works and at worst derided him. (In 1709, Swift for example referred to him as "the Fellow that was Pilloryed, I have forgot his name.")

The works of fiction for which Defoe is remembered, particularly *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), owe less to the satirical and refined impulse of the Augustan tradition, and more to a contrary tradition of early prose narrative by women, particularly Aphra Behn, Mary Delariviere Manley and Jane Barker. Since Ian Watt's influential study, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), literary historians have generally considered *Robinson Crusoe* the first successful English novel and Defoe as one of the originators of realistic fiction in the eighteenth century, but he was deeply indebted to his female precursors and probably would never have attempted prose narrative if they had not created an audience for it in the first place.

The English novel was a product of several differing literary traditions, among them the French romance, the Spanish picaresque tale and novella, and such earlier prose models in English as John Lyly's *Euphues* (1579), Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590) and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1684). The authors of these works collectively helped pave the way for the form of the novel as it is known today. The true pioneers of the novel form, however, were the women writers pursuing their craft in opposition to the classically refined precepts of the writers defining the Augustan Age. Particularly influential were Aphra Behn's travel narrative *Oroonoko* (1688) and her erotic epistolary novel *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1683). In *Oroonoko*, Behn provides numerous details of day to day life and a conversational narrative voice, while with *Love Letters* she pioneered the epistolary form for a longer work of fiction, over fifty years before Richardson. The political prose satires of Mary Delariviere Manley were racy exposés of high-society scandals written in the tradition of *Love Letters*, Behn's erotic *roman à clef*. Manley's novels *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zarahians* (1705) and *The New Atalantis* (1709) were widely popular in their day and helped create an audience for prose narratives that was large enough to support the new breed of the professional novelist.

Eliza Haywood also began her career writing erotic tales with an ostensibly political or high society background. Her first novel, *Love in Excess* (1719) went through four editions in as many years. In the thirties, her writing underwent a transformation suitable to the growing moral concerns of the era, and her later novels show the influence of her male contemporaries Richardson and Fielding (this despite the fact that she may have been the author of *Anti-Pamela* (1741), an early attack on Richardson's first novel). Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) in particular belongs in a more realistic tradition of writing, bringing the action from high society into the realm of the middle class, and abandoning the description of erotic encounters.

Particularly interesting among the work of early women novelists is that of Jane Barker. Her novel *Loves Intrigues: Or, The History of the Amours of Bosvil and Galesia* (1713) tells in first-person narrative the psychologically realistic tale of a heroine who doesn't get her man. The portrayal of Galesia's emotional dilemma, caught in a web of modesty, social circumstances and the hero's uncertainty and indecisiveness, captures intriguing facets of psychological puzzles without providing easy answers for the readers. Galesia retreats from marriage, hardly knowing why she does so or how the situation came about, and the reader is no smarter.

Many of the elements of the modern novel attributed to Defoe -- e.g. the beginnings of psychological realism and a consistent narrative voice -- were anticipated by women writers. Defoe's contribution was in putting them all together and creating out of these elements sustained prose narratives blending physical and psychological realism. His most impressive works, such as *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* (1724), treated characters faced with the difficulties of surviving in a world of recognizably modern economic forces. Given his capitalist philosophy, it is not surprising that Defoe's protagonists are self-reliant, resourceful individualists who express his middle-class values. In his attempt to balance individualism and economic realism with a belief in God's providence, Defoe created multi-faceted characters who combine repentance for past misdeeds with a celebration of the individual's power to survive in a hostile environment.

Although Defoe and his female contemporaries were looked down upon by the intellectual establishment represented by Pope and Swift, later developments in literary history have shown that it was they who would define the literature of a new age, and not the so-called Augustans. While the novel remains the dominant literary form of the twentieth century, mock epic is at best an element used occasionally in comedy. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* are still widely read; *The Rape of the Lock* is mentioned in history books. Jonathan Swift produced an enduring classic as well with *Gulliver's Travels*, but despite his brilliance it is the merchant Daniel Defoe, a journalist who saw writing as "a considerable branch of the English commerce" (*Essay upon Literature*, 1726), who is considered the father of the English novel.