The Early Modern Period

We see the past through lenses that show us something of the world we are trying to understand. How we mark periods in history depends less on an objective evaluation of evidence than on our sense of its relevance to our own present. The centuries between 1500 and 1700 have been termed the "Renaissance," and, more recently, "the early modern period." They were also centuries in which Europe and England saw a massive change in Christian religious thought and practice; this has been called the "Reformation." What do these names mean, and what do they tell us about our understanding of this single and continuous stretch of time?

However, we describe these centuries, they encompassed events that altered the way people lived and thought. In 1500 England, and the rest of the states of Europe, were Catholic. Apart from its few communities of Jews, Christendom was united in a universal church whose head was the Pope in Rome, and its faithful prayed according to a common liturgy in Latin. The shape of the cosmos was determined by Aristotelian physics and what could be deduced from the scriptural story of creation. It was believed that the earth was the center of the universe and composed of four elements—earth, air, fire, and water; that the human body was a balance of these elements, and that nature, as it was a book, revealed a divine sanctioned moral order. Christian subjects generally respected their national or positive law, which they saw as a mirror of God's law of nature and providentially guaranteed, as well as a means to protect them from tyranny as well as anarchy. A person's place in society tended to be fixed at birth; the majority of folk lived in country villages, worked the land, and traded in regional markets.

By the end of the seventeenth century, much—though not all—of this way of life had vanished. Certain of its features would remain in place for the next hundred years, as historians who study it longer describe ("the long term" from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century) during which social, political, and economic structures change very slowly, "resting on land" continued to be farmed by methods followed "too out of mind," manufacturing was still largely done by individuals on small, handmade machines. Religion continued to determine every aspect of life; science and art, politics and economics were discussed in terms supplied by religious thought and institutions. But Christianity was no longer of one piece. Europe had become divided by the establishment of Protestantism in the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and most of Germany. England and Scotland were also Protestant, but with a difference: the first conformed to the doctrine and practices of the Church of England, the second to the requirements of Presbyterians. Ireland, speaking in its Celtic language and retaining much of its ancient customs, remained Catholic despite English attempts at conquest and conversion. Catholics in England, always suspected of subversive intentions, were bitterly hated. Sects proliferated; among them were Anabaptists, Unitarians, and Quakers; commonly, their religious doctrines called for massive social change. Cosmic order, too, had changed; it was no longer thought of as geocentric, nor did its elements consist of four primary materials. A natural
philosophy based on experimental methods had begun to reshape the disciplines of physics, medicine, and biology; such ancient authorities as Aristotle, Galen, and Plato were no longer unquestioned. Though sketched in principle by Sir Francis Bacon in his treatise on scientific inquiry, Novum Organum ("the new instrument"), published in 1620, a systematic investigation of nature was not underway before the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660, when scientists in England consolidated their status in society by forming the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge—an organization vigorously supported by the new Stuart king, Charles II. But the worldview that this investigation would help to confirm was already evident even in the seventeenth century. The work of the Italian physicist Galileo Galilei on gravitational force had demonstrated that the most elementary laws of nature were mathematical; the German astronomer Johannes Kepler had confirmed that not the universe was heliocentric; the English physician William Harvey had established that the body is energized not by the contrary flows of "humors" but by a circulation of blood to and from the heart; and the Dutch cosmographer Gerhardus Mercator had discovered the means to navigate the globe solely by accurately mapping latitudes and longitudes. An international system was being forged; not, as has been imagined, by the Protestant Dutch and the Roman Catholic Spanish, but by the English; and those Englishmen most actively engaged in it—certainly those who were most active in the Royal Society—were not, as is often taken for granted, the aristocracy of the land but the rising merchant, the rising professional, the rising statesman. England in the early eighteenth century was, as it is indeed in our time as well, a city-state, whose history has been, until very recently, the history of its cities. But it is not only a city-state; it is, as it has been the history of many such states, a city in the world, a city of the world. Writing about the intellectual vitality of the age, the French historian François Balthasar has said its amiable character, the giant Cuvier, confessed that his own education had been "dissolute, occupied with books of ignorance." Cuvier knew, however, that his son would be taught differently.

The latter half of the eighteenth century, it is often said, saw the end of the old literary and political culture, the "civilization of the nobility," in which the intellect of the nobility was celebrated. But it is equally true that the intellectual culture of the age was in large part the creation of the nobility, and was created by them for the nobility. The old literary culture, the "civilization of the nobility," was not the creation of the nobility; it was the creation of the educated, the educated who were not the nobility, who were not the intellectual élite. The new literary culture, the "civilization of the new men," was the creation of the educated, the educated who were not the nobility, who were the intellectual élite. The old literary culture, the "civilization of the nobility," was the creation of the educated, the educated who were not the nobility, who were not the intellectual élite. The new literary culture, the "civilization of the new men," was the creation of the educated, the educated who were not the nobility, who were the intellectual élite. The old literary culture, the "civilization of the nobility," was the creation of the educated, the educated who were not the nobility, who were not the intellectual élite. The new literary culture, the "civilization of the new men," was the creation of the educated, the educated who were not the nobility, who were the intellectual élite.
interpreted, and, in a sense, reborn. From its inception in Italy, the work of the Humanists traveled north and west, to France, the Low Countries, Germany, the Iberian peninsula, and eventually the British Isles.

At the same time, the cultures of these regions were changing in unprecedented ways. As much as an older world was being reborn, a modern world was being born, and it is in this sense that we can speak of these centuries not only as the Renaissance but also as the “early modern period.” Its modernity was registered in various ways, many of these having to do with systems of quantification. Instruments for measuring time and space provided a knowledge of physical nature and its control. Sailing to the new world in 1509, Sir Walter Raleigh, wrote of Mercator’s projections published in 1569. Maps were designed to compute the wealth that was being created by manufacture and trade. Money was used in new and complex ways, its flow managed through such innovations as double-entry bookkeeping and letter-of-change that registered debt and credit in inter-regional markets. The capital that accumulated as a result of these kinds of transactions fueled mercantile banks, joint-stock companies, and—notably in England—trading companies that sponsored colonies abroad. Frightened with enthusiasm by William Davenant in 1606, the Virginia Company was reflected in a more muted fashion five years later in Shakespeare’s The Tempest.

In England especially, wealth was increasingly based not on land but on money, and the change encouraged a social mobility that reflected but also exploited the old hierarchy. The effort to ascend the social ladder could prove ruinous, as George Gascoigne’s career confirmed. But riches could also make possible for an artist’s son to purchase a coat of arms and become a gentleman, as Shakespeare did. More important, restored wealth supported the artistic and scholarly institutions that allowed the stepson of a bricklayer to attend the best school in London, to profit from the business of the theater, and to compose literary works of sufficient brilliance to make him Poet Laureate—so Ben Jonson did. “Ambition is like cholera,” warned Francis Bacon; it makes men “scurvy, empty, full of dreams and stirring.” But if ambition “be stopped and cannot have his way, it becometh vast and, thereby maligne and venomous.” Early modern society was certainly both active and stirring, but the very energy that gave it momentum could also lead to hardship, distress, and personal tragedy.

Urban life flourished in conditions increasingly hospitable to commerce; rural existence became more as farms were failed. During the previous century, the nobility had begun to enlarge their estates to the incorporation or “enclosing” of what had formerly been public or common land. They sought to profit from the newest kind of farming sheep. As Sir Thomas More’s Utopia illustrates, thousands of men and women who had worked the land on nuclear familyholdings as a result. The situation got worse when Henry VIII broke England’s tie to the Catholic Church, for Henry added to the property of the very rich by giving them the land he had confiscated from the church. Many of the poor and dispossessed went to the cities, particularly London, others traveled through the country, looking for odd work, begging and thieving. Some, like Isabella Whitney, would try city life only to find it wanting. By the early 1600s, a few men and women were electing to work their fortunes in the Americas. Despite such constraints, however, the great centers of commerce—Bristol, Norwich, and London—sustained large populations, employed not only in trade but in many kinds of manufacture. One of the most important was printing. The invention of movable type in 1436 by a German printer, Johann Gutenberg, revolutionized the dissemination of texts. A single illuminated manuscript took years to produce and provided what was often a very weak version of a text, an item that might cost as much as a small farm; a printing press could quickly produce multiple copies of a text, all of them identical, for as little as a few shillings.

Both the wealthiest of the “Renaissance” and the more comprehensive culture of the early modern period are illustrated by the history of the most frequently disused and contested text of these centuries: the Bible. It was the work of humanists to establish what that text was (after centuries of corrupted versions) and then to translate it into the vernacular languages. Desiderius Erasmus provided accurate Hor and Greek texts and translated them into Latin. Printed English translations by, with William Tyndale’s New Testament, introduced to England in the 1520s. Later versions included the Genevan Bible with its Calvinist commentary, the Bishops’ Bill repudiating much of this commentary; and the King James Bible or “Authorized Version,” a work by forty-seven translators published in 1611. Presumably decrees espoused the importance of reading Scripture as a means to spiritual enlightenment, as the prevalence to the King James Bible makes that for this purpose a translation as go as the original. “No cause why the word translated should be denied to be the word. But the importance of the Bible went beyond its status as the basis for religious belli
Henry VII, following his divorce from Queen Catherine of Aragon and marriage to Anne Boleyn, a lady of the court already celebrated by the poet Sir Thomas Wyatt, instituted perhaps the most important feature of Protestant practice in England: that the Bible be read and spoken in English. This, along with the Act of Supremacy in 1534 making the English church independent of Rome, and the Act of Supremacy in 1534 establishing the monarch as the head of that church, proved to be decisive for Protestantism in England. As the Church of England under Elizabeth I and, later, James I came increasingly under attack from Presbyterians, Puritans, and other sectarians of different kinds, how to read and eventually preach from the text of the Bible was of utmost consequence. Dangers over doctrine, guarding the nature and efficacy of sacraments, and the place of images and icons in religious worship divided communities and even families; occasionally, they even disturbed the peace. Here the story is a grim one. Catholics in the north of England unsuccessfully resisted Henry's Plenipotentiary in Crace in 1536. Protestants, in turn, were persecuted by Mary I throughout her reign; many of their stories are recounted in John Foxe's Book of Martyrs. Catholics were supported by Elizabeth I, and sectarians of various denominations were required to adhere to Anglican forms of worship and obey episcopal orders in the Stuarts.

Some seeing the Bible as an eminently useful text, relied on it to urge the reform of both church and state. This growing movement was being led by Mary Herbert and Queen Elizabeth each translated the Psalms, in effect turning themselves into interpreters of Scripture; and referring to particular passages in the Bible, agitated like Rachel Scott and Enter Sorrowsman argued that women were equal to men. In 1641, women gained the right to protect religious abuses presented their Petition of the Gentlemen and Tradesmen's Wives, in and About the City of London to the House of Commons. Much of the general debate over the power and nature of the monarchy and other forms of government reflected interpretations of Scripture. Drawing on biblical representations of conscience, John Peter insisted that a monarch be obliged to obey the law of the land and thus to adhere to a "constitution," reflecting the same principles in Scripture. In 1513, the English Stuartfairs spoke of the monarch as something that justifies itself, a spiritual king, a judge, an emperor. Though a monarch should respect only divine law and be considered "absolutely" continued into the fomentation of thinkers, this dispute ended in the execution of Charles I. God's word, it turned out, could have a distinctly practical application.

Many features of Renaissance and early modern culture are again in tension today: the printed book, which once superseded the manuscript, is now challenged by computer-generated imagery; once eclipsed the older, manuscript domain and divided "Chrestendom," is now qualified by an international economy; and the belief in human progress, which was once蔑used as an advance over the medieval faith, is brought into question. England's colonial claims, and the exploitation of such kinds of injustice and slavery, colonialism, and the exploitation of war labor—all factors as the growth of early modern England and other states in Europe. As modern and postmodern proliferate, we have a special affinity with our early modern counterparts. Like them, we study change.

History and Epic

The political life of the sixteenth century was dominated by the genius of a single dynasty, the Tudors. Its founder was Owen Tudor, a sailor of an ancient Welsh family. Employed at the court of Henry V, he eventually married Henry's widow, Catherine of Valois. The first Tudor monarch was his grandson, Henry, Earl of Richmond, who defeated Richard III at Bosworth Field in 1485 to become Henry VII. He married Elizabeth, daughter of Edward IV, in which Richard III had succeeded—a forlorn event for the people of England, as it split the two parties by which the crown had been disputed for many decades. Once Henry, who represented the House of Lancaster (whose emblem was a red rose) was joined to Elizabeth, a member of the House of York (symbolized by a white rose), the so-called "Wars of the Roses" were at an end. Henry VII's bureaucratic style then settled the kingdom in ways that allowed it to grow and become identified as a single nation. However much it also comprised different peoples: the north and the south were distinguished for their portions south by dialectal forms of speech; and to the west. In Cornwall and Wales, many English subjects still spoke Cornish and Welsh. More thoroughly Celtic were Ireland, across the sea to the west, and Scotland, to the north. The Anglo-Scottish Union could be perceived as the lands of Ireland in the twelfth century, but what was uniting the English ensured that Ireland would not serve in the same way as Ireland and the English themselves. But the French Revolution and the Irish fought for independence. It is not that the English encouraged the French Revolution and the Irish who fought for independence. It is not that the English encouraged the French Revolution and the Irish who fought for independence.
As a history, however, it is Richard Hakluyt's collection of travel stories, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation*, that has proved most memorable over time. His personal conduct appeared to be dubious. His critics represented him as frequently unkempt and claimed that he preferred to hunt deer rather than to take charge of matters of state. Disputes with the House of Commons over money to support the Queen's activities were frequent. Reports of intrigue with Catholic Spain shattered the nation's sense of security, an aspect that was never to be forgotten.

The Mongol War, the struggle over the authority and power of the monarch culminated in a bloody civil war. Across England and Scotland, forces loyal to the king fought the army of Parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan Member of the Commons. The war, which lasted from 1642 to 1651, ended with the defeat of the royalists.

In 1649 Charles I was captured and executed by order of Parliament, and England began to be governed as a republic. She was no longer a kingdom but a Commonwealth, and this period in her history is known as the Interregnum, the period between kingdoms. The long-advocated change, now a reality, could hardly have been begun in a more shocking way. The monarchy had always been regarded as a sacred office and institution, as Shakespeare's Richard II had said:

"Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breaths of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord."

But in the course of half a century, the people had proved themselves to be a sovereign power, and it was politically irrelevant that Charles, on the block, exemplified a real self-control. As the Parliamentarian poet Andrew Marvell later wrote of the King's admirable courage at his execution: "He nothing common did or mean / Upon that memorable scene ... Nor called the gods with vulgar spite / To vindicate his helpless right."

The conflict itself, its causes and its outcomes, have been variously interpreted. As a religious and cultural struggle, the Civil War, also known as the Wars of Three Kingdoms, expressed the resistance of Scots Presbyterians and Irish Catholics to the centralizing control of the English church and government. As a revolution in government, the conflict was defined by common lawyers, emerged as Puritan enthusiasts, and marked the nation's transition to a society in which the absolute rule by a monarch was no longer a possibility. The people themselves had acquired a voice. To some extent this was a religious voice. Puritans who professed a belief in congregational church government were generally proponents of republican rule. Their dedication to the ideal of a society of equals under the law was shared by men and women of other sects: the Levellers, led by John Lilburne, who argued for a written constitution, universal manhood suffrage, and religious toleration (see Civil War, Lilburne wrote, "doth not choose many rich, nor many wise"); the Diggers, led by Gerrard Winstanley, who proposed to institute a communalistic society in the wastelands they were ploughing and cultivating; the Quakers, led by George Fox, who rejected all forms of church order in deference to the inner light of an individual conscience and, insisting on social equality, refused to take oath that a monarch should be loyally, the living spirit of the law, and therefore bound by the terms of natural or positive law. His personal conduct appeared to be dubious. His critics represented him as frequently unkempt and claimed that he preferred to hunt deer rather than to take charge of matters of state. Disputes with the
their hands before geometry or nobility; and the Ranter, who denied the authority of Scripture and saw God everywhere in nature. Without widespread acceptance of the egalitarian concept that had inspired the Puritan reformation—all believers are members of a real, invisible, spiritual society—it is hard to see how the move from a representative to a representative and republican government could have taken place.

The most comprehensive contemporary history of the war, The True Historical Narrative of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England, by Edward Hyde, Earl of Clas-

silon, was not published before 1674, but the troubled period found an able com-

mentary in what arguably England's greatest and certainly most-humane epic

poem Milton's Paradise Lost, in print by 1667. Milton's career was inextricably bound up with the fate of the Commonwealth. Educated at Cambridge and with his rep-

erit as a poet well established, Milton had been by 1649 to contribute to a defense of Puritans and the creation of a republican government. Despite women's

enlightened views, he published The Tenure of Kings and Magnates, a sustained and elo-

quent argument for tyranny, after the execution of Charles I; and in his Eikonoklasistes ("image-breaker"), written after he was made Latin secretary to the new

executive, the Council of State, he decried attempts by royalists to celebrate Charles I in John Bunyan's pamphlet Episcopacy). In 1660, disturbed by the proposed restoration of Charles Stuart, soon to be Charles II, Milton—now completely blind—published his last political treatise, The Ready and Easy Way to Ensu-

ce the Commonwealth. In retrospect, he is regarded as the most powerful figure in the history of the Commonwealth, which endorsed measures that reinforced the autocratic rule of the monarchy it had overthrown. Meanwhile, the composition of Paradise Lost was underway. In debt to many of Spenser's themes in The Faerie Queene, the "birth of the rebellious angels" and the exile from paradise of the disobedient Adam and Eve—"with the spirit of the account in Genesis. His poem is the product of a doubly dark vision of life—flagrant and suffering again what he felt was the constraints of a monarch, a truth that Milton's theory of exile from paradise spoke to his own life and England's loss of innocence and painful acquisition of the knowledge of good and evil during the period of the war and its aftermath. His Paradise Lost and its sequel, Paradise Regained, express the most provocative ambiguities of contemporary English culture; they are—and have been—praised as riving the epics of Homer, Virgil, and Dante in their power and scope.

DRAMA AND SOCIAL SATIRE

Drama provided another perspective on English life. While epics depicted the grandeur aspirations of the nation, its human character was expressed in stage plays, masques or speaking pageants, and dramatic processions. These forms exploited the material of chronicle to illustrate not only the virtues of heroes but also their failings and limitations; history's villains warned viewers that evil would be punished, if not by civil authority then by nature. Writing tragedy based on history and legend, Marlowe and Shakespeare complicated the direct moralism of medieval drama. Rather than becoming victims of their crimes, Shakespeare's King Lear, Hamlet, and Othello are punished in the end, and their deaths are seen as necessary to restore order. The theme of the fall from grace is a common one in Shakespeare's plays, and it is the central theme in Hamlet, where the protagonist struggles to come to terms with his father's murder and the consequences of violence and betrayal. The play explores the themes of revenge, morality, and justice, and it is a masterpiece of dramatic literature. Shakespeare's works continue to be studied and performed today, and they remain some of the most widely read and enjoyed plays in the English language.
Lyric Poetry and Romance

In early modern England, epic narratives, stage plays, and satire in all forms were genres designed for audiences and readers the winter did not know, a general public with varied tastes and background. Lyric poetry, prose romances, and tales were more often written for a closed circle of friends. Circulated in manuscript, these genres allowed a writer's wit to play on personal or comic matters. Here writers could speak of the pain of love or the thrill of ambition, and both reveal and, in a sense, create their own identities in and through language. By imitating and at the same time changing the conventions of the lyric, particularly as they were illustrated by the Italian poet Francesco Petrarach, English poets were able to express personas, or fictive self, that became in turn a model for others. Unlike Petrarach, who saw his lady as imbued with numerous power before which he could only submit, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Sir Philip Sidney imagined love in social and very human terms. In the struggle to gain affection and power, their subjectivity took strength from their composition as well as their resistance to defeat. The origins of the lyric in song are attested in the verse of Thomas Campion, much of which was actually set to music. Its uses in pastorals (whether erotic or spiritual) are illustrated by poets as different as Robert Herrick, John Donne, and Andrew Marvell. At times, its objects of adoration could be divine or mystical, as in the verse of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan. Women poets, such as Lady Mary Wroth and Katherine Philips, rewrote the conventions of the love lyric to encompass a feminine perspective on passion and, equally important, on friendship. Sonnet sequences were popular and, reflecting a taste for narrative romance, often dramatized a conflict between lovers. Shakespeare wrote the best-known sonnets of the period.
The imaginative work of "self-fashioning" in early modern lyric and romance became, in a degree, with actual social change. During this period, a woman was born into a place—defined by locale, family, and work—but did not remain there. The social ladder was traced in both directions. An imaginative member of the gentility, a second son of a sovereign, or a widow whose noble husband left her with a suitable income or estate could seek below the strata to which she had been born, eventually become a "commoner." In turn, a prosperous artisan, a filthy usurer, or an enterprising merchant could eventually become a member of the gentry—folk who were entitled to signal their identity by a coat of arms and were not supposed to do manual work. The new riches were sometimes sought for avoiding society to conduct business regarding the proper behavior for gentlemen, but one could overlook the change in their status. More important, representatives of the "middling sort" were gaining political power. They generally had the right to vote for a member of the House of Commons, and they regularly held local office as bailiffs, constables, or sheriffs, or served on juries in towns and villages throughout the kingdom. They administered property, engaged in business, and traded on international markets. Creating such a wealth of early modern England; they defined the concept of an economic class in independent of social rank or family background. "What is Gentry if wealth be wanting, but base servile beggary?" asked Robert Greene. The idea that a person inherited a state of life was undercut by evidence of continuous shifts in both urban and rural society.

The situation for women in particular exhibited a certain ideological ambivalence. Ancient philosophy and medieval theology had taught that woman was essentially and naturally different from man, characterized by physical weakness of intellect, and an aptitude for housework, childbearing, and the minor creative arts. That some women were distinguished themselves in occupations traditionally reserved for men was understood to signal an exception; in general, social dis- tricts imposed rigid codes of behavior on men and women. This thinking was confirmed by the text of Socrates—but also and increasingly by evidence from history, which revealed that ordinary women had undertaken all kinds of activity and therefore that a woman had the same range of talents as men. Literary representa- tion and authority reflected some of this argument. The gentle defense of Isabella Whitney seems to compare with the vigorous independence of Middleton and Dekker's fic- tional Mol Cypins, the lead character in The Roaring Girl, which, it was claimed, was based on actual women of the town, Moll Flanders, The Alchemist's "magician" in The Alchemist, Dell Cinnamond, reimagines Shakespeare's Dell Teasby, the actions of two Delfs, unaccountable according to conventional canons of feminine behavior, are not seen as meriting particular reprehension or scorn. These novel ways of understanding woman found corresponding changes in art and society toward men. Departing from medieval social norms, humanists had stressed that men should be educated in the arts as well as arms, and writers like Sir Philip Sidney, illustrating the sensitivity of men to emotional life, devised characters who knew the enfranchising empathy and so were emotionally regarding associated with the notion of passion, sympathy, and a certain self-indulgence. The even more beautiful, nonfictional sequence of at least and in itself is both beautiful and horridly pliable. Flexibility with respect to categories of gender is also a feature of much lyric poetry.
the male poet’s beloved is sometimes another man. Shakespeare’s sonnets are the example of homoerotic verse in this period, but homocentric immundo, often suggested as a feature of a love triangle, is common in all genres of writing. In Marlowe’s poem ‘Hero and Leander’, the youth Leander loves the girl Hero and attempts the sexual attentions of the sea-god Neptunus.

Ideas as well as social forms and practices were also changing. The repeated shifts in religious practice—from medieval Catholicism to Humanism to the Reformation—then back to the Catholicism desired by Queen Mary I, and then on to the Anglican Church of Queen Elizabeth I—revealed that divine worship could alter its form without bringing on the apocalypse. More safely, the emerging capitalist economy produced a conceptual nation that was national in geography, where, through regional and national markets, exerting a particular locale only to move elsewhere, sometimes over great distances, so might ideas, styles, and artisitic sensibilities. Dance especially created a community, how fluidly, and practices that might even create a sense of identity. The importance of music played a motisiviation in part by an interest in solo playing; if an actor who in real life might have been a servant could perform the part of a king in a play, then why must an actor perform the part of a king unless Was there a power present in both liberating and dangerous, as Shakespeare showed by dramatizing the parallel powers of Othello’s false friend, Iago, who chillingly boasted, “I am not what I am.”

The Business of Literature

It was the business of early modern literature to ask these questions. The idea that social continued to beacock in a natural order of things was no longer accepted. As Shakespeare’s last work was published, rejecting the customary inferiority of a person who is born out of wedlock, “Why bastard, Wherefore base!” When this mis-

monstrous are as well compact… as honest madness’s issue.” Writers were certainly supposed to educate their readers in various ways. Spenser thought that his epic would “educate a gentleman in noble persons in virtue and gentle discipline,” and Sidney believed that poetry in its finest could “take naught from” the goodness of the secret office of our souls.” But literature also questioned matters of being and identity because writers themselves were in the forefront of a class that was in the process of changing in the way of life and its means of notation.

During the early modern period, an educated man who sought employment as a writer was the object of patronage by the gentry or nobility, often functioning as a tutor or secretary in a prosperous household. The poet John Skelton might have been Henry VIII’s, John Donne accompanied his patron Sir William Drury on his European journey and dedicated his Mandeville to Drury’s deceased daughter, Elizabeth, and Andrew Marvell educated Lord Fairfax’s daughter, Mary. Men who were employed in other ways—in diplomacy, law, or some aspect of commerce—might be rewarded with a writing by way of distinction from the rich. Elizabeth I gave Spencer, one of her ministers in Ireland, a single grass of fifty pound for The Faerie Queene; and Ben Jonson, thanks to the generosity of James I, was able to make a successful career for himself as a poet. As a young man, as the poet Edmund Spenser, in the sixteenth century, was among the first to recognize that a writer might write for his or her own merit.

For the seventeenth century, prosperous writers discovered that they could be supported by a broader public: after the Renaissance, the talented playwright Apsley Behn gained his living by selling her liter- ary work to publishers and printers. Increasingly, the forces of the market moved to include the business of printing, both liberating and capturing the energies of the nation’s writers.

It was obvious to those in power and authoritat that the printing press was an aspect of change: the question they had to answer was how to control it. Under Elizabeth’s, all printing was regulated (in effect, subject to censorship) by the Stationers’ Company, which had the exclusive right to print and sell literary work. The device was also controlled. By 1574, all plays had to be licensed by the Master of Revels, a servant and appointee of the monarch, before they could be produced. These conditions bound writers to observe both religious and ecclesiastical policy, at least in their dramatic conventions. Some resorted to more covert practices, as others openly defied custom. In 1579, John Stubbs wrote a pamphlet against the Queen’s proposed marriage to the French king’s brother, the Duke of Alençon, entitled The Disconij in A Crying Case wherein England Is Like to Be Soothe: he was arrested and had his hand cut off for a grave society in sense of identity. The importance of music played an important part in part by an interest in solo playing; if an actor who in real life might have been a servant could perform the part of a king in a play, then why must an actor perform the part of a king unless Was there a power present in both liberating and dangerous, as Shakespeare showed by dramatizing the parallel powers of Othello’s false friend, Iago, who chillingly boasted, “I am not what I am.”

The Languages of Literature: The New Science and the Old Nature

Charming ideas of identity, both personal and political, were reflected in changes to the English language, which responded to popularly as well as learned culture. An uncomplained classicist, Ben Jonson clearly modeled his verses on Latin poets and their syntax; at the same time, the language of his poetry and his plays often echoes the cadences of the English spoken by ordinary folk. Authors of popular comic pamphlets.
This view of creation was important for artists and writers because it gave them a symbolic language of correspondences by which they could refer to creations in widely differing settings and conditions. In a sense, it made nature hospitable to poetry by seeing creation as a divine work of art, designed to inspire not only awe but also a kind of familiarity. Things were the likenesses of other things. Particularly in so-called "metaphysical" poetry, whose chief exponent is John Donne, human emotional experience is compared to the realms of astronomy, geography, medicine, Neoplatonic philosophy, and Christian theology. These correspondences are created through strikingly unusual metaphors, which some have called metaphorical concepts, from the Italian concept ("concetto"). The result is a pervasive sense of a universal harmony in all human experience.

Such analogies were not always respected, however. Increasingly, they were questioned by proponents of a kind of vision that depended on a quantitative or deconstructive sense of identity or difference. Poetic metaphor might not be able to account for creation in all its complexity; instead, nature had to be understood through the abstractions of science. By the seventeenth century, it was becoming difficult to regard creation as a single and comprehensive whole; natural philosophers and scientists in the making wanted to analyze it piece by piece. As John Donne wrote of the phenomenon of unani\-ness in his elegy for Elizabeth Drury, The Anniversary:

1.

The element of fire is quite put out;  
The Sun is low, and th\' earth and man's wit  
Can well direct him, where to look for it.  
And freely men confon, that this world's spent,  
When in the Planet, and the Permanent  
They seek so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbling out again to his Am\-x.  
Too all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
All just supply, and all Relation.  
Prince, Subject, Farmer, Son, are things forgot,  
For every man alone thinks he has got  
To be a Phoenix, and that there can be  
None of that kind, of which he is but he.

The earth had been decelerated by the insights of the astronomers Nicholas Copernicus, who in the 1520s deduced that the earth orbits the sun. This "Copernican revolution" was confirmed by the calculations of Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, and our solar system itself was revealed as but one among many. With traditional understandings of the natural order profoundly shaken, many thinkers feared for the survival of the human capacity to order and understand society as well. Ironically, Donne complained of national individualism by invoking the emblem of the Phoenix, the very symbol of metaphor that constituted the coherence he claimed as gone. Do whereas the symbol in an emblem book carried with it the myth of the bird's Christ-like death and rebirth, the image of the rare bird takes on a newly significant and even satirical meaning in The Anniversary: it becomes the sign of a dangerous fragmentation within nature's order. Donne's audience would have been familiar with such enigmatic symbols from emblem books, poems, and coats of arms, as well as in interior decoration.
clothing, and the printers' marks on title pages of books. They were also featured on the standards or flags carried in the Civil War—antique signs in a decidedly modern conflict.

**THE WAR AND THE MODERN ORDER OF THINGS**

The Wars of Three Kingdoms ended with the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, but the society that Charles II was heir to was very different from the one his grandfather James I had come from. Scotland to rule. The terms of modern life were formulated during this period, even though they were only partially and inconsistently realized. They helped to shape these essentially modern institutions: a representative government under law, a market economy fueled by concentrations of capital, and a class system determined by wealth and the power it conferred. They supported a culture in which extreme and opposing points of view were usual. Milton's republican Tenure of Kings and Magistrates was followed by Thomas Hobbes's defense of absolute rule, The Leviathan, or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil (1651). Hobbes rejected the assumption that had determined all previous political thought—Aristotle's idea that man was naturally sociable—by characterizing the natural condition of human life as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." A civil state, said Hobbes, depended on the willingness of each and every citizen to relinquish all his or her rights to the sovereign, which is the Commonwealth. The vigorous language of Puritan sermons, preached and published dur-
ing the 1640s and 1650s, was replicated in the conventos and diarists of the period. These new forms would eventually lead to the sophisticated commentary of eighteenth-
century journalism. Nationalism, however problematic, was registered in history and
epic, as well as in attempts to colonize the Americas and to subdue the Gaelic peo-
plies to the west and the north. Irish poems supporting the Stuarts and lamenting the
losses of the Cromwellian wars would become rallying cries during the late seven-
teenth- and eighteenth-century nationalistic risings against English control, eventu-
ally to result in Ireland’s inclusion in the 1801 Union of Great Britain.

Intellectual thought, mental attitudes, religious practices, and the customs of the
people fostered new relations to the past and a new sense of self. While Milton was
perhaps the greatest humanist of his time, able to read and write Hebrew, Greek,
Latin, Italian, and French, his contemporaries witnessed the disappearance of the
culture of Erasmus, Erasmus, and More—humanists who had fashioned the disci-
plines of humanism. As more particularized portraits of individual life emerged, new
philosophical trends promoted denotive descriptions and quantitative figurations
of the world. Shortly after the Restoration of Charles II, the Royal Academy of Sci-
eence would form a “committee for improving the English language,” an attempt to
design a universal grammar and an ideal philosophical language. This project, in-
spired by the intellectual reforms of Francis Bacon, would have been unceremonial to
the skeptical cast of mind exhibited by Erasmus and More. The abstract rationalism
of the new science, the growth of an empire overseas, a burgeoning industry and com-
merce at home, and a print culture spreading news throughout Europe and across the
Atlantic, would continue to be features of life in the British Isles through the eigh-
teneth century.

For additional resources on the early modern period, including a timeline of the period,
go to The Longman Anthology of British Literature Web site at www.ablongman.com/
franciscothornton.0e.