



University of Mosul  
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English Poetry

Third Year

2024-2025

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## Lecture 1

# ≈ The British Restoration Period and the 18th Century 1660-1798 ≈

In the British Restoration Period and the 18th Century 1660-1798 there are three distinct stages :

1. Restoration 1660-1700  John Dryden

2. Augustan Age 1700-1745  Alexander Pope

3. The Enlightenment 1745-1785  Dr Samuel Johnson  
Also called The Age of Reason

- Restoration literature is the English literature written during the historical period commonly referred to as the English Restoration .Some literary historians divide this literary movement in three parts:
- The Restoration Age (1660-1700) introducing the comedy of manner (a play about the manners and conventions of a highly sophisticated aristocratic society.)
- The Augustan Age (1700-1750) introducing poetry of personal exploration, and serious development of the novel, melodrama, and satire.
- The Age of Johnson (1750- 1798) or the Age of Sensibility was a transitional period between Neo-Classicism and Romanticism introducing contrary to Age of Reason (Neo-Classicism) emotional quality.

# Representative Writers

- One of the most influential Neoclassical writer John Dryden (1631 - 1700), also called “Glorious John,” was also a major force during Restoration, working on both plays and poetry to such a degree that the entire first section of the period sometimes is called “the Age of Dryden.”



# Representative Writers

- Alexander Pope (1688 - 1744) was an Augustan poet. He made money translating major works, such as The Iliad, but soon established himself with his own pieces.

His Pastorals and An Essay on Criticism are probably the best known of his writings, and scholars recognize him for his command of the heroic couplet.





# Representative Writers

Experts usually see Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784) as the last great writer of the Neoclassical period in literature. His major contribution is *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which people used for well over a century. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* eventually replaced it, Johnson's dictionary was a major accomplishment in the development and standardization of English.



# John Dryden, 1631-1700





- He is the son of a moderate Puritan country gentleman .
- First he attended Westminster School
- Trinity College, Cambridge, AB.
- Stayed on at Trinity for three years after graduation, but did not earn a higher degree.

- In 1662, he was elected to the Royal Society, England's national academy of science founded by King Charles II in 1660.
- In 1668, King Charles made him the poet laureate
- Two years later gave him the post of royal historiographer

# His Works

- John Dryden works are often political in nature or occasional pieces (written for a specific occasion).
- Also wrote for money
  - poetry and plays had to meet the taste of the day.
- His writings are very eloquent and intellectual

- His first important poem was Heroic Stanzas (1659) to honor Cromwell.
- Astraea Redux (1660) in honor of the Restoration
- For the rest of his life he was loyal to Charles and James.

# “Father of English Criticism”

- Studied the great playwright
- Greece
- Rome
- Renaissance
- French contemporaries.
- Sought sound theatrical principles on which to construct new drama.

# Long-lasting Influence

- Dryden had an incredible influence on English literature, especially through his criticism.
- He set the taste and standards in literature for a century
- Standards were overthrown by the Romantics, who still hold critical sway today.



# Satire

- Literary satire is not exclusive to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it reached some of its greatest heights in this period, and is the age's dominant mode.
- The object of satire is to correct folly, vices, and abuses by exposing them to derision and ridicule.
- But within this broadly defined genre, and in the hands of masters such as Dryden, Pope, and Swift, there is scope for almost infinite variety.

# John Dryden Use of Satire

- Between 1678-81 at satire reached the greatest height.
- Mock-epic satire Mac Flecknoe (1678) satirizing the playwright Thomas Shadwell
- Absalom and Achitophel (1681)
- The Medal in 1682, a poem written in response to Shaftesbury getting off on charges of treason.



# Absalom and Achitophel (1681)

## John Dryden

- "Absalom and Achitophel" is one of Dryden's great political satires. In this poem Dryden comments on :
  - A.** the Popish Plot (1678: an alleged plot by Catholics to kill the king and make England Catholic again) -the Exclusion Crisis (to keep Charles' Catholic brother, James, from inheriting the throne after Charles' death)
  - B.** Monmouth Rebellion (1685: an attempt to put the king's illegitimate son James, Duke of Monmouth on the throne)
- He frames these contemporary events in terms of the biblical story of King David and his rebellious son Absalom.
- Biblical narratives would have been very familiar to contemporary audiences.

John Dryden's publication of *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) had a specific political motivation. He wrote the poem during the threat of revolution in England, connected to the so-called Popish plot and the move to exclude the reigning King Charles II's Catholic brother, James, duke of York, from his right to follow the Protestant Charles to the throne.

Dryden observed the parallel in England's situation to that of ancient Israel under the rule of King David. The story found in the biblical book of 2 Samuel contained all of the political elements in which Dryden found himself, as a citizen of England, involved. Each of the main characters corresponded to a real-life person in Dryden's time. David's illegitimate son, Absalom, represented Monmouth, and his evil confidant Achitophel represented Anthony Ashley Cooper, earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury had introduced to Parliament the Exclusion Bill to prevent York from taking the throne.

# Biblical background

The story of Absalom's revolt is told in the Second Book of Samuel in the Old Testament of the Bible (chapters 14 to 18). Absalom rebels against his father King David. The beautiful Absalom is distinguished by extraordinarily abundant hair, which is probably meant to symbolise his pride (2 Sam. 14:26). When David's renowned advisor, Achitophel (Ahitophel in the Vulgate) joins Absalom's rebellion, another advisor, Hushai, plots with David to pretend to defect and give Absalom advice that plays into David's hands. The result was that Absalom takes the advice of the double agent Hushai over the good advice of Achitophel, who realising that the rebellion is doomed to failure, goes home and hangs himself. Absalom is killed (against David's explicit commands) after getting caught by his hair in the thick branches of a great oak: "His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on" (NRSV 2 Sam. 18:9). The death of his son, Absalom, causes David enormous personal grief.



# Historical background

In 1681 in England, Charles II was in advanced years. He had had a number of mistresses and produced a number of illegitimate children. One of these was James Scott, the Duke of Monmouth, who was very popular, both for his personal charisma and his fervor for the Protestant cause. Charles had no legitimate heirs, and his brother, the future James II of England was openly a Roman Catholic.

When Charles's health suffered, there was a panic in the House of Commons over the potential for the nation being ruled by a Roman Catholic king.

The Earl of Shaftesbury had sponsored and advocated the Exclusion Bill, which would prevent James II from succeeding to the throne, but this bill was blocked by the House of Lords on two occasions. In the Spring of 1681, at the Oxford Parliament, Shaftesbury appealed to Charles II to legitimate Monmouth. Monmouth was caught preparing to rebel and seek the throne, and Shaftesbury was suspected of fostering this rebellion. The poem was written, possibly at Charles's behest, and published in early November 1681.

On 24 November 1681, Shaftesbury was seized and charged with high treason. A trial before a jury picked by Whig sheriffs acquitted him.

Later, after the death of his father and unwilling to see his uncle James II become King, the Duke of Monmouth executed his plans and went into full revolt. The Monmouth Rebellion was put down, and in 1685 the Duke was executed.

# The Tories

- Crown party
- Those who stood for the traditional values of king and country
- Dryden, Swift, Behn and Manley are some of the staunch Tory poets we'll discuss this term.
- It's also the party associated with the Anglican and Catholic churches, though members of these faiths could be Whigs.

# The Whigs

- Parliamentary party
- associated with the ousted Puritans, but more with the rising mercantile middle-class
- people who have earned wealth and position through hard work and not birth
- though there were members of the peerage who were Whigs.
- Whigs tended to be less conservative, forward-looking and closer to what we would call “liberal” today.

# Tories vs. Whigs

- Tories held fast to the idea of the Divine Right of kings
- Whigs don't believe it.

# Characters

- David - Charles
- Absalom - Monmouth
- Achitophel - Shaftesbury
- Enemies - the Whig party
- Zimri - George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham

# Duke of Monmouth

- Charles's oldest child and a favorite.
- Came to Court 1662, made Duke and married to Anne, Countess of Buccleuch
- Military commands on Continent
- Captain General, 1678





# *Absalom and Achitophel*

- Occasional poem linked to the trial of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury 1031 lines



# Shaftesbury background

- First been a soldier for Charles I
- Became a Parliamentarian under Cromwell.
- On the Restoration he was pardoned by Charles II
- Became an influential politician
  - member of Charles's infamous “Cabal” ministry

# Shaftesbury and Politics

- Appointed Lord Chancellor in 1672
- Did not support James to become king after his brother because of his Catholicism.
- Supported Charles's illegitimate son, James, Duke of Monmouth's claim to the throne
- He was brought to trial for treason in 1681.
- Although he was vindicated in this trial, he fell from favor so dramatically that he was forced to flee to the Netherlands in 1682
- He died there the next year.

# Structure of poem

- Lines 1-149 are an introduction to the dilemma and the political situation
- Lines 150-490 are the temptation of Absalom
- Lines 491-681 Achitophel's men
- Lines 682-816 Dryden's view of kingship
- Lines 817-932 "Good guys" listed
- Lines 933-end David asserts himself

# John Dryden (1631-1700)

## Absalom and Achitophel

Some by their friends, more by themselves thought wise, ..... 142  
Oppos'd the pow'r, to which they could not rise.  
Some had in courts been great, and thrown from thence,  
Like fiends, were harden'd in impenitence .....145  
Some by their monarch's fatal mercy grown,  
From pardon'd rebels, kinsmen to the throne;  
Were rais'd in pow'r and public office high;  
Strong bands, if bands ungrateful men could tie.

Of these the false Achitophel was first: .....150

A name to all succeeding ages curst.

For close designs, and crooked counsels fit;

Sagacious, bold and turbulent of wit:

Restless, unfixt in principles and place;

In pow'r unpleas'd, impatient of disgrace. ....155

A fiery soul, which working out its way,

Fretted the pigmy-body to decay:

And o'er inform'd the tenement of clay.

A daring pilot in extremity;

Pleas'd with the danger, when the waves went high .....160



He sought the storms; but for a calm unfit,  
 Would steer too nigh the sands, to boast his wit.  
 Great wits are sure to madness near alli'd;  
 And thin partitions do their bounds divide:  
 Else, why should he, with wealth and honour blest, .....165  
 Refuse his age the needful hours of rest?  
 Punish a body which he could not please;  
 Bankrupt of life, yet prodigal of ease?  
 And all to leave, what with his toil he won  
 To that unfeather'd, two-legg'd thing, a son .....170  
 Got, while his soul did huddled notions try;  
 And born a shapeless lump, like anarchy.  
 In friendship false, implacable in hate:  
 Resolv'd to ruin or to rule the state. ....174

# Jonathan Swift

- Generally thought to be the greatest prose writer of the 18<sup>th</sup> century
- One of the world's finest satirists
- Considered a misanthrope by many because he was deeply critical of humanity



# Jonathan Swift

- Became an Anglican priest
- In 1713, became the dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, a post he held for more than 30 years until his death
- Died at 78





# Gulliver's Travels



- Jonathan Swift's masterpiece, "Gulliver's Travels" appeared in 1726.

# Satire

- Jonathan Swift is the most influential prose writer and satirist in 18th century England –his aim in writing was to make people more decent and humane.
- Jonathan Swift defined satire as “a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own, which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it.”



## The Fable of Midas

# The Mythical Story

- King Midas had everything — a beautiful land, a huge fortune and a lovely daughter named Zoe whom he loved dearly.
- Dionysus, the god of wine, was passing through Midas's territory when one of his friends got lost. Midas looked after the man and him was reunited with Dionysus
- The god was so grateful he offered to grant Midas one wish.
- Midas immediately said: "I want everything I touch to turn to gold."

- Next morning his wish would be fulfilled, when Midas woke the next day he reached out to touch his bedside table and it turned to gold.
- He was so excited and started touching one item after another and turning them all into gold. After a couple of hours he was hungry and went to eat and drink wine but the food and wine turned to gold.
- Midas, realising suddenly how stupid he had been, broke down and cried.
- His daughter Zoe heard her father's sobs and ran to see what was wrong.
- Before he could stop her she leapt into his arms to comfort him and turned into a golden statue.
- Heartbroken Midas prayed to Dionysus for aid, begging him: "Please take this curse away from me."
- The god took pity on Midas, telling him he would restore Zoe and the other items to their previous state — on the condition that Midas gave up all the gold in his kingdom.
- The king readily agreed.





# Historical Background

- Britain had been at war with France from 1689 to 1697 and again from 1702 in a Grand Alliance that included the Dutch. During the summer of 1711, began secret peace negotiations with the France.
- In December 1711, just over a year after the Tories had won a landslide electoral victory, a prosecution was launched by them against the duke of Marlborough, the military hero whose services to the country had been recognised with the gift from the nation of Blenheim Palace.
- To be sure, there was politics involved – Marlborough had been a Tory but had moved closer to the Whigs, and the Tories sought revenge.
- But in any case, the point at issue was a contract that the duke had to supply the army with bread, from which he made a 6% profit. Between 1702 and 1711, he received £62,000 (roughly the equivalent of about £5m in today's money).
- Here, then, was public money being diverted into a contract from which Marlborough personally gained
- The first Tory party was outraged. Jonathan Swift, by then a Tory partisan, satirised Marlborough's avarice in his poem The Fable of Midas – the mythical king whose touch turned everything to gold.

- Swift's attacks the Duke of Marlborough in The Fable of Midas (1712), written to celebrate the Duke final removal from the places he was still holding. Here Swift compares him with king Midas, the legendary greedy King of Phrygia. Swift criticizes Marlborough a "British Midas" and accuses him of having wealth through corrupt practices by selling commissions and appointments in the army as well as by lending money to the government on interest.

*The Fable of Midas* belongs to that anti-Marlborough campaign. In Swift demonizes the Duke of Marlborough in public imagination. Marlborough returned from a victorious campaign in 1711, and in England he was a popular war hero, and he had been effective as a diplomat. The Duke of Marlborough pushed for the continuation of the war, challenging Oxford's promotion of peace; when he voted against the peace preliminaries in December 1711, his fate was effectively sealed. Queen Anne pressed him to support the peace proposals, and when he refused she summarily dismissed him from his offices.

## Lines 1-10

Midas, we are in story told,  
Turn'd every thing he touch'd to gold:  
He chipp'd his bread; the pieces round  
Glitter'd like spangles on the ground:  
A codling, ere it went his lip in,  
Would straight become a golden pippin.  
He call'd for drink; you saw him sup  
Potable gold in golden cup:  
His empty paunch that he might fill,  
He suck'd his victuals thro' a quill.

## Lines 77-82

The torrent merciless imbibes  
Commissions, perquisites, and bribes,  
By their own weight sunk to the bottom;  
Much good may't do 'em that have caught 'em!  
And Midas now neglected stands,  
With ass's ears, and **dirty** hands.