

The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century (1660-1785)

Overview

The period between 1660 and 1785 was a time of amazing expansion for England — or for "Great Britain," as the nation came to be called after an Act of Union in 1707 joined Scotland to England and Wales. Britain became a world power, an empire on which the sun never set. But it also changed internally. The world seemed different in 1785. A sense of new, expanding possibilities — as well as modern problems — transformed the daily life of the British people, and offered them fresh ways of thinking about their relations to nature and to each other. Hence literature had to adapt to circumstances for which there was no precedent. The topics in this Restoration and Eighteenth Century section of Norton Topics Online review three crucial departures from the past — alterations that have helped to shape our own world.

One lasting change was a shift in population from the country to the town. "A Day in Eighteenth-Century London" shows the variety of diversions available to city-dwellers. At the same time, it reveals how far the life of the city, where every daily newspaper brought new sources of interest, had moved from traditional values. Formerly the tastes of the court had dominated the arts. In the film *Shakespeare in Love*, when Queen Elizabeth's nod decides by itself the issue of what can be allowed on the stage, the exaggeration reflects an underlying truth: the monarch stands for the nation. But the eighteenth century witnessed a turn from palaces to pleasure gardens that were open to anyone with the price of admission. New standards of taste were set by what the people of London wanted, and art joined with commerce to satisfy those desires. Artist William Hogarth made his living not, as earlier painters had done, through portraits of royal and noble patrons, but by selling his prints to a large and appreciative public. London itself — its beauty and horror, its ever-changing moods — became a favorite subject of writers.

The sense that everything was changing was also sparked by a revolution in science. In earlier periods, the universe had often seemed a small place, less than six thousand years old, where a single sun moved about the earth, the center of the cosmos. Now time and space exploded, the microscope and telescope opened new fields of vision, and the "plurality of worlds," as this topic is called, became a doctrine endlessly repeated. The authority of Aristotle and Ptolemy was broken; their systems could not explain what Galileo and Kepler saw in the heavens or what Hooke and Leeuwenhoek saw in the eye of a fly. As discoveries multiplied, it became clear that the moderns knew things of which the ancients had been ignorant. This challenge to received opinion was thrilling as well as disturbing. In *Paradise Lost*, Book 8, the angel Raphael warns Adam to think about what concerns him, not to dream about other worlds. Yet, despite the warning voiced by Milton through Raphael, many later writers found the new science inspiring. It gave them new images to conjure with and new possibilities of fact and fiction to explore.

Meanwhile, other explorers roamed the earth, where they discovered hitherto unknown countries and ways of life. These encounters with other peoples often proved vicious. The trade and conquests that made European powers like Spain and Portugal immensely rich also brought the scourge of racism and colonial exploitation. In the eighteenth century, Britain's expansion into an empire was fueled by slavery and the slave trade, a source of profit that belied the national self-image as a haven of liberty and turned British people against one another. Rising prosperity at home had been built on inhumanity across the seas. This topic, "Slavery and the Slave Trade in Britain," looks at the experiences of African slaves as well as at British reactions to their suffering and cries for freedom. At the end of the eighteenth century, as many writers joined the abolitionist campaign, a new humanitarian ideal was forged. The modern world invented by the eighteenth century brought suffering along with progress. We still live with its legacies today.