

The World of Writing in the 18th Century

The world of writing in the eighteenth century was a world in flux, a time of transition when the nature of writers, writing, publishing and reading changed beyond recognition over the course of a century. Like all big changes, it prompted innovation, and excitement - but its flipside was the kind of hostility and fear of the new that we see in Alexander Pope's attack on modern writing in his satirical poem 'The Dunciad' [1] (1728-1743). Some of the biggest changes to occur in this period are things that we now take for granted. This makes it hard in some ways to see what all the fuss was about. We take it for granted that being an author is a perfectly respectable profession, that writers should be paid for what they produce. We don't question the fact or appropriateness of women writers and readers. Novels are now the dominant genre in literary publishing - we have prestigious prizes for literary fiction. Yet in the period between 1700-1830, all these ideas were new, and were being furiously debated by a whole range of writers and readers.

The resources in these pages offer us a glimpse of the busy, contradictory and diverse world of writing in the eighteenth century. Spanning authors and themes from across the century, they show us some of the many different stories we might find in this period. We take it for granted that Jane Austen's [2] novels are literary classics, works in which, to quote her in *Northanger Abbey* [3], "the greatest powers of the mind are displayed." But only half a century earlier the status of the novel was so dubious, so disreputable that no fiction writer would admit that their novel was a novel, claiming instead that it was a history or memoir. We can also see how the energy of a newly commercialised print culture generated forms of writing that became very fashionable for a short period: the podcasts and eBooks here will take us into the forgotten bestsellers of the period: to eighteenth century oriental fiction, and to labouring class poetry, two of the big hits of the mid century.

The eighteenth century was an era of contradictions - as perhaps all eras are. It was the time in which we invented the idea of a native literary canon (before that great literature had to have come from Greece and Rome), and Samuel Johnson's [4] *Lives of the Poets* [5] created a pantheon of native literary giants. *But it was also a time when readers seem to have cared very little about who wrote what - the countless magazines and miscellanies of the time repackaged reams of poetry and prose by theme and use, and very seldom by author. The eighteenth century was a time of enlightenment, sensibility and moral and social improvement - yet there is also a rich vein of bawdy and boisterous popular literature and music running throughout the whole period.*

The resources available here offer an introduction to some of the most important themes and contexts of the period, and beyond that, to the authors and texts.

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Links

[1] <http://writersinspire.org/content/dunciad>

[2] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/jane-austen>

[3] <http://writersinspire.org/content/northanger-abbey-0>

[4] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/samuel-johnson>

[5] <http://writersinspire.org/content/lives-most-eminant-english-poets-v-14>