

ENGLISH LITERATURE – Early Modern Period

The Renaissance

Renaissance Literature

In England, the Sixteenth Century was marked by the ascent of Queen Elizabeth, whose strategic prowess resulted in an expansion of influence and a sense of prosperity and enhanced world position, particularly as traditional rivals began to lose ground. Elizabethan England was a time of great flowering of literature, particularly in drama and poetry.

In the early Seventeenth Century, after the death of Elizabeth I, England experienced a civil war between Cromwell's "Roundheads" and Monarchists. The desire for a new system of government, together with a rise in literacy and technology, gave a boost to new literary trends.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) *Twelfth Night*(A, 510-571)

William Shakespeare was born in the small market town of Stratford-on-Avon in April 1564, the son of a successful businessman and governmental official who then suffered financial losses. Shakespeare began his career as a playwright in the early 1590s by writing comedies and history plays. His subsequent professional life was involved with the theater.

Twelfth Night was probably written in the same year as *Hamlet* (c. 1601), that is in a time when there was a shift in the tone and character of Shakespeare's writing. Many have suggested that it was a time of personal anguish, but there are no direct records. What we can say is that there is a biting tone, an uneasiness with comic conventions, and a ruthless questioning of the values of the characters. There are dark notes in *Twelfth Night*--mourning, betrayal, and tragic isolation--but all are swept up in a "giddy, carnivalesque dance of illusion, disguise, folly, and clowning"(510).

Question: Comedy and Social Stability

Is comedy related to identity and stability, and is comedy ultimately a conservative kind of writing? This large question is a fitting intro to Shakespeare's creative environment. We see a world in chaos, at the beginning of the present play. Everyone is confused, or wants what he or she cannot obtain, starting with the Duke's passion for Olivia whose own passion is totally devoted to what she takes to be the death of her brother at sea. By the end of the play these confusions have been cleared up and a new restored order imposed. People tend to get answers to what they want. Even Malvolio has been graciously supported, by Olivia, and the Duke has married Viola. *Is this restoration of order*, to repeat our question, of the essence of comedy, and if so would that be because comedy is about norms and the breaking of them? Is the classic comedic situation simply like that of the man walking rhythmically down the street, who slips on a banana peel, is reduced to chaos, then rises again and goes on walking, a little the wiser?

Comparative Literature :

1. It would be worth looking backward and forward in the history of Western comedy, to Aristophanes in the fifth century B.C., and to television sitcoms in our day. Would we discover a conservative nature to comedy as we traveled through these times? Would Lucy, Jefferson, and Jack Tripper amuse us mainly through their unexpected and socially tweaked behavior? (Or is that simplifying the nature of comedy too greatly?) What about Aristophanes' extended satires on the law courts of his time, on the high philosophy of Cloud Cuckoo Land, or on the vanity of politicians? Is Aristophanes able to make us roar, at these

excesses, simply because he knows the social norms against which these excesses are established?

2. The literature on Shakespeare is endless. Give yourself a treat and read a small masterpiece, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1942), by E.M.W. Tillyard. Through the window of this little book you will see a backdrop of customs, religious beliefs and practices, and philosophical assumptions which will help to convince you that Shakespeare lived in an Age profoundly different from ours. I suspect you will also feel the closeness of Shakespeare's world to that of the later Middle Ages, not only to Chaucer but to Christian sophisticates like the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) *Faerie Queene* (A, 368-434)

Edmund Spenser spent much of his career life carrying out administrative roles for the British Crown, in Ireland. The colonizing role of England in Ireland was a rough and contentious one, and over an extended period the colonized were in endless rebellion against their "colonial masters." Spenser was on the whole one of the tough colonialists. He was increasingly known in England for his poetic work, and admired in England by all including the Queen. However he probably acquired in Ireland the distinctive blend of fantasist—the *Faerie Queen* creator, the myth maker--and realist, whose knowledge of human psychology is sharp and penetrating. In the end he was, in some sense, conquered by the culture he approved of colonizing.

Question: Is The Faerie Queene an ancient or a modern poem?

Spenser was a contemporary of Shakespeare and Marlowe, creators usually associated with the full energies of the Renaissance mind. However Spenser, unlike some of his great contemporaries, consciously looked back on the "archaic past," shall we say the past of *Piers Plowman* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? Spenser emulated an old fashioned poetic English, which smacked of late Mediaeval writers, and he peopled his *Faerie Queene* with allegorical figures and abstractions of the Virtues and Vices. On the other hand, though, Spenser confronts the human situation with a direct analytical eye that makes him read as anything but "archaic." The struggles of the Redcross Knight, on behalf of Una, are testimonies of heroic valor and virtue, but the subsequent faithlessness of the Knight sears him with a sense of sin which we can feel on ourselves today. The Virtues and Vices that play through this poem have the bite of real life on them. *Hence the question about the modernity of Spenser. Does he 'get to you' as much as Shakespeare? Is Spenser too our contemporary?*

Comparative Literature:

1. Among other things, Spenser is a Renaissance Neo-Platonist, fascinated with the theories of ideal love developed by Plato, but widely popularized during the Hellenizing movements of the Renaissance. Much of the inspiration for Spenser's work and thought also came from the Italy of his time, which was a source of artistic inspiration in England. You might cross the channel, and take a look at Erwin Panofsky's great *Studies in Iconology* (London, 1939), which looks at the Neoplatonism in Italian painting of the Renaissance. Anywhere you turn in that book will give you insight into the thought world of Spenser, heir as he was both to Platonism and Italian culture

2. A long set of narrative sequences, concerning the pursuit of virtue, may seem far from what we can imagine enjoying today. Comparative Literature is involved with phases of taste and sensibility, and not least with the tastes of the comparatist him/herself. In other words, there is a reflexive dimension to the critical work of Comparative Literature. From that viewpoint, can you explain what it is, in our cultural reading habits, that puts us far from Spenser's sensibility, but that put Spenser's work at the very center of his own time?

Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) *Astrophil and Stella* (A, 451-455)

Sir Philip Sidney was a high born courtier, who moved in circles not far from the Queen, and though his early death in battle cut short a life widely admired, he left behind intense sonnets which established a form and move us still with their passion as well as their formality. His life acquired no less great a

reputation than his work. Close servant to the Queen, entrusted with diplomatic missions on the Continent, and conspicuous in London society, Sidney remains the cameo of an Elizabeth courtier.

Question: Can Passion be conveyed in a Highly Formal Metric

The question, so put, is simplistic. We know we find these sonnets wonderfully wrought, and even the wit of a line like "Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write," startles us with a direct freshness. But can a 14 line verse structure, rigidly tied to a complex metric—abba/abba/cdcd/ee—delight our ears without stifling the shaggy heart in our breasts? Can passion be cut to such an intricate form? We may trust that you will say yes, but if so, how does that effect work? What makes the emotion survive? How is the work of lyric poetry different, in this way, from the far rangier verse lines of narrative poets like Spenser, the nine line stanzas of whose *Faerie Queene*—abab/bcbc/c—conceal their style more talkatively?

Comparative Literature

1. The sonnet form was used as early as the work of Chaucer and Dante, in the 14th century, and gained widely admired currency—especially among lovers—with the sonnets of Francesco Petrarch in Italy, and of Shakespeare, who was himself the author of over a hundred sonnets. The form has flourished throughout the development of English literature, and in certain poets of the last century and a half—Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Gerard Manley Hopkins—the sonnet has acquired new forms and emphases. Suggestion: take a close look at the rare, and rarely used, *curtal* sonnet in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

2. Sir Philip Sidney was an astute literary critic, whose *An Apology for Poetry* was one of the principal Renaissance theoretical works on the nature of literature. You might want to look at that brilliant essay, which takes you, in the mode of Comparative Literature, back in thought to Aristotle, whose view of art as imitation is strong in Sidney, to Plato, whose view of ideal forms is dominant in Sidney, and forward to Shelley, the Romantic poet who most admired Sidney's inspired view of the poet as an "unacknowledged legislator of the world."

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) *Dr Faustus* (A, 460-492)

Christopher Marlowe died at the age of 29, tangled in secret agent plots, and living on the borderlines of the underworld. (You will remember that Thomas Mallory, author of *Morte Darthur*, also lived on the borders of lawlessness; evidence that the literary genius is not always Mr. Mainstream.) Yet by the time of his death Marlowe was a highly educated Cambridge graduate, the author of a number of closely admired plays, and a recognized servant of the Queen, running various private anti-Catholic missions for her in Europe. We can trace in the amazingly intense life of this young man his dominant fascination with tragic heroes who will transcend the bonds of normal human existence, becoming "outreachers" of daring power. The characters he portrays clearly emerge from his own life.

Question: The Intersection of Raw Humor with Magnificent Vision

The question, and you have seen it forming in *Twelfth Night* too, is: *how are we to take the blend of raw humor with poetic flights in Elizabethan drama?* (In *Twelfth Night* we saw the exchanges between Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch, and followed the wit and lyric flights of Feste, Olivia's jester. In *Dr. Faustus* we hear the exchange between Wagner and the Clown, and marvel at the blend of wit, learning, grossness, and musicality. This blending of poetic levels, throughout Elizabethan drama, establishes a tone conflict which shocked later dramatic traditions, like that of French classicism in the following century, and still today, in our ready for anything age, we gasp at the blend of the sublime and the harsh which we read in this sixteenth century work. *So how are we to take this blend?* If you can learn to "take it in stride" you will discover secrets of the comprehensive vitality of this great dramatic tradition.

Comparative Literature:

1. Does Marlowe's concern with the "outreacher" take our minds to other literary images of power: Macchiavelli's Prince or Nietzsche's *Uebermensch*. Is there something in common among these power manipulators, and if so what? How are they different? (The Prince, for one thing, is above all a calculator; while the other two figures are passionate extremists.) How does the legend of Faust, in Goethe, play into this tradition? Is Goethe's *Faust* more conflicted than Marlowe's, in his search for the power that goes with knowledge?

2. In hurrying to the center of great works written long before our time, we often hurry past the details which explain the text we seek. In the case of Marlowe's *Faustus* we need to return to the theological strife of Marlowe's learning years at Cambridge at the end of the 16th century. The Calvinists and anti-Calvinists were in heated strife concerning issues of theodicy, of the justification of God's ways to man. (Question: is the pervasive pain and suffering in the universe part of God's plan? This issue of "justification" will still dominate the religious/epic thinking of John Milton.) These issues frame the desire of Faustus for a temporary respite from the human condition, in order to enjoy perfect pleasure. Comparative literature regularly concerns itself with explaining one cultural mindset to another, probing the geography of possible understanding from one century to another.

John Donne (1572-1631) *Songs and Sonnets* (A, 603-629)

John Donne was born into a devout Catholic family at a time, in sixteenth century England, when prejudice, harassment, and religious hatred made any faith but that of the Church of England, the cornerstone of British national fervor, suspect and diabolical. Having suffered the victim end of his faith, Donne turned to the Church of England in the 1590's, was ordained a priest of that Church in 1615. There, by stages, he rose to positions of high power, finally assuming the prestigious position of Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. In his priestly role Donne wrote fiery and brilliant sermons, much admired to this day for their theology and their prose style. He also, and foremost, continued to create the brilliant sonnets and songs which, already by the 1590's, were making him a central figure in London letters.

Question: Can the religious and the erotic sensibilities coincide in great lyric poetry?

The question speaks for itself, and of course invites a yes, as we are looking at a poet renowned for just such a combination of sensibilities. But if you really mean that yes, try it out on "The Canonization," one of Donne's richest poems. Is that poem both erotic and religious? In their love, the two lovers share a hermitage, in which they are enabled to give full growth to their love, and to become images for one another of the whole created world. Imitators of God—Cf. II. 44-5—the lovers make themselves saintly, secular saintly, worthy of canonization. Donne's erotic poetry, which is passionate and spiritual at the same time, is forever blending the religious with the secular. Try out this notion on any of Donne's sonnets.

Comparative Literature:

1. The fortunes of Donne's poetry are a thermometer for the emotional temper of subsequent English poetry. There was great respect for Donne in 18th century writers like Samuel Johnson and Ben Jonson, but by the 19th century, the moment of Romanticism—we will be there shortly, and your understanding of this point will be sharper—Donne was seen as a wit rather than a real poet. It was only in the 20th century, with the turning of the wheels of taste, that the poet T.S. Eliot (and others) drew new and enthusiastic attention to the achievement of the so called Metaphysicals—Donne and his contemporary lyricists—and privileged Donne as one of the greatest English language poets. Cf. T. S. Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," 1921.

2. One of the influential critical movements in 20th century literary discourse was called the New Criticism. Flourishing from the 20's to the 50s, New Criticism privileged the importance of the text in its particularity, not as a social or psychologically significant document. One of the style setting books of this critical movement was Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), which borrowed its title from a sonnet by John Donne. You might want to pursue the eminent role played by Donne and the other Metaphysicals (Herbert, Marvell), in the formulation of New Critical practice.

Essay Questions for Unit 2

1. Are the Renaissance texts we have read mirrors of their time? Does the social life of England appear clearly through these texts? Is social background a good measure of literary achievement?
2. What relation do you see between the work of Sidney and that of Edmund Spenser? Is Spenser a romantic, in his fascination with archaic diction? Are the two poets similar in their insights into human nature? What is the role of Italian culture and Neoplatonism in shaping the work of the two writers?
3. Is *Twelfth Night* comic, in a sense contemporary to us today? What do you think of the raw humor in this play? Does it contribute to the point of the whole? Does the same kind of raw humor enforce the power of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*?

The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century

The Restoration of 1660 – the return of Charles Stuart and, with him, the monarchy to England – brought hope to a divided nation, exhausted by years of civil war and political turmoil. Almost all of Charles's subjects welcomed him home (854). Much of the powerful writing after 1660 exposed divisions in the nation's thinking that derived from the tumult of earlier decades. As the possibility of a Christian Commonwealth receded, John Milton published *Paradise Lost* (final version, 1674), and John Bunyan's immensely popular masterwork, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1679) expressed the conscience of a Nonconformist. Conversely, an aristocratic culture, led by Charles II himself, aggressively celebrated pleasure and the right of the elite to behave extravagantly (857).

Early in the eighteenth century, a new and brilliant group of writers emerged; Swift, Addison, Steele, and Pope. It was a time of literary innovation, and the novel began to gain great attention, with authors such as Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson. Diarists and non-fiction writers kept careful observations of their life and the ideas around them. Burney, Johnson, Boswell, and Wollstonecraft figured prominently.

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) *Gulliver's Travels* (A, 974-1113)

Jonathan Swift, a posthumous child, was born of English parents in Dublin in 1667. Through the generosity of an uncle, he was educated at Kilkenny School and Trinity College. About 1696-7, he wrote his powerful satires on corruption in religion and learning, which were published in 1704 and reached their final form in the fifth edition in 1710. At age thirty-two, he returned to Ireland where he devoted his talents to politics and religion, and his works in prose were written to further various political causes (971).

Gulliver's Travels is Swift's most enduring satire. Although full of allusions to recent and current events, it still rings true today, for its objects are human failings and the defective political, economic, and social institutions that they call into being. Swift adopts an ancient satirical device: the imaginary voyage (975). The structure of his narrative also mirrors the travelogues and explorationist diaries that were very popular in the centuries following encounter with the Americas, and the ensuing colonial efforts.

Question: What is the Secret of Gulliver's Travels' Lasting Fascination for us?

At the time of Swift the European discovery of far distant lands and cultures was far under way. Columbus had come upon a new world, and Montaigne reflected the excitement of that discovery well over a century before Swift's time. Swift taps into the growing fascination with the travel narrative, and puts it to use both to satirize his own culture—especially through the Houyhnhnms—and to fantasize the adventures of Lemuel in relation to other worlds and attitudes. In other words, this set of Gulliver tales in full of self awareness and analysis. Gulliver is in each tale set off from the people he discovers, by size or personal traits. *Does the unique charm of Swift's presentation come down to a kind of inner social geometry each of us carries inside, by which we are intrigued by seeing and feeling events from different angles?*

Comparative Literature:

1. We have gone into the issue of taste changes from one period to another of English literature. In the 19th century, which was on the whole scornful of 18th century British literary styles, Swift was even more reviled than Pope or Dryden. Thomas de Quincey, in the mid 19th century, wrote that "*the meanness of Swift's nature, and his rigid incapacity for dealing with the grandeurs of the human spirit, with religion, with poetry or even with science when it rose above the mercenary practical, is absolutely appalling. His own Yahoo is not a more abominable one-sided degradation of humanity than he himself is under this aspect. . .*" I think you see that Swift's scatological imagination, his scorn for social traditions, his mocking of human pretenses all goes against the grain of thinking which flies under the "Romantic" banner? You might want to enlarge your sense, of this Classical/Romantic polarity, by checking out Irving Babbitt's scholarly classic, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (1919).

John Dryden (1631-1700) *Essay of Dramatic Poesy; Absalom and Achitophel; MacFlecknoe* (A, 880-916)

A graduate of Cambridge, Dryden, like many of the literary figures central to British literature, grew up with a disciplined knowledge of the Classics, which were long to be the backbone of his sensibility. The training in formal verse, social participation, and a brilliant ear for the cadences of English, all followed Dryden into a career of highly public literary prominence, which rendered him the most noted literary figure in England for the last forty years of the 17th century. He was a playwright, satirist, lyric and ode writer, translator. From his vast body of work we include, here, three texts: a fragment of his brilliant and judicious literary criticism, which was style setting for his age, and from which we can still learn; two longish satirical poems, one a downright libelous take off on a second rate dramatist, the other a serious accusation of political plotting against the Crown.

Question: Can we read Dryden as Living Poetry in our Time?

This question is simplistic, but we risk it in order to make a point: that Dryden's poetry, robust, full with rhyming couplets and classical allusions, on the whole "morally directed," delighting in public satire—that this poetry is foreign to the usual tastes in poetry at our time. (The fact is, that the best of 18th century poetry, like that of Pope, to follow, ploughed the same ground as Dryden; but that after the Romantic Movement—and we will soon read Wordsworth—the taste for Dryden-like poetry became rare, and remains so.) Thus the question, *what kind of poetry does Dryden write?* takes aim at the whole issue of style and tone change in literary history. These large formal shifts in tone are also parts of sensibility shifts, which of course are lodged in the larger political-economic landscape of a period, and thus prove difficult to transcend. You might thus reflect on what it means "to be inscribed within a certain period of taste."

Comparative Literature:

1. Dryden was a much published translator of Latin literature, in his age, an age when such work could be remunerative and of intense public interest. (The Renaissance marked a renewal of interest in Greek and Latin literatures, especially in their original forms. By Dryden's time, the ability to read these languages had started to decline, but, like most of the writers we have been reading, above, Dryden was intensely educated, from childhood on, in Latin and some Greek.) To widen your sense of this classical tradition, and the waves of change that have stirred it during our modern centuries, take a look at Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1985). You will see that the Renaissance fervor for the Classics has persisted through many ups and downs of taste.

2. Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* may well attract your interest, for its creative role in the development of English literary awareness. Dryden was deeply aware of the classical tradition of criticism, and especially of the role of the Elizabethan period in fortifying the English sense of its own literary values. Long after his time, Dryden's *Essay* remained a standard setter for writing in English. Suggestion: take a look at Rene Wellek, *History of Literary Criticism*, a massive context setter for the whole western enterprise of literary critical awareness.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) *Essay on Man; The Rape of the Lock; An Essay on Criticism; Epistles (A, 1120-1177)*

As a Catholic, Alexander Pope was unable to go to University, vote, or hold public office, but this wired precocious man—probably the most brilliant-in-youth poet of British literature—rapidly made his way to the heights of London literary life. He was an avid reader, deeply alert to the Classics, and above all a frequenter of those coffee-houses which were springing up everywhere in London. Literary talk was to flourish in those locales, as it was to do throughout the 18th century, in part replacing the Salons of aristocrats, where in earlier centuries the ruling intellectuals met. The tastes of the moment changed, as did the composition of literary groups, but Pope remained for decades a leader of cultural life—in a way worthily succeeding Dryden, who had been such an eminence a half century earlier.

Question: How does Pope's poetry fit the Enlightenment project?

We know the basic outlines of eighteenth century rational humanism, the Enlightenment perspective we have seen announcing itself in the work of Dryden and Swift. (In 18th century England, as throughout Europe, there was to be an explosion of empirical science; building on the theoretical insights of the previous century, in Newton and Descartes.) The heart of that perspective was faith in man, and in the orderliness of the reasonable universe that frames man. *How does Pope's poetry exemplify that perspective?* In the *Essay on Man*, Pope sums it up—and notice his genius at summarizing the human condition—by announcing that “whatever is is right.” In his *Essay on Criticism*, Pope recurs to Nature as the model for art, and when it comes to details he turns to the art of the Greeks as the model form of nature, “nature methodized.” The “natural,” in this sense, is man’s artistic foundation. Whatever is natural is right. This too is the Enlightenment perspective. And *The Rape of the Lock*? How is this elegant poem part of the Enlightenment project? One way of looking at the poem is as a cry of support for women’s dignity and private space. Another is, as a satire on the least natural aspect of human affairs, the hypertrophy of elegance in social behavior.

Comparative Literature:

1. Scholarship on the eighteenth century abounds. I recommend a look at Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (1940), for a well written general study of the cultural climate of 18th century English literature. You will see how Pope’s view of nature—and that of his contemporaries—was tinted by both contemporary developments in natural science and by the view that the culture held of ‘science,’ and of the “workings of nature.” You can supplement Willey with the classic *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) by A.O. Lovejoy, a history of the idea—intimately congenial to Pope—that all of God’s creations were perfectly sorted out by him, and exist as a descending chain of being from him.

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) *Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (A, 1340-1349)*

Olaudah Equiano was an Ibo villager who was trapped by the slave trade, who was forced to suffer the horrors of the Middle Passage, which he describes in appalling detail, and who eventually was enabled to purchase his freedom in London—after years of enduring one slave role after another in the Caribbean and Britain. To have gone through this much, and to have written about it in a whistle clean narrative, is already a lot; but for Equiano there was much more to come; effective testimony and participation in the Abolitionist Movement, as well as life as a sailor, which included a voyage to find a passage to India by way of the North Pole. What a life!

Question: What is the canon of a literature?

When a national literature is anthologized, as in the *Norton Anthology* we are reading from, choices are made about what texts to choose. If you were to peruse a collection of anthologies created in the last hundred years, you would be surprised to see how different the texts chosen are; and you would probably start to ask yourself whether there are some texts that absolutely should belong in any collection at all, texts which have so much ‘intrinsic value,’ that they require inclusion. In thinking through that question

you would be on a threshold of the disputatious literary canon issue, which has sparked many cultural battles in our own times. You would be asking yourself what the canon of British literature is, or whether there is one. What do you think of the inclusion of Equiano in the present anthology? I hope you found the tale telling of Equiano gripping. I hope you are able to distinguish your aesthetic pleasure from your satisfaction in following the course of the author's life. It is hard not to challenge the marmoreal quality of the canon, but equally hard to miss the unappealable greatness of many of the authors we read in this class. *Is there a fixed canon of the best in British literature, or is there simply a list of approved tales maintained by the white male guardians of upper class British society in the last four centuries? Is Equiano a significant, or just a culturally important, writer? Or is there a difference between the two?*

Comparative Literature

1. Several hundred slave narratives were published during the 18th and 19th centuries. Certain of these narratives celebrate the religious inspirations which made slavery endurable, others proclaim the importance of the Abolitionist cause, still others concentrate on the personal joys of freedom. The Federal Works Project Administration, in the 1930's, preserved many oral narratives of then still living former slaves. You would find it informative to look into slave narratives in general, and to see what traits they share with other kinds of literature. (Cf. *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, 1972-79). You will want to think, as you carry through this research, of the limits of literature; where does "literature" end and "document" begin? Does the "canon" of significant literary texts include "document-like works" or only aesthetic masterpieces?

2. Comparative Literature was in its origins a study of the relations among different national literatures. The operative assumption, in that starting point, was that literatures have national homes. You might want to study the evolution of Comparative Literature as it has worked to incorporate more sophisticated versions of the idea of national literature. A writer like Equiano is a clear challenge to the bond between nationalism and literature. For a view of the early stages of Comparative Literature, cf. Phillip Rhein, *Comparative Literature: The Early Years* (1973). More recent developments, taking account of globalism, and even of "planetaryism," have attempted to move the discourse of Comparative Literature far beyond the boundaries initially envisaged by Goethe and other Europeans, who generated the idea of Weltliteratur in the late 18th century.

Frances Burney (1752-1840) *Journal and Letters* (A, 1349-1361)

Frances Burney was the daughter of the first British professional historian of music, a man at the center of London culture. From that setting, Mrs. Burney early became addicted to higher culture, especially to writing, and gained acquaintance with many of the literary geniuses dominating the London scene; especially with such men as Joshua Reynolds and Samuel Johnson. She was an active and successful novelist, a long time resident of France, and a cunning observer and commenter on the end of century Napoleonic Revolutionary era. The materials we will be reading, from her *Journals*, give us a glimpse of her intimate and pellucid style, and the original directness of her dealings with life.

Question: What is the Secret of Pure Style?

Sometimes small biopsies of a writer's work enable us to penetrate that work, whereas the sheer mass of a writer's larger fictions, or epic work, may daunt us. Mrs. Burney's *Journal and Letters* put us inside people and places, and reveal them as distinctive discoveries of the author's sensibility. *What makes for the extraordinary sharpness and vigor of, for example, Mrs. Burney's account of her mastectomy?* (This course deals so boldly in centuries and vast themes; we need to pause now and then to look at how literature works on the level of detail.) Looking back on her operation, Mrs. Burney invites us into her victim status, which she both dramatizes and watches from a distance, alongside us. Not only that, but she describes herself putting herself into the minds and hearts of the surgeons operating on her. A subtle psychodrama is created, in the course of which we "feel her pain" keenly. The dreadful events transpiring, and the sequence in which they occur, is artfully (and agonizingly) laid out, are at no point inert, but sing in our scorched feelings.

Comparative Literature

1. We brought up the canon issue in discussing the fresh voice of Equiano, and that same kind of issue is in place now. We are asking (but not answering) the same old question: are texts like these worthy of inclusion in an anthology of literary masterpieces? It was perhaps necessary to await Feminism, a movement rooting in European culture of the early 19th century, to valorize the work of a female writer like Mrs. Burney, whose fictional attention was directed to the growth of women's lives in society. With the Feminist movement attention began to drift toward the voices of women in creating the literary traditions of British literature. Take a look at Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 1987, for a large view of this movement, which has done much to multiply the voices heard in literary tradition.

Essay Questions for Unit 3

1. The 18th century, in Western culture, is traditionally called the Age of Enlightenment. That term broadly connotes: a practical, demythologized view of human personality and destiny; a devotion to life on this earth; faith in human reason. Do you see those Enlightenment traits in the work of Swift, Dryden and Pope?

2. What is a national literary canon? Who determines what texts belong in a literary canon? Does it make sense to include "document-like works," such as those of Mrs. Burney or Equiano, in a literary canon?

3. The poetry of John Dryden and Alexander Pope fell under sharp criticism, during the Romantic Movement in the 19th century, for being stiff, too formal, too pointed, and even, in many views, mechanical. (When you read Wordsworth and Coleridge, in the next Unit, you may reflect back onto the gap between these century-separated poetries.) What do you think about such charges. Can you read 18th century English poetry as a living part of your own experience?