

# The Coffeehouse: English Literature and the Culture of the Public Sphere, 1660–1740

Misty G. Anderson, Professor of English  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

This curriculum guide is designed for a specialized survey of English literature and culture from the Restoration of Charles II to the throne to the mid-eighteenth century. The reading list covers an array of genres, organized around an inquiry into how public spaces and public conversation shape ideas about the modern self. The coffeehouse, as a relatively democratic space for the exchange of ideas, provides both a literal location and a metaphor to think about the emergence of modern culture through the mediations of print.



WILLIAM HOGARTH, THE LAUGHING AUDIENCE, 1733.

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## 1. A Whole New World: Science, Authority, and the Restoration

With the overthrow of Oliver Cromwell's Puritan government and the restoration of Charles II to the throne came a host of print conversations about the sources of authority. Did it come from God? King? Public Consensus? The Body? Science? These images show the transition from Cromwell to the Stuarts and some of the reac-

tions to it in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and selections from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* on the great fire of London.

[\*View the images in the Artstor Digital Library\*](#)

## 2. For God and King

Public houses, coffee houses, and theatres became raucous, bawdy, and cynical loci of conversation and print culture. Rochester's pornographic verse and William Wycherley's satiric 1675 comedy *The Country Wife* illustrate, in different ways, a new materialism figured through sexuality. Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and *Reflections Upon Marriage* connect the material conditions of women's lives (could they afford to live alone?) with educational advancement, while Dryden's apologetic *Absalom and Achitophel* compared Charles II's serial infidelities to King David. These images showcase the affluence and sexual excess of Charles II's court and the theatre that supported it.

[\*View the images in the Artstor Digital Library\*](#)

## 3. All the World's a Stage

By 1700, plays like William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, which appeared after the "bloodless revolution," in which William and Mary ascended to the throne to guarantee a Protestant monarch would rule, show some evidence of a reforming sensibility. That cultural reform movement would be spelled out in Addison and Steele's attempt to end "the long divorce of wit from virtue" in *The Spectator*, which offered thoughts on modern life from the point of view of coffeehouse conversation and was actually read in coffeehouses, where multiple users could share copies.

[\*View the images in the Artstor Digital Library\*](#)

## 4. Merchants, Colonialism, and the New Economy

The commodity-rich culture of the early eighteenth-century, which included coffee, tea, sugar, and cotton, required slavery, colonialism, and international trade for its supply chain. Aphra Behn's 1688 *Oroonoko* brought together a contemporary critique of slavery with a nostalgic longing for past models of kingship. The emerging middle-class identity we see in newspapers and the early novel embedded human consciousness in the experience of global commodities. Defoe's character *Robinson Crusoe* is one such adventurer; Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver* is a satiric version of the same.

[\*View the images in the Artstor Digital Library\*](#)

## 5. Nation Building

The 1707 Act of Union and the coronation of George I (who was German, but the next Protestant in the line of succession) in 1714 called for a rearticulation of what it meant to be a nation. Pope's "Windsor Forest" Finch's, "Nocturnal Reverie," and Centlivre's *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* reflect on that work of nation building. These images show Blenheim palace, built as a reward for the Duke of Marl-

borough for his military service, as well as the new Hampton palace for the Hanovers and images of Windsor Forest.

*[View the images in the Artstor Digital Library](#)*

## 6. God, Science, and the Human

The nature of what makes us human and how science might be changing that definition are philosophical questions raised by Hooke's *Micrographia*, included in these images, and his early experiments with the microscope, as well as other experiments conducted in public by the Royal Society. The world of Enlightenment had its underside in doubt, mysticism, and a fascination with the cave, which Pope literalized in his grotto. Pope's *An Essay on Man* anchors this section, and images from his home supplement the images from the history of science.

*[View the images in the Artstor Digital Library](#)*

## 7. Women and Other Commodities

Women often took the fall for the emerging commodity culture as figures of vanity, driven by consumerism. Selections of verse from Jonathan Swift, responses by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and satires from Alexander Pope, especially *The Rape of the Lock*, give different takes on the place of women, while Eliza Haywood's *Fantomina* and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters from Turkey show how cultural events like masquerade balls or conventions like the veil allowed women to circulate and experience agency.

*[View the images in the Artstor Digital Library](#)*

## 8. Crime and the City

This two-week unit is built around George Lillo's *The London Merchant*, a popular staged morality tale about a young apprentice who falls to sexual temptation, and John Gay's ballad opera *The Beggar's Opera*, which reflected on the parallels between the underworld of highwaymen and gangs with the corrupt apparatus of prisons and courts. The images, many from William Hogarth, show the power of these stories as well as glimpses of urban London.

*[View the images in the Artstor Digital Library](#)*

## 9. Feeling, Virtue, and Middle-Class Respectability

By the time George II ascends to the throne in 1727, colonial ventures were pouring money into a "Georgian" middle-class Britain and a booming London. Early Methodism was a partial reply to a crisis of ethics in this modern world, as were novels like *Pamela*, which attempted to give some moral instruction through fiction. Sensibility, the notion that appropriate feelings of sympathy, dread, sorrow, and other affects proved one morally worthy, began to displace strictly hereditary notions of class identity, while the ideology of companionate marriage remained in tension

with marriage for money and the consolidation of these new estates, as *Marriage a la Mode* satirizes.

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