

Gender in Restoration and Early Eighteenth-Century Literature

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This curriculum guide takes as its central focus four frequently studied texts of Restoration and early eighteenth-century literature: William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, and Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. The selected texts represent three literary genres (drama, poetry, and prose), and are arranged chronologically to provide students insight into cultural constructions of gender and sexuality as they develop in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Students use images from the Artstor Digital Library to expand their knowledge of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century British history; to explore the ways in which visual artists treated concepts of gender and sexuality; and to develop a stronger understanding of Restoration and eighteenth-century gender norms.



WILLIAM HOGARTH, THE RAKE'S PROGRESS:
THE ORGY (THE TAVERN), 1735.

Image and original data provided by Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts
Archives/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.; artres.com

1. Setting the stage: the Restoration of 1660

In this section, students will learn about the historical upheavals of the English Civil Wars, Interregnum, and Restoration that pre-date our course texts. Images will be used to expand historical knowledge (with special emphasis placed on portraiture), acquaint students with major political figures of the period, and discuss seventeenth-century understandings of gender. Special attention will be paid to the court of King

Charles II, and the libertine rejection of Puritan values.

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

2. William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*

In this section, students will explore the world of the Restoration playhouse, and examine depictions of gender in Restoration comedy. Images will demonstrate the impact of the first actresses on the English stage, develop students' understanding of libertinism as a social and political construct, and provide insight into seventeenth-century medical technology and the ever-present threat of venereal disease.

[Go to image group A: the first English actresses and the Restoration stage](#)

[Go to image group B: Restoration libertinism](#)

[Go to image group C: Restoration medicine](#)

3. John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*

Images in this section will provide historical background on the Exclusion Crisis. Students will also compare the depiction of masculinity in Dryden's poem with that in visual treatments of the story of David and Absalom, and reflect on the role of women in anti-Catholic propaganda of the period.

[Go to image group A: understanding the Exclusion Crisis](#)

[Go to image group B: David and Absalom in art](#)

[Go to image group C: women and seventeenth-century anti-Catholic propaganda](#)

4. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

In this unit, students will reflect on the relationship between constructions of gender and constructions of race in the later seventeenth century, and discuss Behn's sense of self as a female author. Images will reflect long eighteenth-century fascination with harem life and develop student awareness of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century constructions of race.

[Go to image group A: harem imagery](#)

[Go to image group B: the female author](#)

[Go to image group C: race in the later seventeenth century](#)

5. Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*

In this unit, images will provide insight into the material culture of the early eighteenth-century, explaining what Belinda's toilette would actually look like. They will also demonstrate the contemporary understandings of sexual violence on which Pope puns.

[Go to image group A: material culture](#)

[Go to image group B: sexual violence in the long eighteenth century](#)