CHARLOTTE SUSSMAN

Eighteenth-Century English Literature

Cultural history of
LITERATURE

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1660–1789

CHARLOTTE SUSSMAN

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Two concurrent and unprecedented historical developments shaped eighteenth-century literature and culture. As print technology grew more sophisticated and literacy rates rose, hitherto unknown possibilities emerged for both public interaction and the private articulation of selfhood. The period between 1660 and 1789 can be understood, on one level, as a time when the relationships between persons and communities were being worked out afresh, finally coalescing into the unstable formations we now call "the reading public," "the nuclear family," and "individuality." At the same time, England's colonial expansion into the Americas, mercantile penetration of the Far East, and assimilation of the "internal colonies" of Scotland and Ireland resulted in extraordinary riches flowing into the metropolis, riches that fostered a variety of new urban entertainments and commodities, as well as an anxiety about England's susceptibility to luxury. This period, therefore, can also be understood as a time when England formed a new kind of national identity in the face of its international triumphs and defeats. "Britishness" was remade, during this era, in response to a variety of influences – from Scotland and Ireland, from Africa, from China, and from the New World.

  But how did these social, political, and economic developments shape a literary period? This book chooses to start its investigation of that subject forty years before the eighteenth century technically began, in 1660, and ends eleven years before it officially ended, in 1789. There is nothing unusual about that: these dates are the traditional bookends of the field known as "eighteenth-century literature," but it is worth pausing over this misalignment of literary era and chronological century for a moment, to

examine why these dates have been deemed so important. The first – 1660 – is often considered the moment when the Renaissance turned into the Enlightenment, and it marks a political event: the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy. After almost twenty years of civil war, England's period without a king, its "Interregnum," came to an end; for this reason, the years between 1660 and 1689 are called, by both literary scholars and historians, "the Restoration." Yet the date signals a shift in cultural practices as well. When Charles II ascended the throne, he reopened London's theaters, allowing actresses on stage for the first time. He also curtailed religious freedom, while at the same time loosening restrictions on scientific inquiry. And, he personally set the tone for an era of ribald humor, licentious depictions of sexual relations, and exuberant wit. The latter date – 1789 – is also both a political and cultural landmark. That year witnessed the beginning of the French Revolution – an event that had dramatic consequences for Britain's self-understanding; it also saw the publication of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, an event that heralded the dawn of a new literary period – the Romantic era. By covering only material written between these two dates, I am tacitly suggesting that eighteenth-century literature can be distinguished, on the one hand, from Renaissance or Early Modern literature, and, on the other, from Romantic-era literature.

Such distinctions will always be somewhat artificial. *Paradise Lost*, for instance, was written in 1667, but it is hardly ever considered a piece of "Restoration literature" (and is not in this book). Robert Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was published in 1786, but it is as often included in the canon of Romanticism as it is read in surveys of eighteenth-century literature (and it *is* included in this book). Literary periodization can be a tricky, if fascinating, issue. Nevertheless, I have organized this book around

important cultural changes that seem central and specific to Britain between 1660 and 1789. During this period, many of the things we take for granted about modern life suddenly took shape: the novel began to dominate the literary marketplace; people entertained the possibility that all human beings were created equal; philosophers proposed that reason could triumph over superstition; ministers became more powerful than kings; and the consumer emerged as a political force.

   Many important political events happened between those two dates as well. I have already noted the counterrevolution of 1660, but 28 years later counterrevolution shifted England's governmental structure yet again. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 deposed the autocratic James II (Charles II's brother, who had succeeded him) in favor of William of Orange, who was married to James's daughter Mary. Summarizing a complicated situation, we might say that William was brought in because he was willing to reign as a constitutional monarch, and because he supported Protestantism (in the form of the Church of England) – in contrast to the crypto-Catholic Stuarts. The Act of Settlement of 1701 ensured that all future monarchs of England would uphold these principles. When William died, James's other daughter, Anne, took the throne. She was the last Stuart to reign in England. At her death, the Act of Settlement necessitated bringing in the closest Protestant relation to succeed her. This turned out to be George of Hanover; and so for the rest of the eighteenth century England was ruled by Hanoverian kings. The first of these, George I (1714–1727), spoke little English, but his successors, George II (1727–1760) and George III (1760–1820), assimilated well to their adoptive country. They were innocuous enough kings – as uninterested in the flamboyant court life of the Stuarts as they were in the theory of divine right.

Their reigns influenced the flavor of later eighteenth-century literature in that most writers felt little interest in court patronage or influence, focusing their attention on the more vibrant arenas of the market, public entertainment, and parliamentary politics. Indeed, when one thinks of "politics" during most of the eighteenth century, one thinks of the newly complex interaction between parliament and the public sphere, rather than the struggle for monarchical patronage and the court rivalries that arguably characterized the Early Modern era and the Restoration. Even so, it is important to remember how small the franchise was throughout the eighteenth century – restricted to adult men who owned land worth at least 40 shillings (historians estimate that on the eve of the Great Reform Act of 1832, only 200,000 people in Great Britain could vote for their Member of Parliament). Thus, while the governmental structure of the later eighteenth century was remarkably stable, the first part of the period saw a remarkable number of reversals. It is useful to remember that Restoration writers like John Dryden, Katherine Philips, or Aphra Behn experienced three abrupt changes in regime during their lifetimes, and had to adapt their creative and political practices accordingly.

Although the British governmental system remained unchanged after 1688, it did not go unchallenged. Despite being deposed, the heirs to the Stuart monarchy did not simply disappear. On the contrary, they plotted in exile, and mounted two serious attempts to retake the throne during the eighteenth century – the so-called Jacobite revolts of 1715 and 1745. Both of these rebellions (or "risings" to their partisans) originated in Scotland, where sympathy for the Stuarts ran deep. In 1715, the "Old Pretender" (the former James II) conspired with the Earl of Mar to raise the Scottish clans. An army made up of these groups took the Scottish city of Perth, and marched into northern England. But the

support they expected from English sympathizers never materialized, and they were defeated by government forces at the Battle of Preston, the Old Pretender abandoning the effort long before its close. The second revolt, in 1745, was more serious. This one took place under the auspices of the "Young Pretender" – Charles Edward Stuart, or "Bonnie Prince Charlie." This time, Jacobite forces were able to take Edinburgh (though not the castle) after the success of the Battle of Preston Pans, and advanced to the town of Derby in northern England, only 125 miles from London itself. At this point, however, it became clear that the promised English support was, once again, not there, and that the capital was heavily defended. In the face of all this, Charles and his commanders made the strategic decision to retreat to Scotland. After a series of scattered skirmishes, the Jacobite forces were finally routed at the devastating battle of Culloden. Charles abandoned his remaining troops and escaped back to France, disguised as Flora McDonald's lady's maid. With this defeat, and the subsequent draconian punishments the English government imposed on the Highland clans, the Jacobite threat to the Hanoverian dynasty was effectively eliminated. Historians have argued recently that Jacobite sympathies were more widespread in England than the simple recitation of their defeats would indicate. But it is clear that most Britons valued the continued stability of the Hanoverian regime, whatever its faults, over the possibility of more political upheaval.

  Although they were primarily internal conflicts, the Jacobite revolts featured significant French involvement. Indeed, most of England's wars during the eighteenth century took place on a pan-European, and often transatlantic, stage, evidence of the "global" sweep of culture and politics during the era. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, Britain was embroiled in the War of Spanish Succession, joining with European powers, such as

the Dutch Republic and the Duchy of Savoy, to prevent the possible unification of Spain and France under a single Bourbon monarch. The war also played out on North American soil, as English colonists fought French colonists in "Queen Anne's War." Britain was on the winning side in the this war, and, importantly, was awarded the Assiento – a contract for a monopoly of the slavery trade to the New World – as part of the Treaty of Utrecht that ended it. A similarly sprawling war – called the Seven Years' War – reoccupied Britain during the middle years of the century (1756–1763). Once again, Britain and the European powers divided into sides – Prussia, Portugal and some of the smaller German states sided with Britain, while Austria, France, Russia, Sweden, Saxony and eventually Spain lined up against them. After a good deal of bloody conflict, the war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris, without much change in the existing power relations between nations. This war, too, had battlefields in North America where it is known as the French and Indian War (since it was fought by British colonists against the French and their Native American allies). The end of this war had significant consequences for Britain's empire. On the one hand, it ousted the French as one of the important colonial powers in the region (they gave up much of their American territory in the Treaty of Paris, along with some sugar producing colonies). On the other hand, the war was hugely expensive, and the British crown instituted a number of colonial tax policies in its wake in an attempt to get the colonies to pay for a war that had been fought to protect them. The war's aftermath left many British subjects wondering about the value of such expensive foreign conflicts and many British colonists enraged over the injustice of edicts like the Stamp Tax and the Tea Tax.

We might say then, that these earlier conflicts, though largely forgotten today, set the stage for the American War

of Independence (1776–1783) – the conflict that brought about the end of what has been called Britain's first empire. After years of growing unrest with Britain's policies with regard to its North American territories, the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Britain and their own status as a new nation – the United States of America – in 1776. France allied itself officially with the colonists in 1778, and the war came to an end – with Britain acknowledging the new country – in 1783. Britain still had colonial holdings in the Americas – the vast lands in Canada that were one of the "prizes" of the Seven Years' War, as well as the immensely profitable sugar colonies of the Caribbean – but the balance of power in the region had shifted for ever.

These military and imperial endeavors cannot be disentangled from the structural changes simultaneously occurring in Britain's economy. John Brewer has demonstrated that Britain was only able to wage these wars by drastically increasing taxation, developing new modes of deficit financing (i.e., a standing national debt), and, as a result, instituting a modern form of governmental bureaucracy. The resulting "fiscal-military state" was an important element of Britain's modernity.[1]

Central to these developments was the establishment of the Bank of England in 1694, which William III chartered to fund his war with France. The first national, central bank of its kind, the Bank of England functioned as the crown's banker and lender, allowing many of the developments Brewer describes.[2] The growing number of joint stock companies founded by royal charter during the Restoration also shaped the economic climate of the age, and provide further evidence of the "global" nature of the British economy during the eighteenth century. While England's first joint stock companies had been formed at the beginning of the seventeenth century (the Virginia Company, founded in 1606, for instance, helped make early

colonization of the New World possible), the Stuart monarchs issued charters for several important ones in the 1660s and 1670s: the Royal African Company, chartered in 1660, held the monopoly on Britain's slave trade until 1698 (when it shifted its attention to ivory and gold dust); and the Hudson Bay Company, chartered in 1670, controlled the extremely profitable fur trade in what is now Canada. Another of these entities, the South Sea Company, triggered one of the first modern financial crises in 1720. "The South Sea Bubble," as it was called, resulted from wildly inflated share prices, and a widespread interest in investing. When share prices plummeted, many, including the composer Handel, were ruined.

  Rather than simply moving through a chronological survey of works and authors, this book is organized into ten thematic chapters, each one dealing with a significant development in eighteenth-century English culture and its effect on literature. Each chapter, however, explores its theme chronologically in order to illustrate how the issue changed over time. The book begins with a survey of how England's national identity developed over the course of the eighteenth century. A central aspect of national life during the period was the rapid rise of print culture, something that facilitated the new concept of the public sphere, and the second chapter takes on these conjoined issues. A chapter on the city follows, detailing the significance of the rapid urbanization of England during this period; the following chapter investigates contrasting representations of the countryside. The fifth chapter again turns away from these broader social formations and towards the individual, examining changes in ideas of selfhood and personal identity. The eighteenth century has long been associated with increasing secularism, but the next chapter, on religious experience, makes a case for the centrality of spiritual beliefs during this time, even if their expression

differed from that of previous historical periods. The book then turns to questions of sex and gender roles in a discussion of representations of female sexuality and the emerging ideal of domesticity. A chapter on wit and sensibility examines two important aspects of the "history of manners" during the eighteenth century, charting representations of social interaction. The two final chapters turn towards the "peripheries" of British culture, arenas that may have been far removed from those who wrote about them, but were never marginal in terms of their significance for British culture and literature: one looks at the growing importance of trade and travel, both economically and in terms of the development of literary genres; a final chapter examines Britain's changing understanding of its involvement in slavery and colonialism during this time. Although these topics are separated into ten chapters, I do not want to give readers the impression that these themes are truly discrete. The massive changes that characterized the eighteenth century were interdependent. Thus, the transformation of London into a world city could not have happened without the influx of wealth from both England's far-flung trading empire and its sugar-producing colonies; nor could London have grown to the degree it did without the mass migration of people from the country to the city occasioned by the agricultural revolution and the enclosure movement. The idea of a public sphere is perhaps impossible without new ideas about individuality and identity.

To describe a book as a cultural history of English literature implies, none too subtly, that literature and the culture in which it is written interact on some fundamental level. Nevertheless, it is hard to explain exactly how that interaction works. We know that literature never simply reflects the world around it; and yet we also know that literature is never completely unmarked by the context in

which it is written. This book aims to give readers a broader sense of that context – to alert them to some of the social, economic, and cultural trends to which important works of eighteenth-century literature may have been responding: to urge them, to put it very simply, to see that literature as a window onto another time, one that allows us to see the vibrancy and tumult of the era not as something suspended in a kind of historical amber, but as something that can still touch us today. And yet, we need to acknowledge the implications of that metaphor: a window is always a precisely framed view of things, glimpsed through a particular texture of glass. Eighteenth-century literature is no camera's eye on the world around it. Each work shapes what we see; together they give us a plethora of distinctive, idiosyncratic, "interested" (to use the eighteenth-century terminology) accounts of what was happening around them. Indeed, many scholars have argued that literature shaped the culture around it as much as the culture shaped it. To mention just two such arguments discussed in the following chapters: "prospect poetry" may have taught its readers how to view landscapes as private property; and the domestic novel may have inculcated in its readers an idea of the proper relationship between the private and public spheres. Finally, we also need to remember that most eighteenth-century literature did not see itself as divorced from the project of cultural formation. It was far more comfortable than twentieth-century literature with its own didactic force – as we can see in works ranging from Pope's satires to Richardson's novels. Most writers did not view themselves as standing outside society, pursuing their own creative impulses, but as active, necessary spokespeople for their beliefs, there to encourage virtue and crack the whip on vice, or even to take a public stand on political issues, such as the slave trade. That sense of the intense social involvement of eighteenth-century literature is one of the

most important things I hope readers will take away from this book.

Of course, literature responds not only to the world around it, but also to its precursors. Eighteenth-century mock epic, for example, engages not only with the foibles and vices of eighteenth-century England, but with the complex legacy of the epic itself. As this book is primarily focused on eighteenth-century literature's relationship with its historical milieu, I have rarely had space to deal with the question of generic history, of the genealogy of form. Nevertheless, I would urge readers to be aware of eighteenth-century literature's consciousness of its place in that history, to note that some of its meaning, some of its resonance, derives from the transhistorical framework of genre.

The field of eighteenth-century studies has changed dramatically over the past twenty years as scholars have challenged the stability and certainties of the "Age of Reason." Always interdisciplinary, the field has become both more inclusive – of writing by women, the colonized, and the laboring classes – and more self-conscious of its own assumptions and methodologies. Even in the (admittedly lengthy amount of) time I have spent writing this book, avenues of inquiry have evolved. Readers have begun to look outside the traditional canon to less well-known writers. Perhaps most urgently, as I complete this book, readers have begun to explore the global, and more specifically, the transatlantic nature of eighteenth-century culture and literature.

This book aims to introduce readers to broad, ongoing literary and historical debates, and to the difficulties of understanding the relationship between literature and history. I hope that each chapter will give the reader a sense of what issues are at stake in the literary texts and suggest questions that productively might be asked about them. I hope it will foster discussion and analysis, rather than pat

understanding or facile explanations. Ideally, this book is not a package of information to be absorbed but rather an introduction that will show readers that eighteenth-century literature is a vibrant and complex field of research – one with which they can all engage critically.

Notes

1 John Brewer, *Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

2 See also Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

1

National Identity and a National Literature

Introduction

[S]hould it ever be the case of the English, in the progress of their refinements to arrive at the same polish that distinguishes the French, if we did not lose the *politesse de coeur*, which inclines men more to humane actions than courteous ones – we should at least lose that distinct variety and originality of character which distinguishes them, not only from each other, but from all the world besides … The English, like ancient medals, kept more apart, and passing but few people's hands, preserve the first sharpnesses that the fine hand of nature has given them – they are not so pleasant to feel – but in return, the legend is so visible, that at first look you see whose image and superscription they bear.

Laurence Sterne, 1768[1]

Just who were the British? Did they even exist?[2]

Speaking to a French acquaintance, Yorick, the protagonist of Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*, encapsulates some of the characteristics of English national identity during the eighteenth century. The English are unpolished but humane, sincere, and straightforward, if not always polite. Some of their qualities are paradoxical; the English are all original and various, distinguished not just from other nations, but from each other. Their very lack of a uniform character

constitutes their collective identity.[3] How difficult then to summarize a national identity that includes not just the English, but also the inhabitants of an ever-expanding Britain. (Indeed, Sterne himself was Irish, although Yorick is English.) If we look across the wide spectrum of the British population, can we find a uniform national identity? Or, conversely, can we say that there were no self-identified characteristics that unified the inhabitants of Great Britain and its settler colonies? These were questions that animated British writers during the eighteenth century, when the manifestations of national identity were a favorite subject of literature and the other arts.

National identity is a relatively new invention, a concept that may not have existed at all in Britain before the eighteenth century, or even during it. As Benedict Anderson has shown, national identity is an abstract idea. Men and women from diverse social backgrounds, who live in very different physical conditions, and who may even speak different languages, see themselves as belonging to an aggregate of others, most of whom they have never met. There is no necessary physical or linguistic marker of national identity; it is an identification based on internal self-conviction. Of course, national characteristics were assigned to the British by outside observers. But, to the British themselves, the definitions that mattered were self-conceived. In order to have national identity, they needed to image themselves as belonging to a nation, a culturally unified territory of long standing, rather than viewing themselves as simply the subject of monarchy or government.

Nationalism is often distinguished from patriotism, although the two are closely connected. Gerald Newman, for example, defines patriotism as "a mere primitive feeling of loyalty": "in some way connected with military matters, the patriotic sentiment should be regarded as primarily an

attachment to the country's prestige in a context of foreign relations; to its arms, flags and power in the international sphere." Patriotism thus involves a fervent, often aggressive belief in the superiority of one's country to all others. Nationalism, as Newman writes, must function "in peace as well as war."[4] The emotions of national identity are often organized around symbols – a flag, a song, or a particular national hero – although the meanings of those symbols may differ over time, or from person to person. The fact that both the British national anthem "God Save the King [or Queen]" and the great nationalist hymn "Rule Britannia" were composed during the eighteenth century is an index of how important the codification of national identity was during the period.

National identity presumes not simply the achievements of the nation in the present, but the persistence of the nation through time. National identity is thus always concerned with history. Yet, that history is perpetually under construction, both by the recovery of appropriate ancestors and exemplary moments for the nation, and by the forgetting of divisive or embarrassing people and events. As Ernest Renan argues, the nation exists by "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories," while at the same time, "forgetting, … even … historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation."[5] As Homi Bhabha points out about this formulation, "being obliged to forget becomes the basis of remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of contending and liberating forms of cultural identification."[6] Literature, as it offers compelling and coherent narratives of national endeavor, has a vital role in this continual, imaginative reconstruction of the nation's past and present.

During the eighteenth century, however, many obstacles stood in the way of Britons imagining themselves to be a

coherent nation. For one thing, the countries that made up Great Britain had either only recently been joined together politically or were in the slow process of political assimilation during the eighteenth century. England was formally joined to Wales in 1536, but union with Scotland took place only in 1707, and Scotland retained its own legal system and parliament throughout the period. Ireland's status was even more volatile and difficult to understand. A virtual colony through most of the century, only the Anglo-Irish had any political representation in the British parliament (most inhabitants of Ireland could not vote because they were Catholic). Ireland was granted its own parliament in 1785 ("Grattan's Parliament"), but this was dissolved at the Union of Ireland with the rest of Britain in 1801. During the period, many of the inhabitants of these regions still spoke their own languages: Welsh, Gaelic, or Scots Gaelic (Erse). Within England itself, other divides presented themselves, such as those between country and city, or between north and south. When Defoe wrote *The True-Born Englishman*, he emphasized these internal differences, as manifestations of Britain's history of conquest by foreign powers.

In eager rapes, and furious lust begot,

Betwixt a painted Briton and a Scot:

Whose gend'ring offspring quickly learnt to bow,

And yoke their heifers to the Roman plough:

From whence a mongrel half-bred race there came,

With neither name nor nation, speech nor fame

In whose hot veins now mixtures quickly ran,

Infus'd betwixt a Saxon and a Dane.

While their rank daughters, to their parents just,

Receiv'd all nations with promiscuous lust.

This nauseous brood directly did contain

The well-extracted blood of Englishmen … (ll. 281–92)

Culturally heterogeneous, the inhabitants of Great Britain had fewer reasons than one might expect to imagine themselves as part of the same nation.

In the face of all these divisions, however, members of these disparate groups still often thought of themselves as a unified whole, and viewed their country with pride and self-satisfaction. They celebrated their accomplishments, both man-made and geographical. Oliver Goldsmith declared, for example, in "The Comparative View of Races and Nations" (1760): "Hail Britain, happiest of countries! Happy in thy climate, fertility, situation and commerce; but still happier in the peculiar nature of thy laws and government."[7] Religion also played a significant role in British national identity, particularly after the Act of Settlement of 1701. This act excluded the heirs of the last Catholic king, James II, and stipulated that all future monarchs would be members of the Church of England. Thus Protestantism, particularly Anglicanism, became part of British national identity, both legally and culturally. Catholics and members of other religions, including Jews and dissenters from the Church of England, were denied most of the rights of other citizens throughout the period.[8] Both anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism played a significant role in defining Britishness.

National identity also manifested itself in a variety of physical practices, including food consumption. A character in Frances Burney's novel *The Wanderer* (1814), for instance, describes what he believes to be a gracious invitation to some new French acquaintances thus:

You won't think me wanting to my country, if for the honour of old England, I give these poor half-starved souls a hearty meal of good roast beef, with a bumper of Dorchester ale and Devonshire cyder? Things which I conclude they have never yet tasted from their birth to

this hour; their own washy diet of soup meager and salad, with which I would not fatten a sparrow, being what they are more naturally born to.[9]

The idea of roast beef as the national food had already been enshrined by Hogarth's engraving, "The Roast Beef of Old England." As both these examples make clear, national characteristics stood in the sharpest relief when juxtaposed to the shortcomings of other nations, especially France. In her influential study of national identity, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, Linda Colley argues strongly that the British "came to define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home, but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores."[10] The many wars between France and England during the century helped cement a sense of national unity.

And yet we should not assume that there was a single formation of national identity to which all Britons subscribed during the period. Indeed, the period was marked by conflict between different ideas of where national identity came from, and who deserved to belong to the nation. These conflicts played out around religion, as both the press and the government debated whether to extend the rights of British citizens to Catholics, Jews, and dissenters. Conflict also arose around the question of colonial expansion and the rights of the inhabitants of the British colonies. For most of the century, the growth of the British Empire was a source of national pride. At the end of the century, however, both the American War of Independence and the debates over slavery challenged belief in national coherence. As Kathleen Wilson argues:

Within Britain itself, from the perspective of the metropole, the Welsh, and, more gradually, the Scots become naturalized as British, the Irish, Jews and Africans perhaps never do; beyond the British isles, the claims of people of different races and cultures to British rights and

liberties were even more remote and contingent, and Britishness was conferred or denied not only in relation to the numbers of white British settlers in residence, but also to the degree of acceptance by colonial peoples of English hegemony and the legitimacy of British rule.[11]

Often, then, national identity can be viewed as more of a desire to belong to a national whole, a willful dismissing of the material, economic, and cultural divisions that separate the inhabitants of a nation, than as a natural, or organic formation.

This section is a survey of some of the literary projects that helped build national identity by offering visions of Britain that attempted to smooth over these divisions, or subsume them into representations of the nation with which Britons could identify with pride. Towards this end, literature worked to find a "common" language that all literate inhabitants might share.[12] The section also traces the changes in the sources writers sought for that identity – from classical analogies to indigenous roots. While writers of the neoclassical, or Augustan, era of the early eighteenth century looked for a definition of English greatness in comparison to the glories of the Roman Empire, later writers searched for a national identity that would be geographically rooted in British soil.

In this transposition of terms, an important event in literary culture occurred. Critics established English antiquity as the moment of literary achievement against which all subsequent writing would be measured. A national canon formed on the precedent example of the classical canon took shape. This canon was necessarily old and carried with it much of the aura of antiquity: difficulty, rarity, sublimity, masculinity.[13]

Thus, as the century ended, the project of formulating a national canon gave rise to a number of collections and