A COMPANION TO

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POETRY

EDITED BY **CHRISTINE GERRARD**

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A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry

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Notes on Contributors

Paul Baines is Professor of English at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of *The House of Forgery in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1999), *The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope* (2000), and *The Long Eighteenth Century* (2004), and co-editor of *Five Romantic Plays 1768–1821* (2000).

Ros Ballaster is a Fellow and Tutor in English at Mansfield College, Oxford University. She is the author of *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction 1674–1740* (1992) and *Fabulous Orients: Fictions of the East in England 1662–1785* (2005).

Richard Bradford is Professor of English at the University of Ulster. His most recent books include *A Complete Critical Guide to John Milton* (2001), *Lucky Him: The Life of Kingsley Amis* (2001), *Augustan Measures: Restoration and Eighteenth Century Writings on Prosody and Metre* (2002), and *First Boredom Then Fear: The Life of Philip Larkin* (2005).

Gerard Carruthers is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is author of *Robert Burns* (2005) and co-editor of a critical edition of Walter Scott's *Reliquiae Trotcosienses* (2004) and *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* (2003).

Caryn Chaden is Associate Professor of English and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. She is the author of articles on Samuel Richardson, Oliver Goldsmith, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, and Mary Leapor.

Rachel Crawford is Professor of English at the University of San Francisco. She is author of *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape 1700–1830* (2002). Her current research project focuses on the function of Siam as Place in the British imagination.

Markman Ellis is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Studies in the School of English and Drama at Queen Mary, University of London. He is the author of *The Politics of Sensibility* (1996), *The History of Gothic Fiction* (2000), and *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (2004), and is co-editor with Brycchan Carey and Sara Salih of *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition* (2004).

David Fairer is Professor of Eighteenth-Century English Literature at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Pope's Imagination* (1984), *The Poetry of Alexander Pope* (1989), and *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century* (2003). He is the editor of *Pope: New Contexts* (1990), *The Correspondence of Thomas Warton* (1995), and, with Christine Gerrard, *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (1999; 2nd edn. 2004).

Christine Gerrard is Fellow and Tutor in English at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University. She is the author of *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725–1742* (1994) and *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector, 1685–1750* (2003). She is the co-editor, with David Fairer, of *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (1999; 2nd edn., 2004).

John Goodridge is Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University. He is the author of *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (1995) and general editor of the Pickering & Chatto series "English Labouring Class Poets."

Mina Gorji is a Research Fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford University. She is writing a study of John Clare and vernacular poetry and editing a collection of essays for Routledge, *Rude Britannia*, on the cultures and values of rudeness in modern Britain.

Charlotte Grant was Senior Research Fellow at the AHRC Centre for the Study of the Domestic Interior. She is co-editor with Elizabeth Eger, Clíona O' Gallchoir, and Penny Warburton of *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere 1700–1830* (2001), editor of *Flora* (2003), and co-editor with Jeremy Aynsley of *Imagined Interiors* (2006).

Isobel Grundy is a Professor Emerita at the University of Alberta. She is author of *Samuel Johnson and the Scale of Greatness* (1986), *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Comet of the Enlightenment* (1999), and (with Virginia Blain and Patricia Clements) *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1990). She is a joint author of the forthcoming electronic history of women's writing in the British Isles produced by the Orlando Project (director: Patricia Clements).

Brean Hammond is Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Nottingham. He is author of *Professional Imaginative Writing in England 1670–1740* (1997) and *Making the Novel* (2006). He is the author of several books and many articles on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writing.

David Hopkins is Professor of English Literature at the University of Bristol. Among his recent publications are (as author) *Writers and Their Work: John Dryden* (2004) and (as editor), with Paul Hammond, volume 5 of *The Poems of John Dryden* (2005) and, with Stuart Gillespie, volume 3 of *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English* (2005).

Shaun Irlam is Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature of the University at Buffalo, where he has taught since 1993. His research and teaching focus on the role of colonialism and empire in literary and intellectual discourses of the eighteenth century. His book *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in Eighteenth-Century Britain* was published in 1999. He also teaches postcolonial theory and literatures with specific emphasis on Africa.

Freya Johnston belongs to the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Warwick. She is author of *Samuel Johnson and the Art of Sinking, 1709–1791* (2005).

Robert Jones is a Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Literature at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (1998). More recent articles have explored Anna Laetitia Barbauld and James Boswell, Thomas Chatterton, Joshua Reynolds, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. He is currently working on a book on British responses to the American War of Independence.

George Justice is Associate Professor of English at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He is the author of *The Manufacturers of Literature: Writing and the Literary Marketplace in Eighteenth-Century England* (2002) and co-editor, with Nathan Tinker, of *Women's Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England, 1550–1800* (2002).

Suvir Kaul is Professor of English and Director of the South Asia Center at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire* (2000) and co-editor, with Ania Loomba, Antoinette Burton, Matti Bunzl, and Jed Esty, of *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (2005).

Bridget Keegan is Professor of English at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. She is the editor of *Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. 2: *1740–1780* (2003) and, with James McKusick, *Literature and Nature: Four Centuries of British and American Nature Writing* (2000). She has published numerous articles on British laboring-class poetry, in particular laboring-class writing about nature.

Jennifer Keith is Associate Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is the author of *Poetry and the Feminine from Behn to Cowper* (2005) and essays on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British poetry.

Kathryn R. King is Professor of English at the University of Montevallo in Alabama. She is author of *Jane Barker, Exile* (2000) and co-editor, with Alex Pettit, of Eliza Haywood's *The Female Spectator* (2001), and has published widely on women writers of the early eighteenth century. She is currently at work on a critical biography of Eliza Haywood.

Margaret M. Koehler is Assistant Professor of English at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. She is working on a book about personification in Restoration and early eighteenth-century poetry.

Clark Lawlor is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle upon Tyne. He is the author of *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease* (forthcoming 2006) and editor of *Sciences of Body and Mind* (2003), volume 2 in *Literature and Science, 1660–1834*, gen. ed. Judith Hawley (8 vols.), and has written various articles on literature and science in the long eighteenth century.

Emma Mason is a Lecturer in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (2006) and, with Mark Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (2006). She is also a co-editor of two forthcoming volumes on biblical hermeneutics: *The Oxford Handbook to the Reception History of the Bible* and Blackwell's *Companion to the Bible in English Literature*.

John D. Morillo is Associate Professor of English at North Carolina State University, Raleigh. He is the author of *Uneasy Feelings: Literature, the Passions, and Class from Neoclassicism to Romanticism* (2001), as well as articles on Dennis, Pope, Shelley, Southey, and Scott. He served as Director of Graduate Studies in English from 2001 to 2005.

Chris Mounsey is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Winchester. Chris has written and taught extensively on eighteenth-century literature. Book publications include *Christopher Smart: Clown of God* and *Presenting Gender: Changing Sex in Early-Modern Culture*, both from Bucknell University Press. Chris is editor of the *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* for the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and also organizer of its annual conference.

Bill Overton is Professor of Literary Studies at Loughborough University. He is the author of *The Novel of Female Adultery: Love and Gender in Continental European Fiction 1830–1900* (1996) and *Fictions of Female Adultery: Theories and Circumtexts 1684–1890* (2002), and the editor of *A Letter to My Love: Love Poems by Women First Published in the Barbados Gazette, 1731–1737* (2001). He is currently completing a book-length study of the eighteenth-century British verse epistle.

Juan Christian Pellicer is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Oslo. Since completing a doctoral thesis on John Philips (2002) he has published articles on eighteenth-century georgic and related topics, and currently contributes the section on eighteenth-century poetry in *The Year's Work in English Studies*. With John Goodridge he has edited Philips's *Cyder* (2001), and a further collaborative edition of John Dyer's *The Fleece* is now in preparation. A chapter on pastoral and georgic 1660–1790 for the forthcoming *Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature* is also in progress.

Murray Pittock is Professor of Scottish and Romantic Literature and Head of the Department of English and American Studies at Manchester University. His main publications are in the area of nationality and identity, and include *A New History of Scotland* (2003), *Scottish Nationality* (2001), *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (1999), *Jacobitism* (1998), *Inventing and Resisting Britain* (1997), *The Myth of the Jacobite Clans* (1995, 1999), *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (1994), and *The Invention of Scotland* (1991). He is currently working on a number of projects, including *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, *James Boswell: The Political Correspondence*, and *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe* for the British Academy's *Reception of British Authors* project.

Adam Rounce is Research Fellow, at Keele University, for the Cambridge edition of the works of Jonathan Swift. He has edited *Alexander Pope and His Critics* (2003) and *The Selected Poetry of Charles Churchill* (2003), and published articles on Dryden, Johnson, Akenside, Cowper, Warburton, and Churchill. He is currently writing a book on the idea of literary failure in the eighteenth century.

Valerie Rumbold is Reader in English Literature at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *Women's Place in Pope's World* (1989) and editor of *Alexander Pope: The Dunciad in Four Books* (1999). She is one of the editors of the forthcoming Pope in the Longman Annotated English Poets series, and is currently editing the volume *Parodies, Hoaxes, Treatises, Mock-Treatises* for the Cambridge edition of the works of Jonathan Swift.

John Sitter is the Notre Dame Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame. His books include *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth Century England* (1982), *Arguments of Augustan Wit* (1991), and, as editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (2001).

Richard Terry is Professor of English Literature at the University of Sunderland. He is the author of *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past 1660–1781* (2001) and *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper: An English Genre and Discourse* (2005), as well as numerous essays on eighteenth-century topics. He is currently working on the practice and allegation of plagiarism during the long eighteenth century.

David F. Venturo, Professor of English at The College of New Jersey, is author of *Johnson the Poet: The Poetic Career of Samuel Johnson* (1999) and editor of *The School of the Eucharist. With a Preface Concerning the Testimony of Miracles* (forthcoming), and has written extensively on British literature and culture, 1640–1830. He helps to edit *ECCB. The Eighteenth Century: A Current Bibliography* and *The Scriblerian*, and is writing a book, *Fall'n on Evil Days: Alienation and Protest in Milton, Dryden, and Swift.*

Abigail Williams is a Fellow and Tutor in English at St Peter's College, Oxford University. She is the author of *Poetry and the Creation of a Whig Literary Culture, 1681–1715* (2005) and is currently working on John Dryden's *Fables* and editing Jonathan Swift's *Journal to Stella* for the new Cambridge edition of the works of Jonathan Swift.

Carolyn D. Williams is a Senior Lecturer in the School of English and American Literature at the University of Reading. She is the author of *Pope, Homer and Manliness* (1993) and numerous publications on eighteenth-century life and literature. Her broader interests include gender, medical history, and historical novels.

Thomas Woodman is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Reading. He is the author of *Poetry and Politeness in the Age of Pope* (1989) and *A Preface to Samuel Johnson* (1993) and editor of *Early Romantics: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth* (1998).

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C.G.

Introduction

Christine Gerrard

The landscape of eighteenth-century poetry has changed dramatically over recent decades. In the late 1970s it was not uncommon for undergraduates to advance week by week through a course represented, typically, by Dryden, Pope, Swift, Gay, and Johnson. Many students at that time – myself included – found something antipathetic in an "Augustan" canon that seemed overwhelmingly male, metropolitan, neoclassical, and conservative. Yet already there were hints of alternative perspectives. Charles Peake's evocatively titled anthology *Poetry of the Landscape and the Night* (1967) offered a glimpse of a different kind of eighteenth-century poetry – meditative, melancholic, descriptive, and subjective – while Pat Rogers's *Grub Street* (1972) reconstructed a refreshingly vulgar and material counter-culture to correctness and couplets. Views multiplied further in the 1980s, when the *New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (1984) and *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (1989), the fruits of Roger Lonsdale's inexhaustible efforts to recover from oblivion forgotten poetic voices – the voices of laborers, dissenters, provincial writers, and, most importantly, women – powerfully reinforced a growing awareness of the plurality and diversity of eighteenth-century poetic culture. The second of these anthologies showed for the first time the range and variety of poetry written by women during this period: women inspired and incensed in equal measure by their male models (primarily Pope and Swift). *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology* (1999, 2004), which I was fortunate enough to co-edit with David Fairer, attempted to recreate, through careful juxtapositions, a contemporary sense of male and female voices in poetic dialogue. Since the early 1980s editors, biographers, and critics have made steady progress toward placing the work of such important female poets as Jane Barker, Mary Chudleigh, Anne Finch, Mary Collier, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Ann Yearsley in the public domain. It is a testament to the efforts of such dedicated scholars as Carol Barash, Margaret Ezell, Kathryn King, and Isobel Grundy that university English departments now frequently, even routinely, incorporate women poets of this period within their syllabuses.

These recent acts of literary retrieval have re-emphasized the relationship between text and print culture. A sequence of distinguished studies, including Margaret Ezell's *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (1999) and James McLaverty's *Pope*, *Print*, *and Meaning* (2001), have helped make readers newly aware of the processes by which texts were produced, assembled, and disseminated, ranging from an unexpectedly tenacious côterie manuscript culture to the popular marketplace for poetry in periodicals such as Edmund Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*. Brean Hammond's lively *The Rise of Professional Imaginative Writing* (1997) explored the complex interdependencies of "high" and "low" literary culture. The boundary between a dominant literary culture and its subculture – charted in Rogers's *Grub Street* – was now seen to be unstable and fluctuating. In 1972 Rogers had affirmed Pope's aesthetic superiority to the "dunces" whom his *Dunciad* so confidently dismissed. Recent critical work, particularly on the Whig literary tradition, has revealed how the aesthetic value judgments we have inherited from Pope and his literary associates – judgments uncannily persistent in shaping later generations' perceptions of the period – were driven as much by political as by literary bias.

Some of the liveliest and most energetic work on eighteenth-century poetry has cut across, dismantled, and re-assembled in new and thought-provoking ways the poetic texts and trends of the period. Alongside the single-author study have flourished works such as Eric Rothstein's *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (1981) and Margaret Doody's *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (1982), which helped transform eighteenth-century poetry from an orderly, harmonious, and slightly dull field for humanist enquiry into a constantly surprising, sometimes unstable world in which such preoccupations as pain, pleasure, power, and metamorphosis exerted a powerful hold on the poetic imagination. David Fairer's wide-ranging *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century* (2003) similarly resists and counters rigid classifications, including the vexed issue of "Augustan" and "Pre-Romantic," by evincing evidence in the first three decades of the century of an early eighteenth-century romantic mode. The plethora of recent critical studies that have enriched and complicated the traditional equation of eighteenth-century poetry with political satire by emphasizing the political inflections of other genres and modes (landscape poetry, the ode, the epic, and the lyric) have also served to loosen the bonds around the eighteenth century as a "period." Dryden's artificially buoyant lines from the *Secular Masque*, written a month before his death in 1700 – "'Tis well the old age is past, 'tis time to begin the new" – might serve to suggest, like the ill-fated millennium celebrations of the year 2000, that any attempt to construct a period boundary along a century divide is bound to fail. As chapter 1 will show, poets of the first three decades of the new century carried with them the legacy of the post-Civil War and Restoration years in their shared preoccupation with party politics and dynastic uncertainties. The genres and forms that came to dominate verse in the middle and later century – the ode, and especially Miltonic blank verse as it evolved through Thomson's *The Seasons*, Young's *Night Thoughts*, Cowper's *The Task*, and eventually Wordsworth's *The Prelude* – derive from the generic experimentation of the Civil War period. The preoccupation with

the sublime, as Shaun Irlam shows (chapter 37), stretches back into the seventeenth century and forward into the nineteenth. Poets at both ends of the century were capable of producing public poetry and political satire. As Carolyn Williams shows in chapter 35, the century began, as it would end, with an attempt to recuperate the antiquarian past – in Dryden's 1700 adaptation of "Palamon and Arcite," a chivalric epic from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

The essays in this *Companion* are arranged in four sections. The first offers a series of contexts – aesthetic, cultural, economic, political, and religious – for reading and understanding eighteenth-century poetry. The second section contains a sequence of close readings of individual texts, pairs of texts, or groups of texts. The choice of these has been determined in part by their ready availability to readers of *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, to which this *Companion* is designed to be what its title proclaims. But the texts in "Readings" go far beyond those included in the *Anthology*, encouraging readers to range more widely. The third section pays attention to a number of different genres and modes that recur through the eighteenth century. The final section, "Themes and Debates," picks up a number of strands of argument and investigation that run through current critical work on eighteenth-century poetry, such as Whig and Tory poetics, the role of the sublime, the self-taught tradition, the constructions of femininity, and the uses of the past.

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PART I
Contexts and Perspectives

1
Poetry, Politics, and the Rise of Party

Christine Gerrard

Party politics and dynastic uncertainty shaped the lives of writers born in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Wars. For poets such as Alexander Pope, Anne Finch, Jonathan Swift, and Matthew Prior, a sense of the political was thus deeply ingrained. Swift, born in 1667 and dying in 1745, lived through the reigns of no fewer than six English monarchs – Charles II, James II, William III, Queen Anne, George I, and George II. On at least two occasions he had a price on his head for his interventions in English and Irish politics. Alexander Pope, born in 1688, the year in which the Dutch Protestant William of Orange's bloodless coup ousted the Catholic James II from the English throne, suffered the direct consequences of that so-called "Glorious Revolution" – the punitive Williamite legislation against Catholics affecting rights of residence, worship, and university education. So did Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661–1720), who lost her Court post serving James's wife Mary of Modena: as non-jurors (those who refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the new regime), she and her husband went on the run, and her husband was arrested for Jacobitism. Matthew Prior (1664–1721), the most important English poet in the decade following Dryden's death in 1700, enjoyed a distinguished diplomatic career under William and his successor Queen Anne. Yet at George I's accession in 1714, Prior, like many of his Tory friends, faced a vendetta from the new Whig administration: refusing to implicate his friends in allegations of support for the Stuart dynasty, he was impeached and spent two years in close custody.

Yet if political events changed the lives of the poets, poets saw themselves as agents of political change. Poetry of all kinds – highbrow and lowbrow, satires, odes, panegyrics, ballads – proliferated during the restored monarchy of Charles II, especially after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1679. The growing prominence of the poet as political commentator, satirist, propagandist, and panegyrist was both a cause and a consequence of the inexorable rise of party politics during Charles's reign. During the 1670s a two-party political system developed from the clashes between Charles and his political supporters on the one hand and, on the other, the parliamentary pressure

group led by the first Earl of Shaftesbury, driven by opposition to the succession of Charles's Catholic brother James. During the "Exclusion Crisis" this pressure group – soon to be known as the Whigs – pushed for legislation to exclude James from the throne. Loyal supporters of the King's cause earned themselves the name of Tories. Both Whig and Tory were originally terms of abuse derived from the Celtic fringe. Like many of the other political terms prevalent in this period – Court, Country, Patriot – they were subject to constant scrutiny, debate, and redefinition. The intensity of political engagement that characterizes poetry of the period 1660–1750 testifies to the growing confidence felt by male and female poets alike in their right to voice political opinions and their ability to change the course of history: a sense of empowerment which was itself a product of the loosening of social hierarchies in the decades after the Civil Wars. Poets between Dryden in the 1660s and Pope in the 1730s – and even as late as Charles Churchill in the 1760s – helped alter the direction of politics, whether it meant (as in Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* of 1681) discrediting the nascent Whig party and affirming Stuart legitimacy, popularizing the new Hanoverian dynasty at German George I's accession in 1714, or compelling the first minister Robert Walpole to declare war against Spain in 1739. To poets of this period, the modern separation of the political and the aesthetic realms would have seemed entirely alien.

Critical Debates

Scholarship of the past three decades has enriched and complicated our understanding of eighteenth-century political history. Debates that began in the 1980s and still reverberate today have challenged traditional preconceptions of the eighteenth century as a period of stability and complacency. Linda Colley's pioneering work on Britishness, which stimulated wide-ranging discussions of national identity, examined the ways in which the 1707 Act of Union forged a sense of nationhood in which distinctive Scottish, Welsh, and Irish allegiances were subsumed under a larger sense of Britain as a Protestant nation pitted against Catholic France (Colley 1992). Britain's growing confidence as an imperial power has been the subject of some broad-ranging studies of empire [*see* ch. 2, "Poetry, Politics, and Empire"]. Revisionist historians such as J. C. D. Clark, debating the nature and impact of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, have argued controversially that England remained a static, confessional state, still dominated by the Anglican Church and not altered substantially by secularization, urbanization, or proto-democratic parliamentary change (Clark 1985). Both revisionist historians and historians of nationhood placed a renewed emphasis, for different ends, on the importance of monarchy: its rituals, its court culture, its literature. The tradition of Tory political satire centered on Dryden, Pope, Swift, and Johnson was reanimated by debates over the extent to which any or all of these writers remained secretly committed to the exiled House of Stuart. Jacobitism, once dismissed as an antiquarian idyll, was again taken seriously by some (not all) historians and literary scholars. Critics such as Howard Erskine-Hill and Murray Pittock mined the writ-

ings of all the major male poets in the canon for evidence of Jacobite innuendo and symbolism (Erskine-Hill 1981–2, 1982, 1984, 1996; Pittock 1994). Other critics compensated for the comparative neglect of the literary culture of the Whig party which dominated British political life between 1688 and 1760 (Womersley 1997, 2005; Williams 2005). Their work established the contours of a modern, forward-looking Whig cultural agenda embracing piety, politeness, and patriotism. Poets such as Richard Blackmore, Thomas Tickell, and Ambrose Philips, familiar as the butt of Pope's satire on "dull" writers, are now seen to have participated in, and even prompted, a dialectic with Tory poetry and criticism.

Pioneering work by critics such as Carol Barash, Kathryn King, and Sarah Prescott has enlarged the field of enquiry to include the work of women poets, once entirely absent from critical accounts of poetry and politics in this period. Barash's seminal work on late seventeenth-century women poets – Aphra Behn, Katherine Phillips, Mary Chudleigh, Jane Barker, and Anne Finch – emphasized their Tory, royalist, and Jacobite affiliations and their associations with queens and consorts such as Mary of Modena and Queen Anne (Barash 1996). More recent work has begun to reconstruct the lives and works of female poets writing in the Whig tradition. As Prescott has shown (2005b), Elizabeth Singer Rowe and Susannah Centlivre greeted the new order under William III with enthusiasm, advancing a cultural and political agenda that was essentially Protestant, militaristic, and modern. Centlivre, a firm supporter of the Hanoverian succession, subsequently produced some stringently anti-Jacobite verse. George II's intellectual and ambitious consort, Caroline of Anspach, became a muse figure for male and female Protestant Whig poets as well as the satiric butt of male Tory satirists. As King asserts, women poets participated in a wide range of different political discourses – republican, Whig, Tory, Jacobite – and a range of genres: satire, pamphlets, panegyrics, and odes (King 2003).

Many of the subsequent essays in this volume – notably those by Suvir Kaul (ch. 2, "Poetry, Politics, and Empire"), John Morillo (ch. 5, "Poetic Enthusiasm"), Brean Hammond (ch. 27, "Verse Satire"), Margaret Koehler (ch. 28, "The Ode"), Juan Pellicer (ch. 29, "The Georgic"), Abigail Williams (ch. 32, "Whig and Tory Poetics"), and Gerard Carruthers (ch. 41, "Poetry Beyond the English Borders") – show how the relationship between poetry and politics in this period informs genre and permeates, even generates, aesthetic debate. A number of essays in the "Readings" section (Part II) place individual texts or pairs of texts in their context and offer a detailed interpretation of their political implications. The present essay is designed primarily as an introduction to such debates by offering a chronological discussion of poetic responses to major political events and concerns in the period covered by this volume.

The Rage of Party under Queen Anne

Although Matthew Prior heralded the year 1700 with his optimistic panegyric *Carmen Seculare*, dynastic uncertainty underscored the advent of the new century.

Mary Chudleigh's "On the Death of his Highness the Duke of Glocester" mourned the loss that July of eleven-year-old William, last surviving child of Princess Anne, heir to the throne. The child's death also buried Tory hopes for a continuation of a Protestant Stuart dynasty. The following year, 1701, the Act of Settlement decreed that in default of issue to either William or Anne, the crown would pass to Sophia, Electress of Hanover, and to "the heirs of her body being Protestants." Anne succeeded William in 1702 following his sudden death by a fall from his horse (an act of God, according to some Jacobites). The text from Isaiah 49: 23 delivered at her coronation – "Kings shall be thy nursing-fathers, and their queens thy nursing-mothers" – threw into sharp relief the tragic facts of Anne's maternal failure (seventeen pregnancies and five births) and her increasingly poor health. Finch's "A Pindarick Poem Upon the Hurricane" (Fairer and Gerrard 2004: 26–33), written shortly after the Great Storm of 1703 caused devastation across the south of England, registers a profound sense of unease and dislocation. Unlike her better-known "Nocturnal Rêverie," "Upon the Hurricane" is a bold public poem – a Pindaric ode – which draws analogies between the natural and political spheres to meditate on the upheavals of post-Civil War England. Finch's storm-damaged landscape subverts the idealized emblematic order of traditional loco-descriptive poems such as Denham's *Cooper's Hill* and Pope's *Windsor-Forest*, "Where Order in Variety we see, / And where, tho' all things differ, all agree" (ll. 15–16). The lofty pine tree, destined for British naval service, and the oak (symbol of Stuart monarchy), "so often storm'd," both fall victim to apocalyptic violence. Finch's poem, echoing the Puritan providentialism that sees the hand of God, the "Great Disposer," at work everywhere, depicts the hurricane as the "Scourge" of the "Great Jehova" (l. 110).Yet exactly who or what is being punished? In lines 96–111 Finch cautiously ventures ("we think") that the death from a collapsing chimney of Richard Kidder, new Bishop of Bath and Wells (a recent Whig replacement for the popular non-juror Thomas Ken), may have been a divine judgment. Yet the poem refuses to advance a partisan reading. It contains teasing fragments of seventeenth-century political thought (echoes of Dryden's and Rochester's Hobbesian vision of mankind naturally drawn to "wild Confusion" and "lawless Liberty" in pursuit of their "Fellow-Brutes"), and draws parallels between the destructive forces of the storm and the destructive forces of war (the thunder resembles "The Soldier's threatning Drum," l. 141). Yet Finch's hurricane transcends the petty world of party politics, placing it in perspective: "Nor WHIG, nor TORY now the rash Contender calls" (l. 177). It is an idea that Swift was later to echo in his mock-georgic "Description of a City Shower" (1710), written soon after the Tory election victory of that year. Swift shrinks Finch's hurricane to a London downpour; in a world more urbane and less violent than Finch's, social etiquette and dry clothes dictate a political truce: "Triumphant Tories, and desponding Whigs, / Forget their feuds, and join to save their Wigs" (Fairer and Gerrard 2004: 76).

Three major factors sharpened Whig/Tory divisions under Queen Anne: religious controversy, dynastic politics, and war. The close relationship between the Tory party and the High Church was cemented by the trial in 1709 of the High Church Tory

Dr. Henry Sacheverell for preaching a sermon in St. Paul's implying that the Church was unsafe in the hands of the Whig administration. The trial rebounded on the government – support for Sacheverell was so strong that a Tory ministry was elected on its back which lasted from 1710 to Queen Anne's death in 1714. The War of the Spanish Succession, distinguished by the brilliant continental military victories of the Queen's general John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, remained a potent theme for Whig poets, who fanned the flames of patriotic fervor in panegyrics celebrating the slaughter of enemy troops amid "rivers of blood." Addison's *The Campaign* (1705), apotheosizing Marlborough in the thick of battle (he "Rides in the whirl-wind, and directs the storm," like the God of Psalm 104), represented a new mode of Whig verse – biblical rather than classical, Miltonically sublime, a self-confident affirmation of British national destiny. Yet by 1710 high taxation and national debt had left many people war-weary. Jonathan Swift's brilliant propaganda exercises for the Tories discredited the "Junto" of Whigs around Marlborough and Godolphin by accusing them of prolonging the war for their own financial gain. His famous *Examiner* essay 16 (Nov. 23, 1710), inspired by Marlborough's complaints of ingratitude for his military services, juxtaposed in account-book style "A Bill of ROMAN Gratitude" (a crown of laurels, a statue, a trophy, and so forth) with "A Bill of BRITISH Ingratitude" (Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, "Employments," "Pictures," "Jewels"). In his suggestively titled "Sid Hamet: or the Magician's Rod" (1710), a satire on the former Treasurer Sidney Godolphin, Swift gave a further spin to the "Tory myth," prevalent since Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, of the Whig leaders as duplicitous magicians deceiving an unwary public – a myth that was to reach its apogee in 1730s opposition satires on Robert Walpole.

Party politics polarized literary affiliations during the last four years of Anne's reign. Political friendships were formalized by the creation of partisan literary clubs: Addison's "Little Senate" of Whigs met at Button's coffee-house; the Tory wits, who eventually formed the Scriblerus Club, at Will's. Pope's former friendships with leading Whig writers came to an abrupt end over the so-called "pastoral controversy," which boosted sales of Ambrose Philips's assertively Whig pastorals rather than Pope's apolitical (perhaps quietly Jacobite) pastorals published in the same volume of Tonson's *Miscellanies* in 1709. The same quality also permeates Pope's *Windsor-Forest*, written to celebrate the Treaty of Utrecht concluded in April 1713. The peace itself became a site of literary partisan conflict (Williams 2005; Rogers 2005). Tory diplomacy sealed the peace, but Whig poets claimed the war's victorious conclusion as their party's unique achievement. The Whig Thomas Tickell's best-selling *The Prospect of Peace* celebrates the war itself as much as the conclusion to hostilities, whereas Pope's poem, with its emphases on the arts of peace and its displacement of real political events by mythological episodes such as the rape of Lodona and the leisure pursuit of hunting, locates the peace in a larger humanist meditation on war, peace, and man's irrepressibly violent energies. It is only the poem's stubbornly intractable assertion of a dynastic register – "And Peace and Plenty tell, a STUART reigns" (l. 42) – that gives the poem an unapologetically Tory Jacobite edge.

Hanoverians and Whigs

In the last years of Anne's reign Tories were forced to face the unpalatable prospect of a Whig-friendly German monarchy. The Whigs had jockeyed for favor with the Hanoverian family through diplomatic missions to Herrenhausen: both Ambrose Philips and his patron the Earl of Dorset belonged to the Whig "Hanover Club." Even John Gay, Pope's and Swift's impecunious friend, traveling as secretary to Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, paid court to the incoming royal family in hopes of poetic preferment. Within a few weeks of Anne's death on 1 August 1714 the die was cast. George I formed his new ministry almost entirely of Whigs. Lord Bolingbroke, who only the week before Anne's death had emerged victorious from his party leadership struggle with his rival Robert Harley, fled to the "Pretender" James's service in France – where he remained, proscribed and stripped of his title, for the next decade. Harley was sent to the Tower and Prior was impeached. Many Tory poets suffered a profound sense of loss and displacement. Swift and Parnell, two Irish members of the Scriblerus Club, returned to Ireland. Pope kept out of politics virtually altogether for another fourteen years, most of which were spent in the enterprise which was to create the foundation for his financial and hence political independence – his lucrative subscription edition of his Homer translations.

However, many other poets, of all political stripes rushed to greet the new monarchy in enthusiastic verse. There were at least fifty panegyrics published on George I's accession, for which the ground had been laid by the Act of Settlement thirteen years earlier and which proved less fraught by interpretative difficulties than William III's seizure of the throne from James II. Despite some anxieties about another "foreign" master, the accession of George I, with his ready-made Protestant dynasty (by 1714 he was already a grandfather of four) secured the future of Protestantism in Britain. If the Whigs under William and Anne celebrated a militant and militaristic patriotism, then Whig poets under the Hanoverians founded their sense of patriotism on peace, liberty, and prosperity, exemplified by Centlivre's *Poem. Humbly Presented to His most Sacred Majesty George, King of Great Britain, France and Ireland. Upon His Accession to the Throne* [*see* ch. 2, "Poetry, Politics, and Empire"].

The Rise of Patriotism

The accession of the Hanoverians effectively marked the start of a half-century of Whig rule in which a succession of Whig ministers (most famously Robert Walpole) consolidated Whig oligarchy through measures such as the Septennial Act of 1716, which stipulated a seven-year interval between elections. Yet the Whigs did not enjoy power unopposed. It is from the seeds of resistance and opposition to Whig rule – by 1739, an overwhelming clamor – that some of the liveliest and most imaginative political poetry of the eighteenth century emerged. As early as 1720, the year in which