The Restoration & The Turn to Prose

An Epistemological Shift (1660 – 1700)



ENGL 201 B Lecture 6 Companion

Epistemological Whiteboard

The Institutional Shift

What changed when Charles II returned?



The Aesthetic Shift

How did theater, poetry, and prose reflect a new age of wit and skepticism?

Charles II + 1660 = Δ English Literature

The Demographic Shift

How did new writers (especially women) prepare the way for the novel?

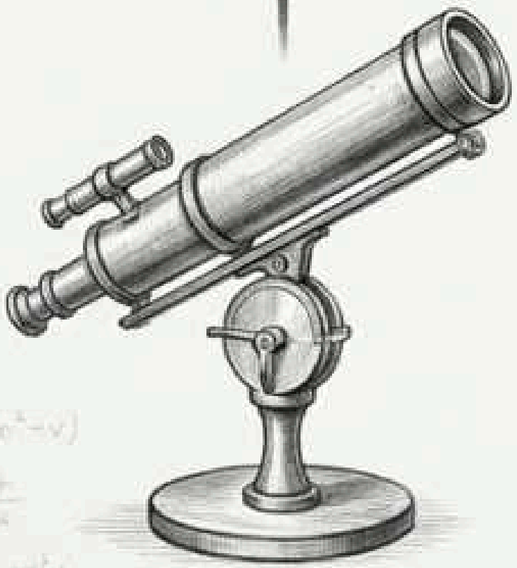
Commonwealth (Stern Religion) → 1660 → Restoration (Wit, Pleasure, Curiosity)

May 1660
Charles II Returns



1662
Royal Society Chartered

Bringing scientists together.



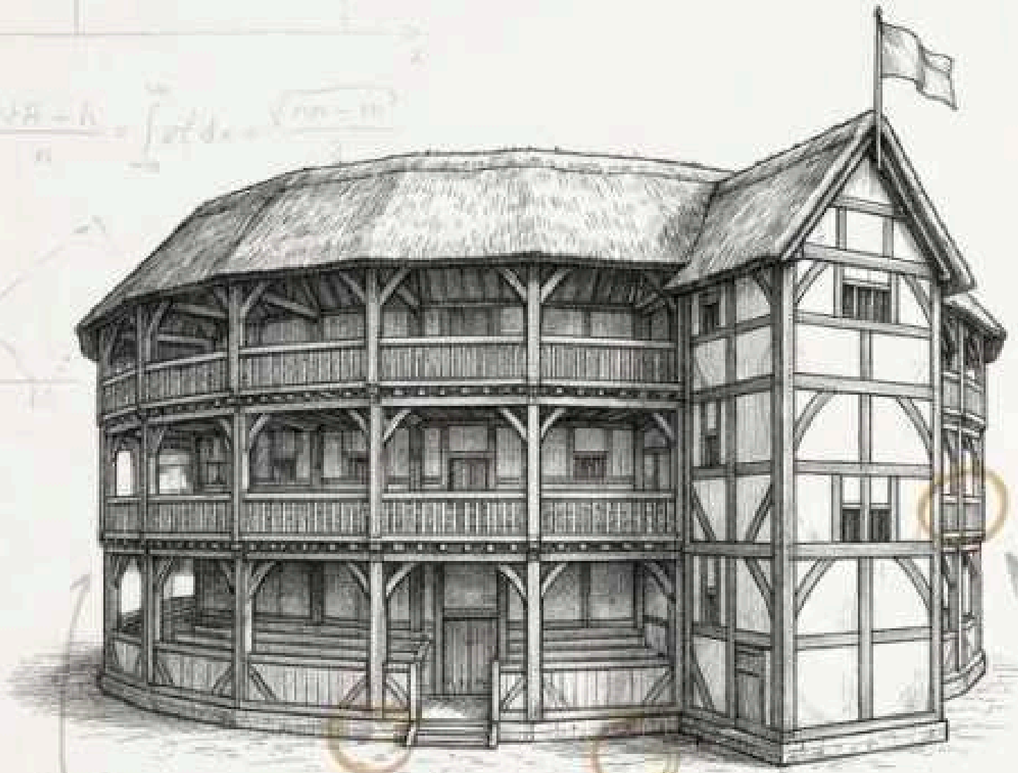
1665
The Great Plague



1666
Great Fire of London



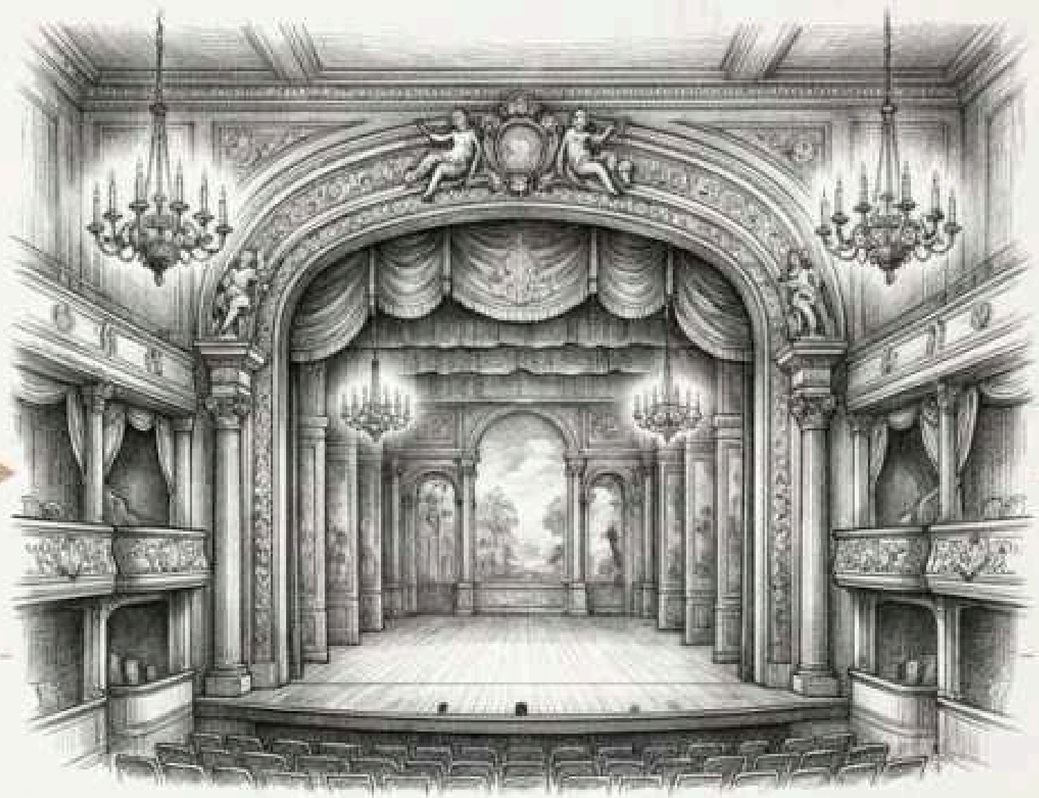
Shakespeare's Stage



Massive audiences

All-male casts

The Restoration Stage



Licensed Monopolies: King's Company & Duke's Company.

Audience: Smaller, closer to the court, highly fashionable.

⚠ Casting: Women appear on the public stage → Actresses become celebrities → Playwrights write specifically for them.

Wit × Satire = Comedy of Manners

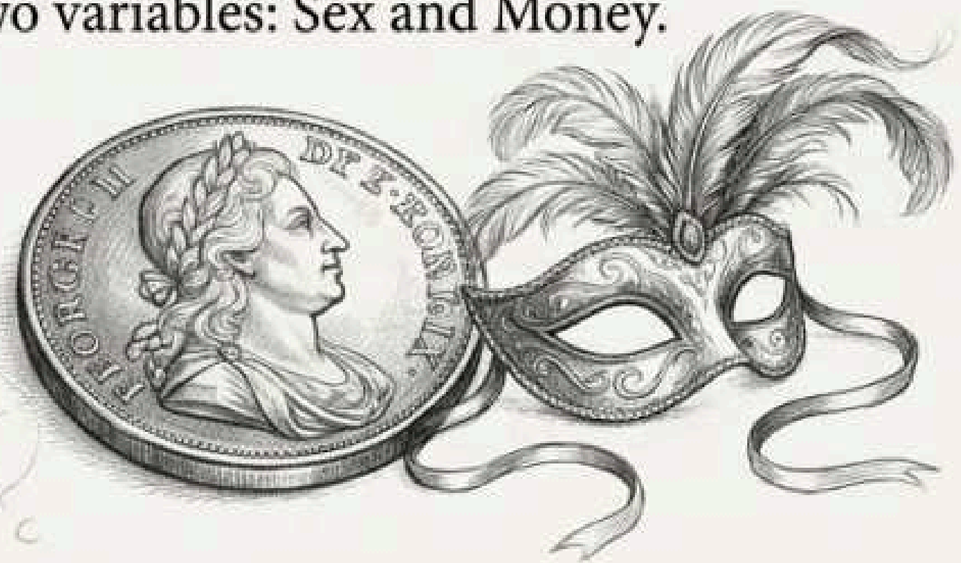
Satirizing the social games of the fashionable world.

William Wycherley: *The Country Wife*

George Etherege: *The Man of Mode*

William Congreve: *The Way of the World*
(End of century)

Sharp, witty commentary driven by two variables: Sex and Money.



1698

Jeremy Collier attacks the stage as immoral.

The debate becomes lively.



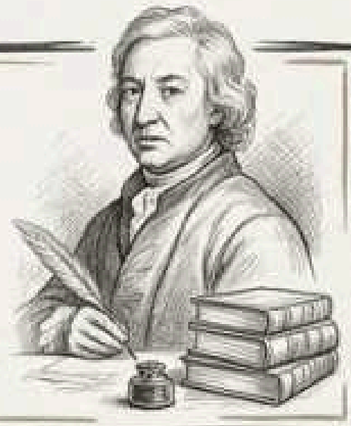
Absalom and Achitophel

[*Political story mapped through a biblical one in polished couplets*]



John Dryden
(1631–1700)

Dominates the Age.
Poet Laureate (1668).



Critical Essays

[*Helped create English literary criticism*]



MacFlecknoe

[*Mock-epic satire of a rival poet*]

All for Love

[*Retelling of Antony and Cleopatra]*



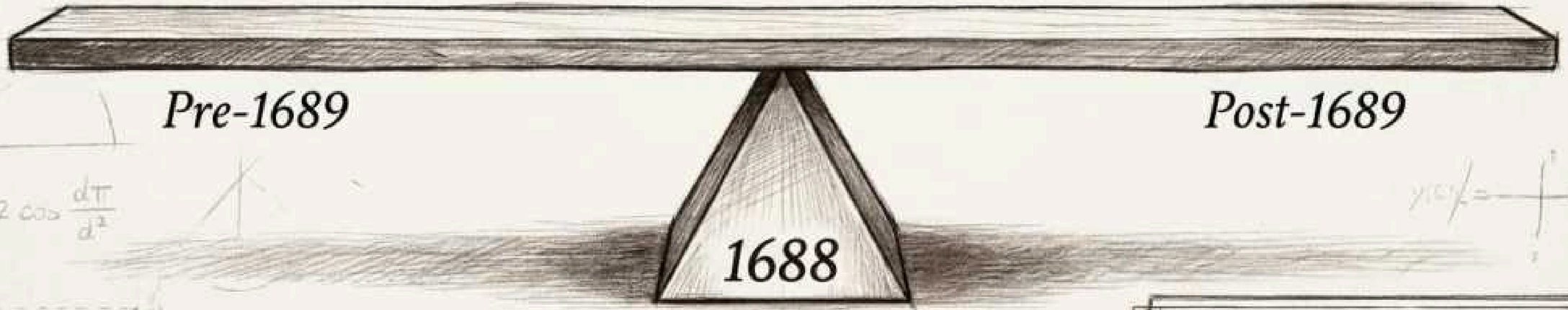
1689

Dryden loses the laureateship.

Cause: *As a Catholic convert, he refuses to swear loyalty to William and Mary.*

Status: Poet Laureate.
Loyalty: *Established court figure.*

Status: Professional Translator (*e.g., Virgil's Aeneid*).



Showed that a professional writer could live by his pen, though never comfortably.

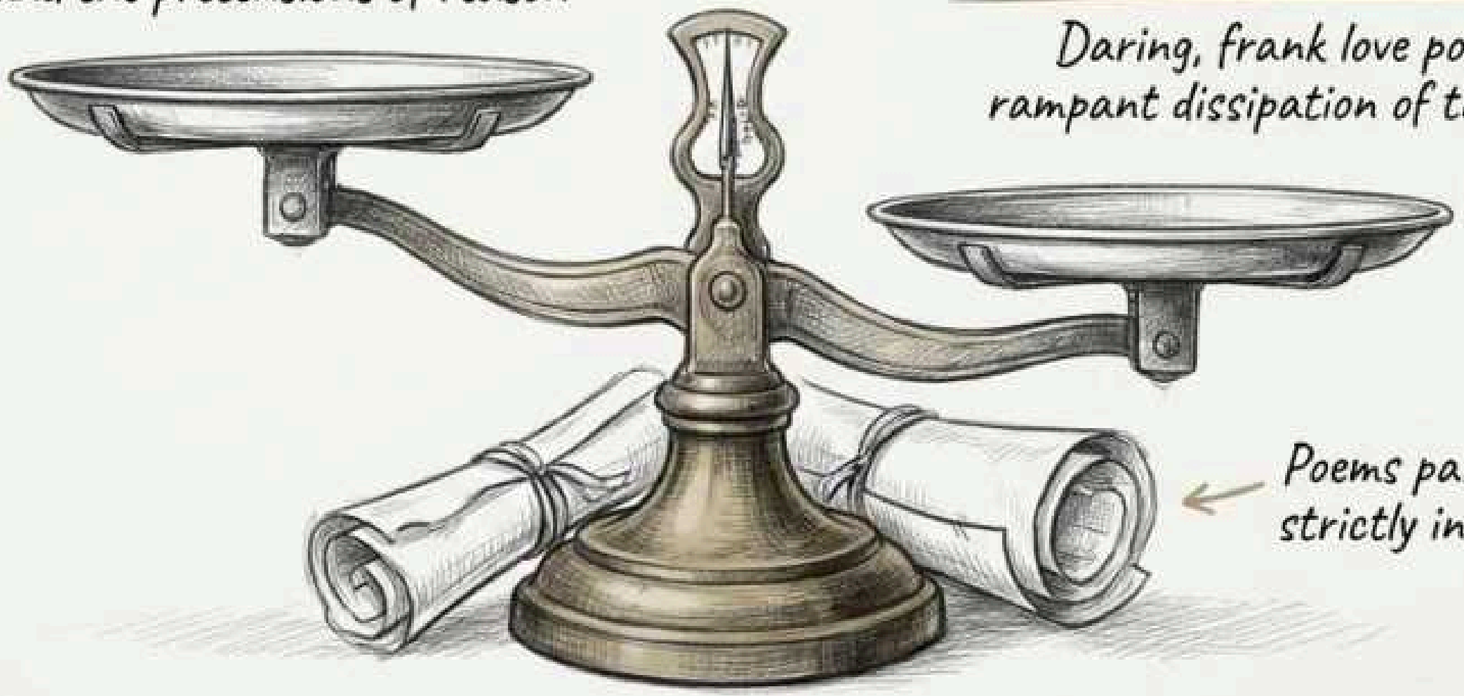
John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester
(Died at 33 in 1680)

Brilliant Court Wit

Satires attacking hypocrisy, vanity, and the pretensions of reason

Frank Desire & Dissipation

Daring, frank love poems; rampant dissipation of the court

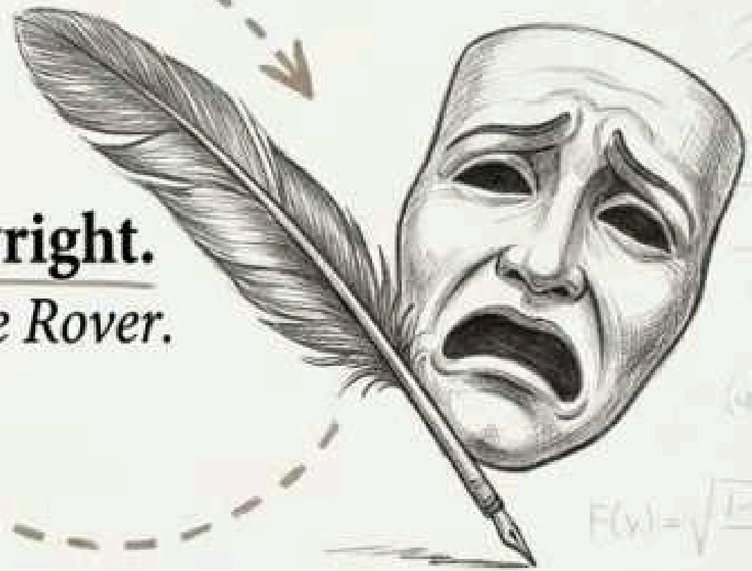


Poems passed around strictly in manuscript

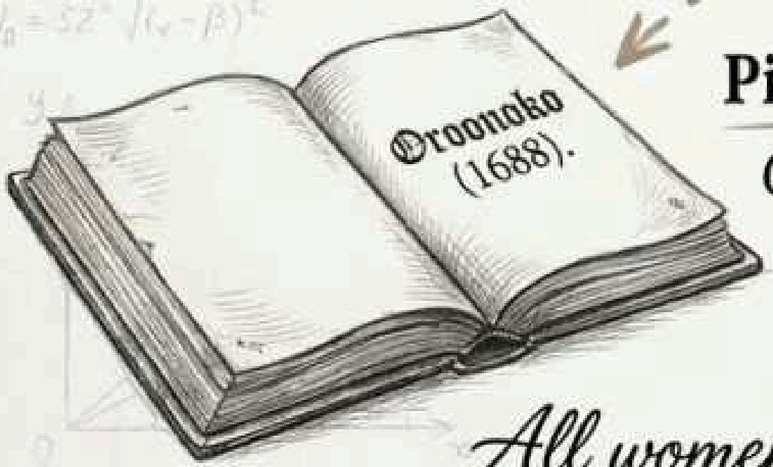
Aphra Behn (1640–1689): The First Professional Englishwoman Writer



Royal Spy
in Antwerp.



Playwright.
e.g., The Rover.



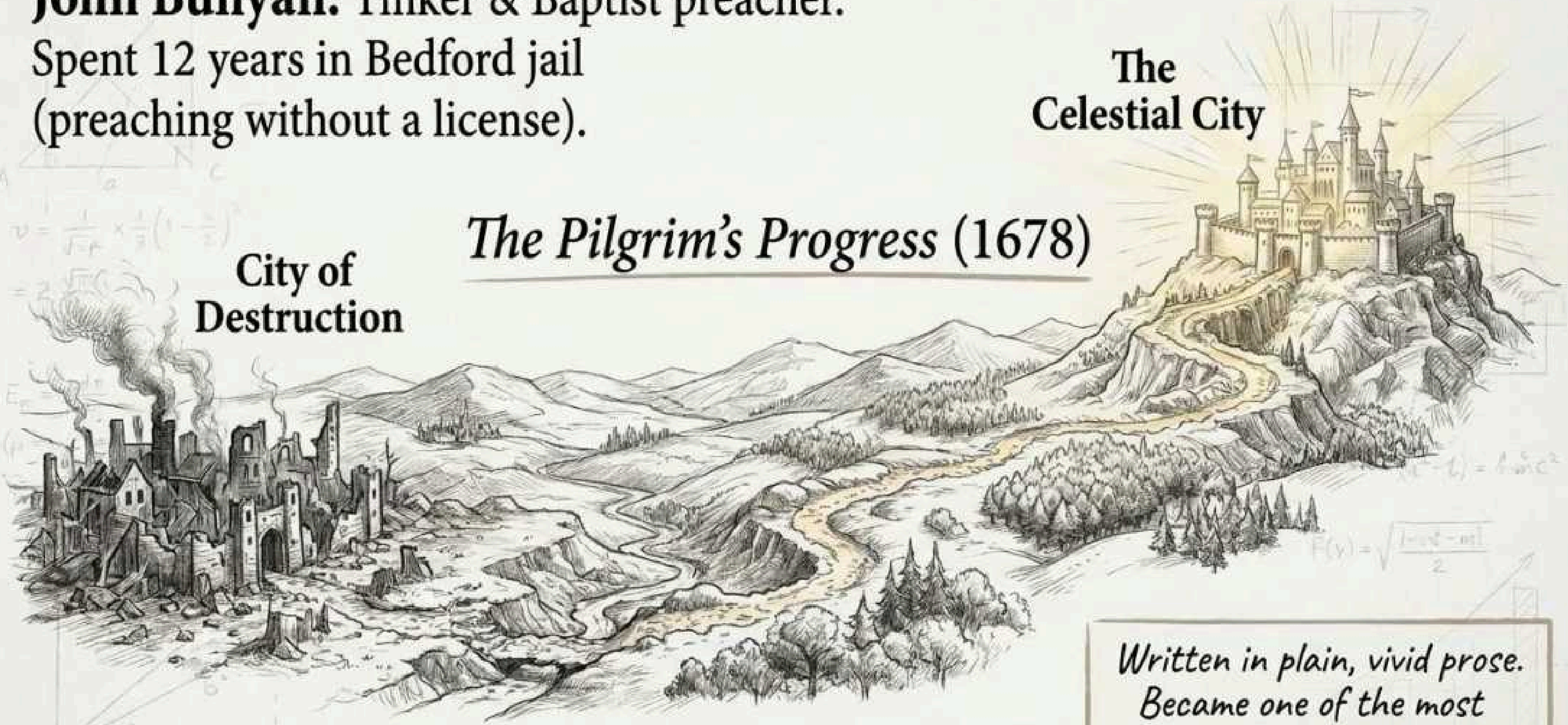
Pioneer Novelist.
Oroonoko (1688).

Tells of an African prince enslaved in Surinam.
Often read as an early protest against slavery.

All women writers owed her a debt. — Virginia Woolf

John Bunyan: Tinker & Baptist preacher.
Spent 12 years in Bedford jail
(preaching without a license).

The Pilgrim's Progress (1678)



Written in plain, vivid prose.
Became one of the most
widely read books in English.

The Birth of the Diary: A Close-Up View of London Life

Samuel Pepys

Active: 1660–1669.

Method: Kept in private shorthand (undeciphered until the 19th century).

Content: The plague, the Great Fire, the theater, and his own personal appetites and failings.

John Evelyn

Method: Kept a parallel, significant diary of the same era.

Content: Together with Pepys, provides the ultimate historical lens into 17th-century London.



Thomas Sprat + Isaac Newton + John Locke = The Plain Style

Thomas Sprat

(1667): *History of the Royal Society*

→ Praised a *close, naked, natural way of speaking.*

Isaac Newton

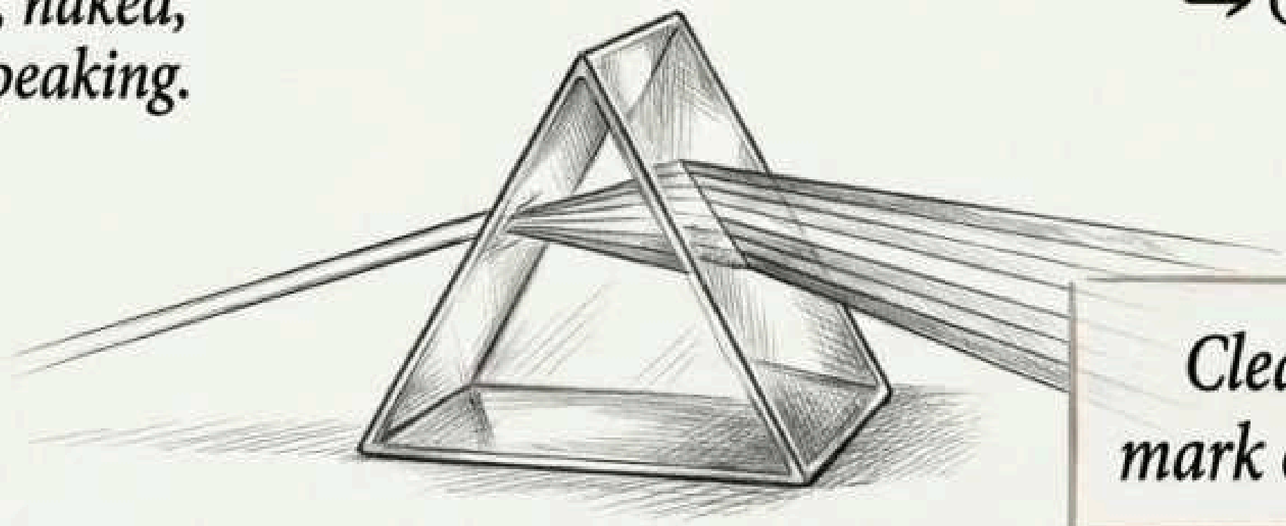
(1687): *Principia*

→ Written in an exact manner.

John Locke

(1689): *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

→ Championed *clarity.*



Clear prose became a mark of reason and trust.

Women Claim a Larger Place (Preparing for the Novel)

Anne Finch



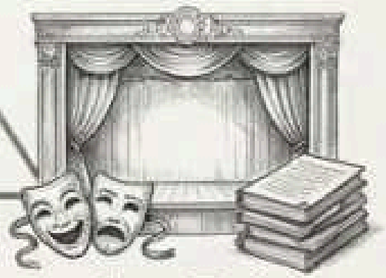
→ Wrote poems of nature and melancholy.

A crucial foundation for the rise of the novel.

→ Proved women could write for the public and be paid for it.



Mary Astell → A Serious Proposal to the Ladies (1694) arguing for female education.



Aphra Behn (and others)

The Glorious Revolution (1688–1689)

↓

The Bill of Rights & The Toleration Act
(The political landscape shifts)

↓

1695: The Licensing Act Lapses
(and is not renewed)

↓

Ends the system of prior censorship.
Fulfilling the vision Milton fought for in Areopagitica fifty years earlier.



This changing audience is a direct cause of the eighteenth-century novel.

Coffeehouses

→ *Places to read newspapers and debate.*

The Audience

→ *Moving away from solely patrons/courts to addressing a wider public of ordinary readers.*



The London Gazette

→ *Began in 1665.*

Publishing Models

→ *Booksellers begin selling by subscription.*

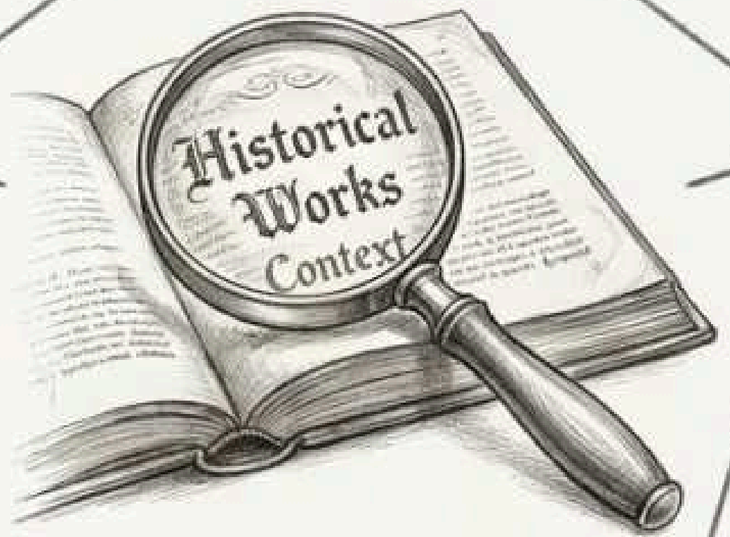
A Thousand-Year Retrospective

Language	Form	Genre
Old English	*Alliterative Verse*	*Epic & Romance*
↓	↓	↓
Middle English	*The Pentameter Line*	*Sonnet & Stage Play*
↓	↓	↓
Recognizable Modern English	*Prose Narrative*	*The Novel*

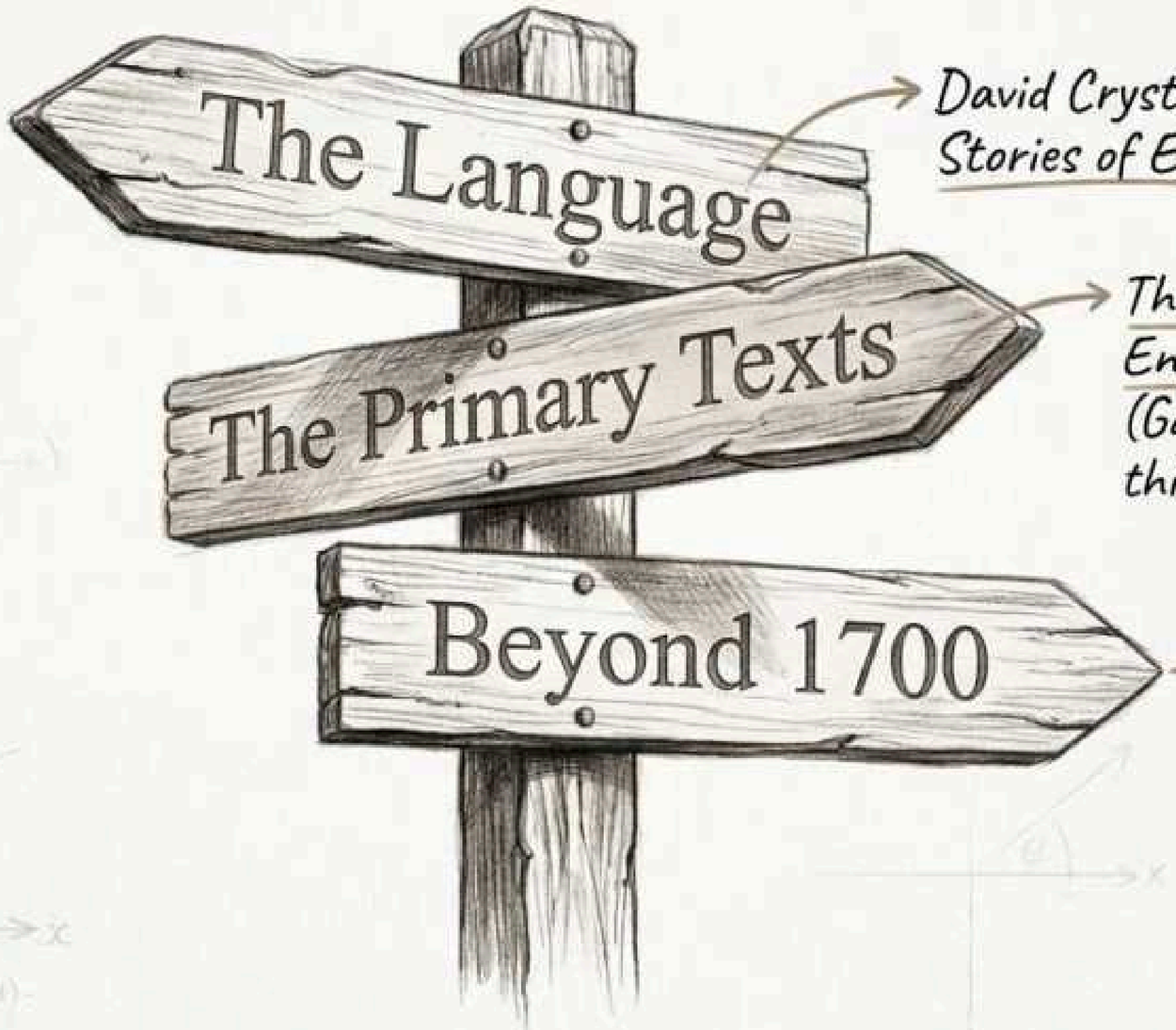
Each change shows how writers adapt to new readers, new technologies, and new powers.

5 Habits for Reading Historical Works

1. **Read Aloud**
   (Early writing was meant to be heard)
2. **Notice the Form**
   (Form is part of the meaning)
3. **Place in History**
   (Context is critical)
4. **Identify the Voices**
   (Ask who is speaking and who is silent)
5. **Compare Translations/Editions**
   (The text you read is always an editor's choice)



Where to go next?

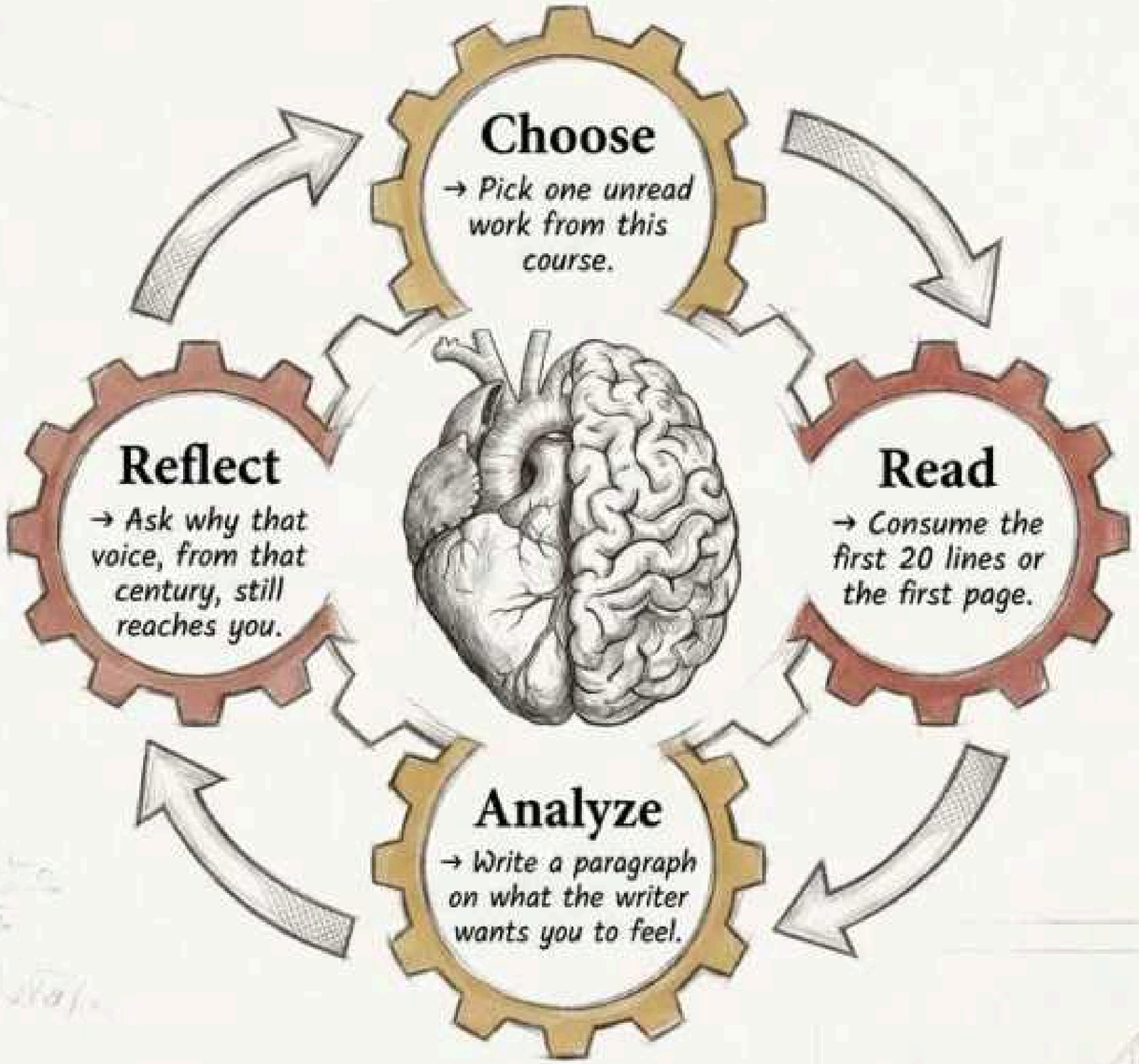


David Crystal's The Stories of English.

The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume A (Gathering many works from this course).

The Future
The Age of Pope, Swift, Defoe, and the rise of the novel.

Closing Exercise: Connecting Across Centuries





Thank you for studying English 201 B with Anderson Academy.

Questions and feedback are most welcome.

Email: *garyanderson@mail.grokbot.com*
X (Twitter): *@garyanderson*

