

John Sitter



The Cambridge **Introduction** to
Eighteenth-Century
Poetry

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JOHN SITTER



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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Eighteenth-Century Poetry*

For readers daunted by the formal structures and rhetorical sophistication of eighteenth-century English poetry, this introduction by John Sitter brings the techniques and the major poets of the period 1700–1785 triumphantly to life. Sitter begins by offering a guide to poetic forms ranging from heroic couplets to blank verse, then demonstrates how skillfully men and women poets of the period used them as vehicles for imaginative experience, feelings and ideas. He then provides detailed analyses of individual works by poets from Finch, Swift and Pope to Gray, Cowper and Barbauld. An approachable introduction to English poetry and major poets of the eighteenth century, this book provides a grounding in poetic analysis useful to students and general readers of literature.

John Sitter is Mary Lee Duda Professor of Literature at the University of Notre Dame.

For Katrina fair

Acknowledgments

Several years ago the plan for this book began to take shape during research leave time supported by a fellowship at the Bill and Carole Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry of Emory University. Later, I was able to complete some of the writing thanks to a sabbatical leave at my new professional home, the University of Notre Dame. I am very grateful to both universities for their assistance and to many colleagues for encouragement and advice. In recent years, my partners in eighteenth-century studies at Notre Dame, Margaret Doody and Chris Fox, have given good counsel and example. Steve Fallon took hours from labors Miltonian to read and help clarify several chapters, and Henry Weinfield turned from his large study of blank verse to correct my small discussion of it in Chapter 5. At Notre Dame I have also benefitted from conversations with and in some cases research assistance from former and current doctoral students: Samara Cahill, James Creech, Erin Drew, Ethan Guagliardo, Wes Hamrick, Patrick Mello, and John Traver. This book could not have been completed in its present form had not Laura Fuderer of Notre Dame's Hesburgh Library, Chris Fox, and the Office of the Provost expedited the purchase of *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* shortly after my arrival at Notre Dame.

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Eighteenth Century, prior to its publication by Johns Hopkins University Press in 2009. A part of Chapter 12 appeared in different form in a special issue of the journal *Religion and Literature*, Spring, 2008. I am grateful to Kate Rigby, the issue editor, for the invitation to contribute, and to the journal editor, my colleague Susannah Monta, for permission to use some of that material here. The illustration on p. 14 of a page from the Alexander Pope's first collected *Works* of 1717 is provided by courtesy of the Special Collections division of the Hesburgh Library.

My greatest debt is to Kate Ravin, who inspired the whole and improved each page.

Note on texts and titles

Where possible I have used first or very early eighteenth-century editions of the poems quoted. References are noted on the first appearance with the publication date; the place of publication is London unless specified. Within the text I have followed the practice advocated by the *Chicago Manual of Style* to italicize titles of individual poems regardless of whether they were originally published separately.

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Introduction

Esther Greenwood, the twenty-year-old narrator of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, was studying literature in the 1950s, but her assumptions remain common in some quarters today:

There were lots of requirements and I didn't have half of them. One of the requirements was a course in the eighteenth century. I hated the very idea of the eighteenth century, with all those smug men writing tight little couplets and being so dead keen on reason. So I skipped it.¹

I hope this book will help readers overcome the barriers – ranging from Romantic and Modern myths to inexperience – that often dull our senses to eighteenth-century poetry. Early chapters aim to test and sharpen our hearing as readers; several of the later ones focus on vision. Along the way it should become clearer, to take the young Esther Greenwood's preconceptions individually, that the period's poets included many women as well as men, that they were no more smug on average than poets of other eras, that what complacency they harbored was not due to a confidence in reason (which they mostly distrusted), that they wrote blank verse, odes, and various other stanzaic forms as well as rhymed couplets, and that the couplets they did write were not automatically “little,” often aspiring instead, like the late twentieth-century poet A. R. Ammons, toward a versification capable of the “sweet ingestion” of nearly anything, a poetry “multiple and embracing.”²

An “introduction to eighteenth-century poetry” requires some explanation: an introduction for whom and on what terms? And what exactly is meant by the eighteenth century? The latter question may be answered briefly: for practical reasons this volume deals mostly with the “short” eighteenth century, from about 1700 to 1785. In introducing the poetry of this period I try to keep in mind readers who may have read little of it and who may not feel fully comfortable with poetry of any period. I have found the latter group quite large, including not only undergraduate students but also many pursuing advanced degrees in literature, many teachers, and even many academic critics. If this

work helps guide some of those teaching as well as those reading eighteenth-century poetry for the first time, it will serve its purpose.

I have aimed less at coverage than at “uncoverage,” hoping through selective commentary to remove some barriers to experiencing eighteenth-century poems as poems. The emphasis falls much more on *how* to read than on *what* to read. Many important poems and several interesting poets go unmentioned here, but perhaps by engaging fewer works more closely this book will leave the reader wanting to range abroad in the period and better prepared to do so. I begin by emphasizing poetic forms and voices. Indeed, the first third of the book might be thought of as a “*formal* introduction” to the subject. This approach seems the best way of seeing the poems as poems and not as something else, quotable pieces of a “discourse” interchangeable with any other from which ideas are to be abstracted. Thematic approaches to poetry run the risk of the sort of criticism implied by the quip that “Wagner’s music is better than it sounds.”³ The joke, of course, is that whatever idea we might have of music is inseparable from how it sounds. The same, I argue, should be true of our idea of poetry. No doubt with later poetry in mind, Wallace Stevens remarked that “above everything else, poetry is words; and ... words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds.”⁴

I emphasize form, then, not for the sake of categorizing techniques but in order to experience the insistent materiality of eighteenth-century poetry. Counting syllables or lines is pointless in itself, but modes of attention that help us hear a voice, or often voices, within a poem can enlarge our engagements with other minds and ways of being in the world. Perhaps because the referential pull of eighteenth-century poems can be so strong – for instance, their use of real names in satire – it is worth keeping in mind the rest of Stevens’s proposition, that in a radical sense the “poet’s words are of things that do not exist without the words.” A contemporary poet and theorist of poetry, Allen Grossman, gives this claim a more cognitive emphasis: “What are poems for? A good poem gives rise to thinking. About what? About states of affairs that would not, except for the poems, come to mind, be seen as problems, or the solutions seen to be solutions.”⁵

It hardly needs saying that this book is not a literary history of the period. Much is omitted, often including attention to movements or group affiliations. There is no discussion of the Scriblerian poets (Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell) as a group, for instance, or of the “Johnson circle.” I do not discuss women poets as a group but rather side by side with male writers.⁶ Finally, this book is not a study of “backgrounds” – social or intellectual – to its subject. Instead, I focus on ideas as they become “foregrounds,” emerging in poetic performance itself. Thus, considerable space is

given to quotation and practical criticism throughout and, in Chapters 7 and 8, to some of the period's "metapoetry" (self-reflexive poems about poetry).

Critics and scholars like to imagine that readers will read their books exactly in the order presented. This probably happens rarely, especially with a book meant to introduce a subject, to which some will come looking for guidance on this topic or that. I can only say that later chapters assume progressively more familiarity with the period's poetry than do the earlier ones. I hope the final three chapters in particular will have something to say to long-time students of the period as well as to newcomers. Chapters 10, 11, and 12 explore ways of seeing, often closely dependent on personification, especially as these tend toward theorizing about society and about the ecology of the natural world. "Society" is a word that gathers resonance as the century progresses; the word "ecology" would not come into use until the next century, but its perspectives are frequently anticipated in the providential orientation of the period's natural theology and nature poetry.

As these last examples suggest, I have tried to alert readers to continuities between eighteenth-century poetry and that of our own age but to stress differences as well. No doubt some sections will seem to emphasize too much the familiar or the unfamiliar, but the simple premise throughout is that if we can find nothing like ourselves in what we study, we are likely to stop studying it, while if we can find only ourselves we need not begin.



Part I

Voice
