

**English literature of the 17th—18th
centuries. Enlightenment.**

A new Augustan Age: 1702-1714

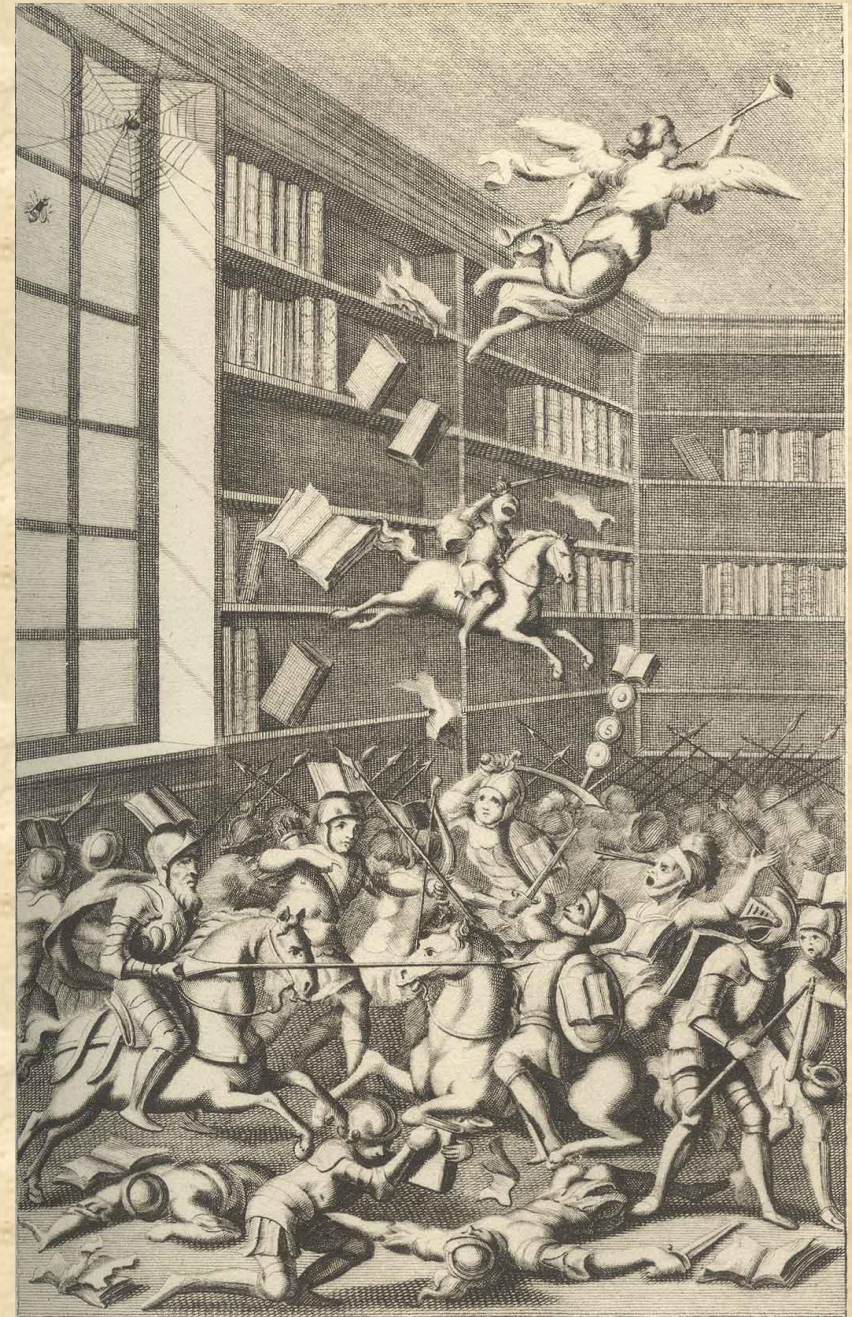
Literary life in England flourishes so impressively in the early years of the 18th century that contemporaries draw parallels with the heyday of Virgil, Horace and Ovid at the time of the emperor **Augustus**. The new Augustan Age becomes identified with the reign of Queen Anne (1702-14), though the spirit of the age extends well beyond her death.



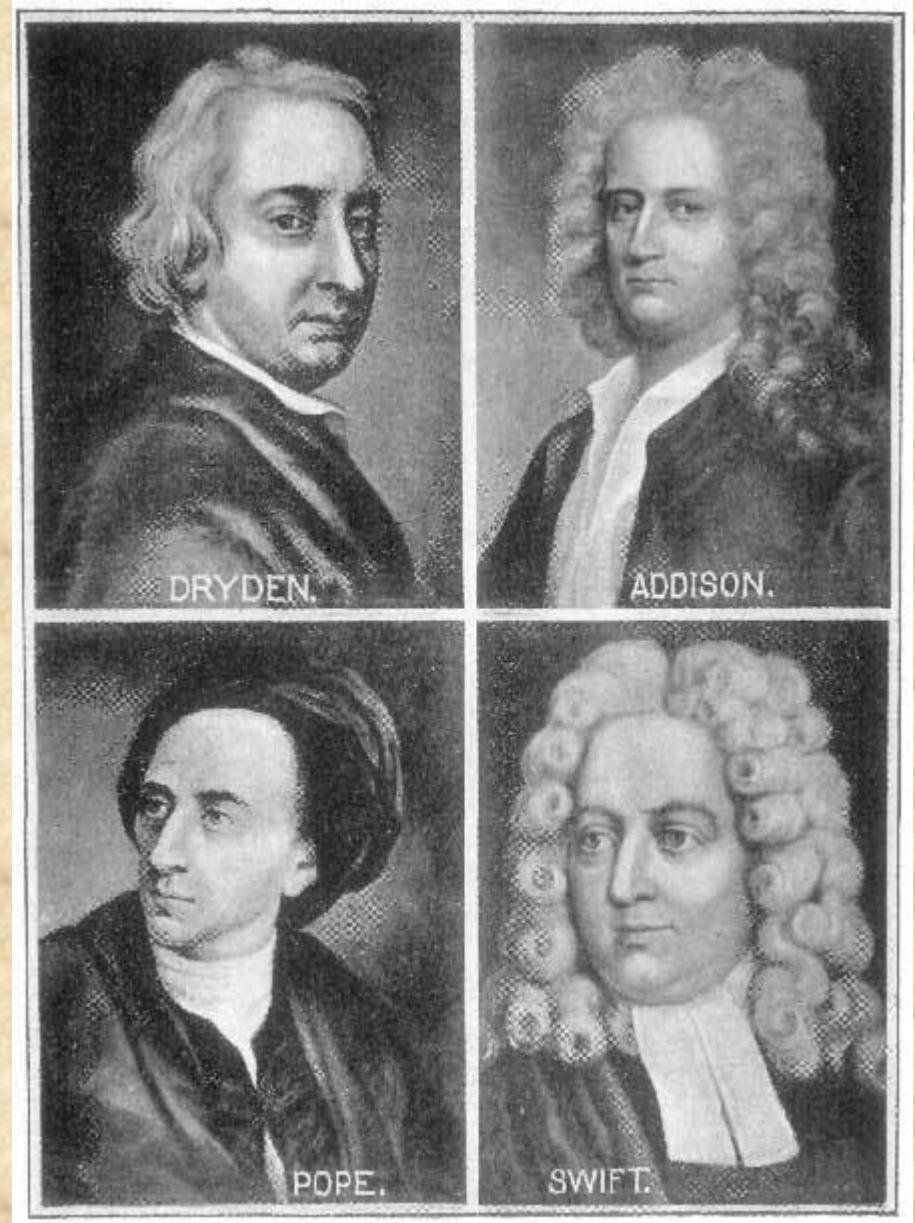


The oldest of the Augustan authors, Jonathan Swift, first makes his mark in 1704 with *The Battle of the Books* and *A Tale of a Tub*. These two tracts, respectively about literary theory and religious discord, reveal that there is a new prose writer on the scene with lethal satirical powers.

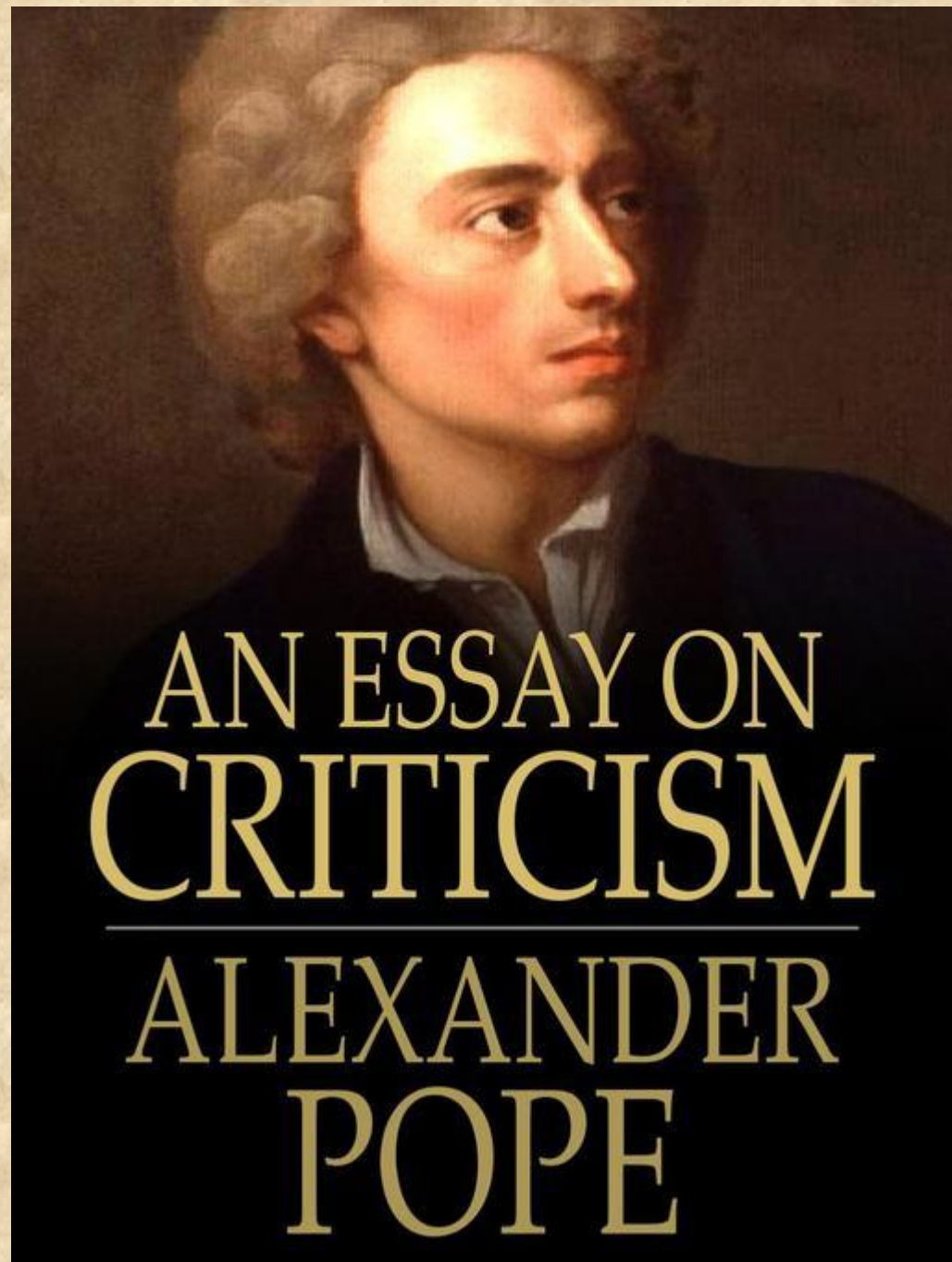
The tone of oblique irony which Swift makes his own is evident even in the title of his 1708 attack on fashionable trends in religious circles -*An Argument to prove that the Abolishing of Christianity in England, may as Things now stand, be attended with some Inconveniences.*



In the following year, 1709, a new periodical brings a gentler brand of humour and irony hot off the presses, three times a week, straight into London's fashionable **coffee houses**. The *Tatler*, founded by Richard Steele with frequent contributions from his friend Joseph Addison, turns the relaxed and informal **essay** into a new journalistic art form. In 1711 Steele and Addison replace the *Tatler* with the daily *Spectator*.

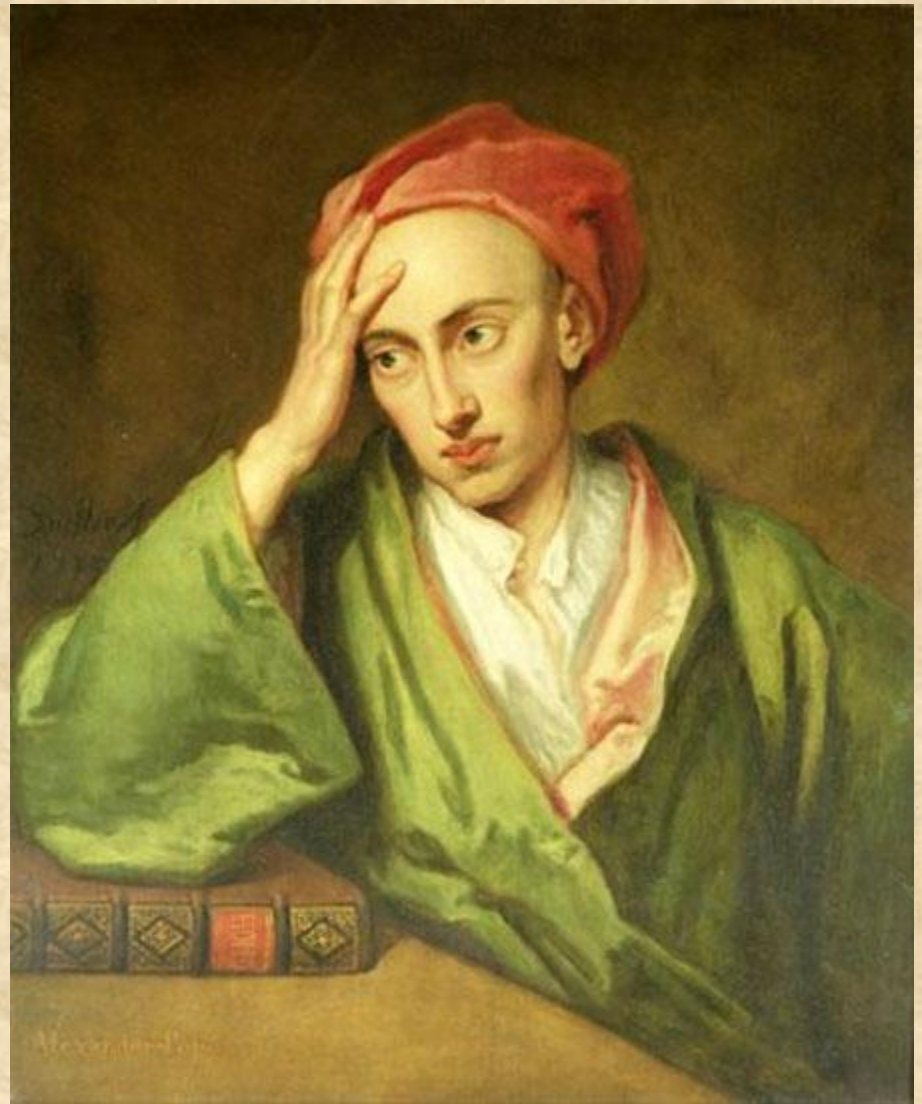


The same year sees the debut of the youngest and most brilliant of this set of writers. Unlike the others, Alexander Pope devotes himself almost exclusively to poetry, becoming a master in the use of rhymed heroic couplets for the purposes of wit. In 1711 he shows his paces with the brilliant *Essay on Criticism* (the source of many frequently quoted phrases, such as 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread'). He follows this in 1712 with a miniature masterpiece of mock heroic, *The Rape of the Lock*.



In *Windsor Forest* (1713) Pope seals the Augustan theme, using the poem to praise Queen Anne's reign just as **Virgil** celebrated that of Augustus.

Pope is so much in tune with the spirit of his age that he is able, in his mid-twenties, to persuade the British aristocracy to subscribe in large numbers to his proposed translation of Homer's *Iliad* into heroic couplets. The work appears in six volumes between 1715 and 1720, to be followed by the *Odyssey* (1725-6). The two projects bring Pope some £10,000, enabling him to move into a grand riverside villa in Twickenham. This is just half a century after **Milton** receives £10 for *Paradise Lost*.



DEFEROR IN VICVM



VENIENTEM TVS ET ODORES

THE DUNCIAD.

With NOTES

VARIORUM,
AND THE
PROLEGOMENA
OF
SCRIBLERUS.

LONDON:

Printed for LAWTON GILLIVER at
Homer's Head, against *St. Dunstan's*
Church, *Fleetstreet*, 1729.

The weapon of these authors is wit, waspish in tone - as is seen in *The Dunciad*(1728), Pope's attack on his many literary enemies. The most savage in his use of wit is undoubtedly Swift. His *Modest Proposal*, in 1729, highlights poverty in Ireland by suggesting that it would be far better for everybody if, instead of being allowed to starve, these unfortunate Irish babies were fattened up and eaten.

Yet, astonishingly, a book of 1726 by Swift, almost equally savage in its satirical intentions, becomes one of the world's best loved stories - by virtue simply of its imaginative brilliance. It tells the story of a ship's surgeon, Lemuel Gulliver.



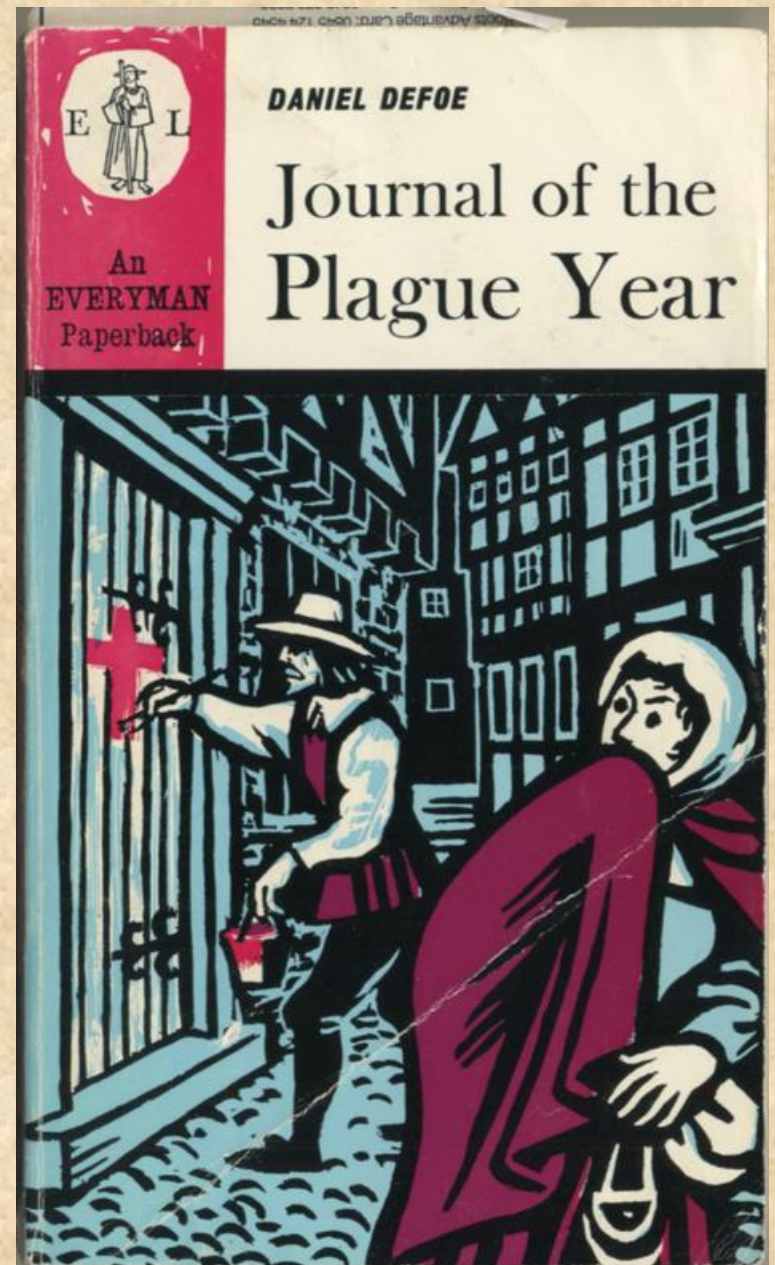
GULLIVER IN LILLIPUT.

Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver's Travels: 1719-1726

Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, has a genius for journalism in an age before **newspapers** exist which can accomodate his kind of material. He travels widely as a semi-secret political agent, gathering material of use to those who pay him. In 1712 he founds, and writes almost single-handed, a thrice-weekly periodical, *the Review*, which lasts only a year. But it is his instinct for what would now be called feature articles which mark him out as the archetypal journalist.

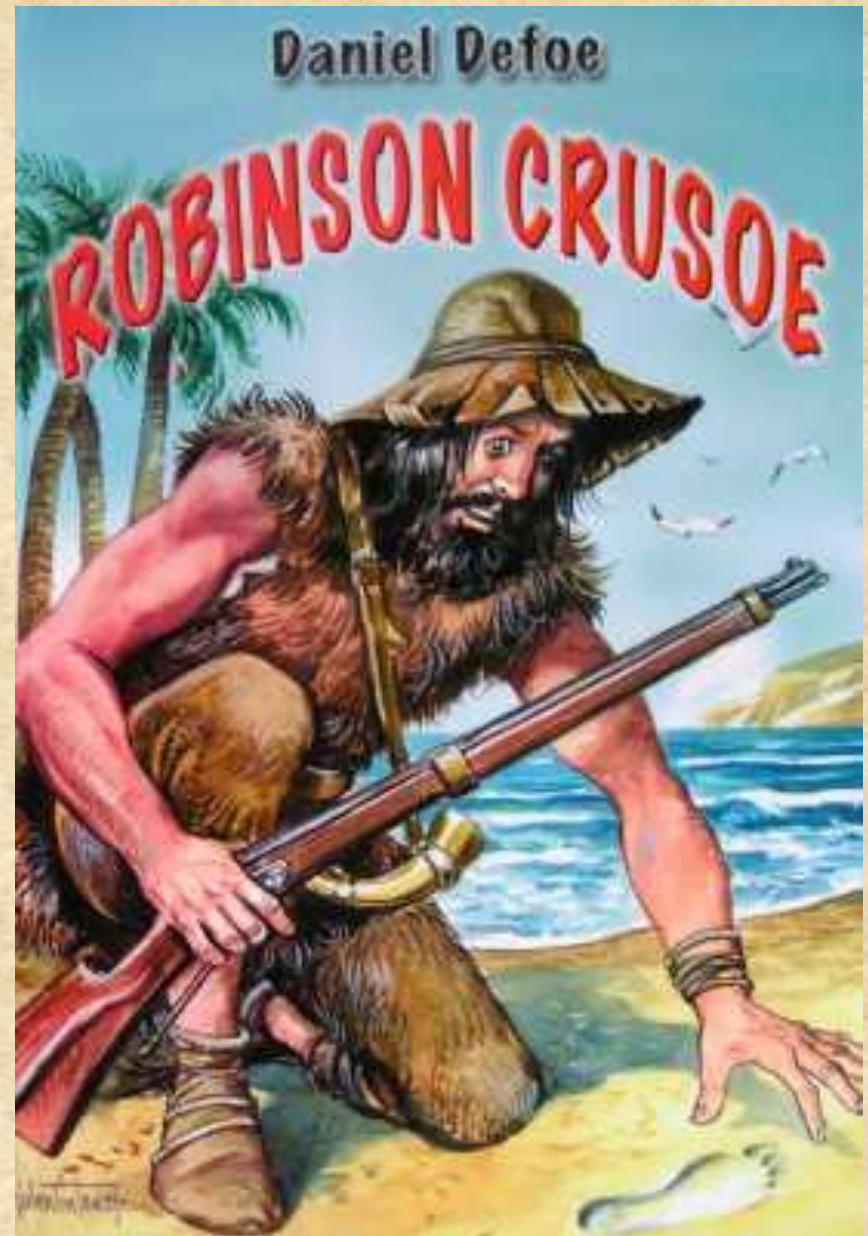


A good example is the blend of investigative and imaginative skills which lead him to research surviving documents of the **Great Plague** and then to blend them in a convincing fictional *Journal of the Plague Year*(1722).



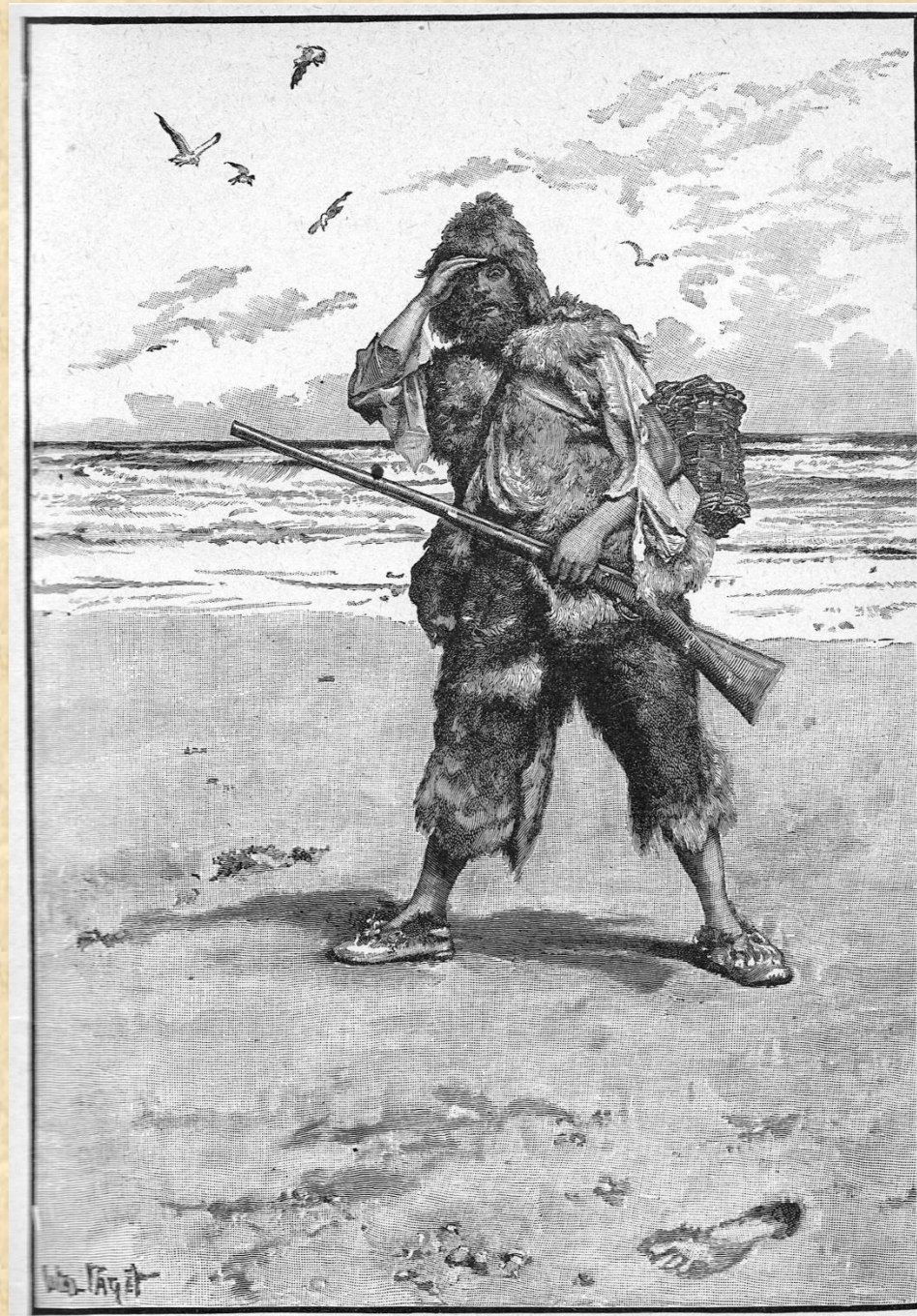
Another work which could run week after week in a modern newspaper is his immensely informative *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, published in three volumes in 1724-7. But his instinctive nose for a good story is best seen in his response to the predicament of Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who survives for five years as a castaway on a Pacific island before being discovered in 1709.

Just as the plague documents stimulated a fictional journal, this real-life drama now prompts Defoe to undertake the imagined autobiography of another such castaway, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).



Defoe imagines in extraordinary detail the practical difficulties involved in building a house and a boat, in domesticating the local animals, and in coping with unwelcome neighbours. This is a cannibal island. The native whom Crusoe rescues from their clutches on a Friday becomes his faithful servant, Man Friday.

Defoe's interests seem to lie mainly in the theme of man's creation of society from primitive conditions, but meanwhile he almost unwittingly writes a gripping adventure story of survival. *Robinson Crusoe* is avidly read as such by all succeeding generations - and has a good claim to be considered the first English novel.



Seven years later another book appears which immediately becomes one of the world's most popular stories, and again seems to do so for reasons not quite intended by its author. Jonathan **Swift**, a man inspired by savage indignation at the ways of the world, writes *Gulliver's Travels*(1726) as a satire in which human behaviour is viewed from four revealing angles.



When Gulliver arrives in Liliput, he observes with patronising condescension the habits of its tiny inhabitants. But in Brobdingnag, a land of giants, he is the midget. When he proudly tells the king about European manners, he is surprised at the royal reaction. The king says that humans sound like 'little odious Vermin'.



(Э. С. Брок, 1849)

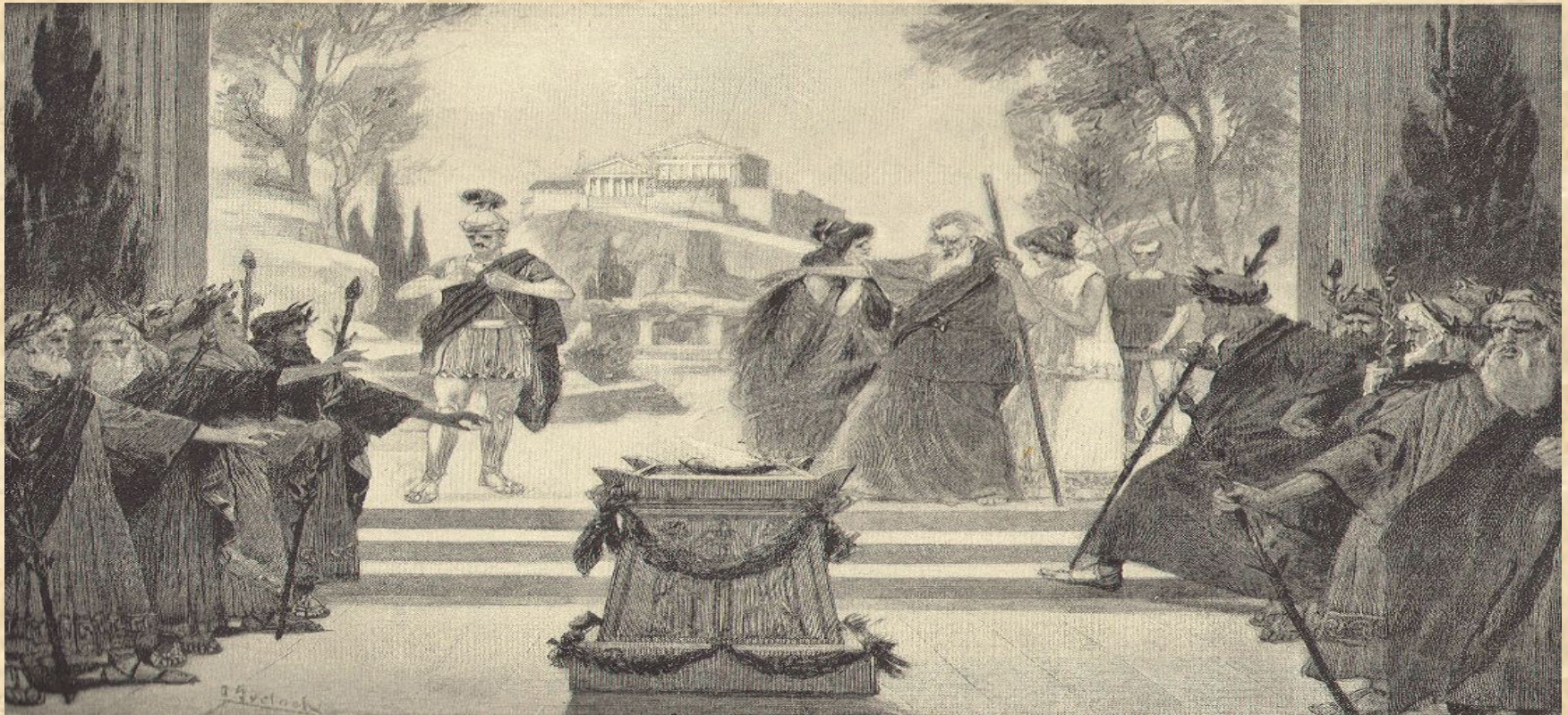
Gulliver's next stop, the flying island of Laputa, is run by philosophers and scientists (as **Plato** might have wished); predictably they make a mess of things. Finally Gulliver visits a land ruled by intelligent horses (the Houyhnhnms, Swift's version of whinnying). The hooligans here are brutal and oafish beasts in human shape, the Yahoos.

Once again the sheer vitality of the author's imagination transcends his immediate purpose. Of the millions who enjoy Gulliver's fantastic adventures, few are primarily aware of Swift's harshly satirical intentions.



Voltaire and the philosophes: 1726-1778

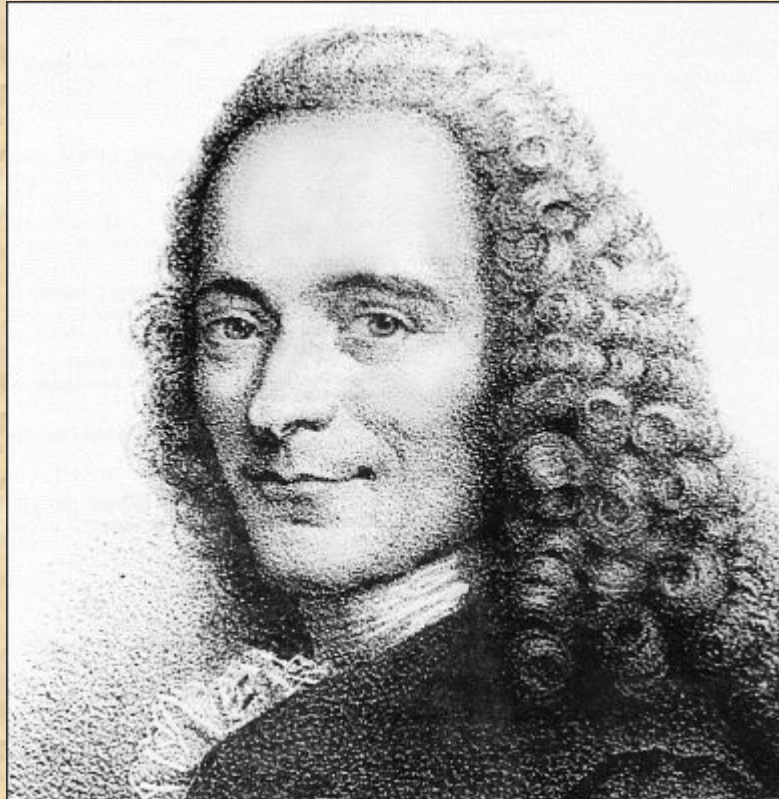
Though born within the 17th century, in 1694, Voltaire becomes - after a long life and a multifaceted career - the characteristic voice of the French 18th century. His early successes reveal an ambition to outdo literary giants of the past. When his tragedy *Oedipe* is a great success, in 1718, he is hailed as the new **Racine**. His *Henriade* of 1723, an epic poem in praise of **Henry IV**, is a conscious attempt to become France's **Virgil**. But his lasting fame derives from his attack on the abuses of the present and his vision of a more rational future.



In this respect his exile from France in 1726, after a quarrel with a powerful nobleman, proves something of a turning point.

Voltaire travels to England, where he is struck by a matter-of-fact frame of mind very different from the attitudes of France. In religion this results in **Deism**, an offshoot of the reasonable philosophy of John Locke; in social and political terms it seems to be expressed in a mercantile economy more open to new ideas and more capable of innovation than the feudal structures surviving in France.

Voltaire is able to return to France in 1728. In 1733 he publishes in English, and in 1734 in French, his *Letters Philosophiques*- twenty-four letters praising English religion, institutions and even literature as a means, primarily, of attacking the French equivalents.



The book provokes outrage and a warrant is issued for Voltaire's arrest - which he avoids only by escaping to the countryside. For the rest of his life, filled though it is with immensely varied literary activity, he is engaged in a crusade to reform the abuses of the French establishment (or the system which later becomes known as the ***ancien régime***). Of these abuses he finds the influence of the Roman Catholic church, and in particular of the **Jesuits**, to be the most infamous. *Écrasez l'infame* ('crush the infamous') is his battle cry. In this campaign for reason against superstition, and for justice against privilege, Voltaire is joined by a younger generation. Together they become known as the *philosophes*.





The greatest achievement of the *philosophes* is the *Encyclopédie*, edited by Denis Diderot and published in 28 volumes (17 of text, 11 of plates) between 1751 and 1772. This enterprise is originally inspired by Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*, published in two volumes in London in 1728, but it far outdoes its model in scope and ambition.

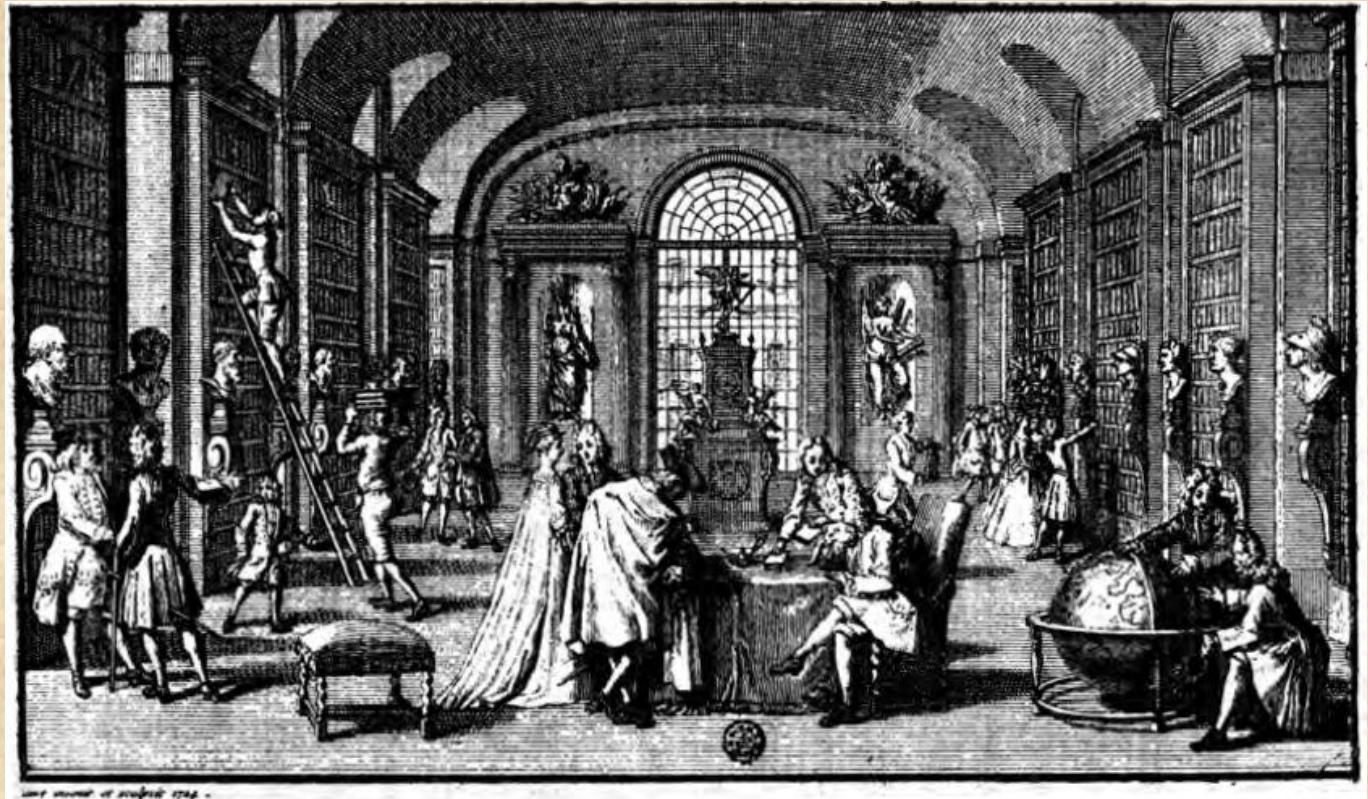
The *Encyclopédie* aims to be nothing less than a rational statement of contemporary knowledge and belief. It can be seen as the definitive statement of the ideas of the **Enlightenment**. Jesuit influence twice halts publication, but the project is successfully completed and acquires great influence - being often pointed to subsequently as an important part of the build-up to the **French Revolution**.





During the years when the *Encyclopédie* is being published a powerfully irrational event occurs. In 1755 an earthquake destroys much of Lisbon, killing many thousands. The disaster seems to mock the optimism which characterizes the rational 18th century. It prompts Voltaire to write the short satirical book, *Candide* (1759), which has proved the most lasting of his many works.

Candide is a pupil of an optimistic philosopher, Dr Pangloss. They undergo the most appalling sufferings in a series of fantastic adventures, but nothing can dent Pangloss's often repeated conviction that 'everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. It is not, says Voltaire - but if not best, it could at least be better.

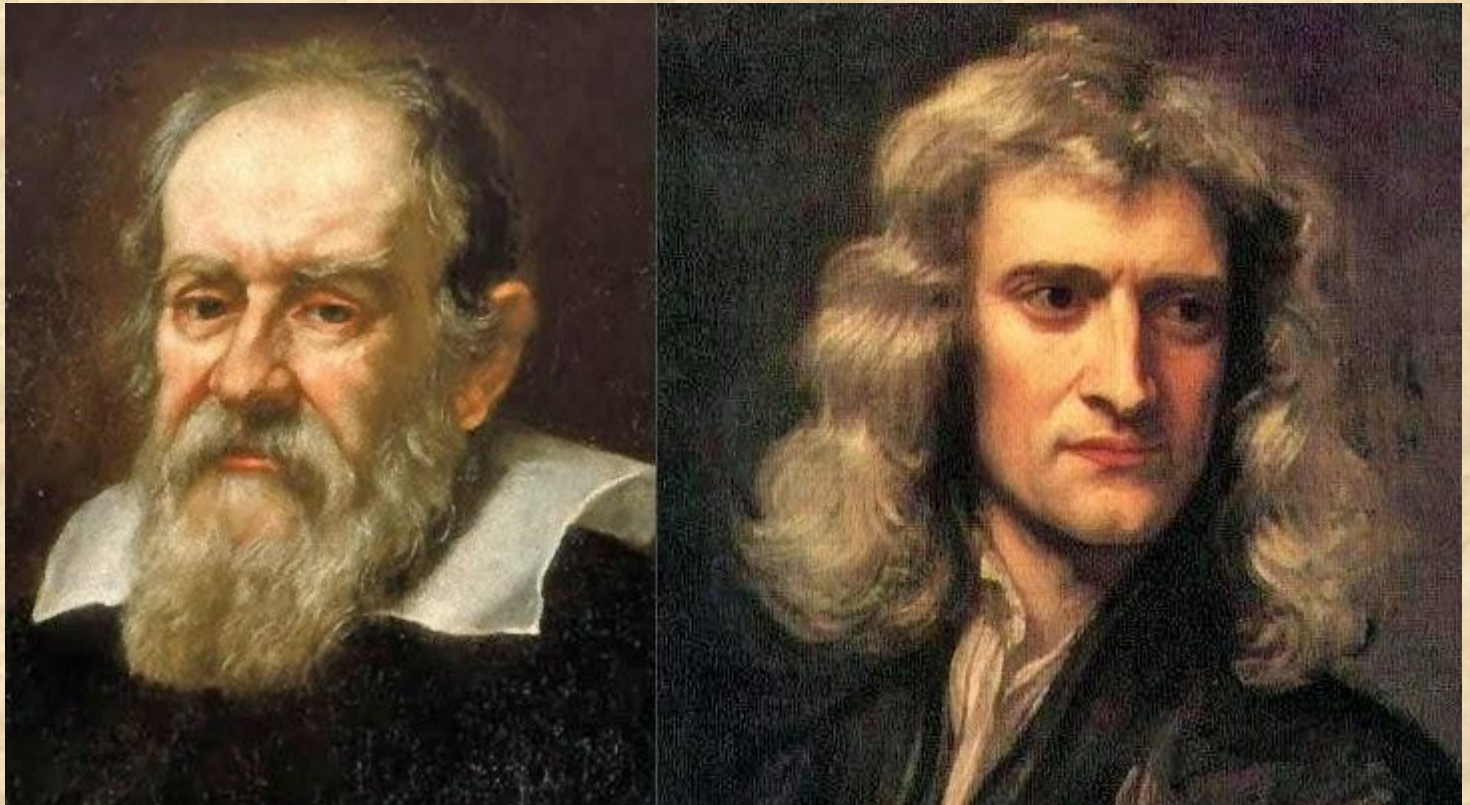


The Enlightenment: 17th - 18th century

The term Enlightenment, applied to ideas which develop during the 17th century and are most clearly expressed by the 18th-century French *philosophes*, describes a tendency to make reason the guiding principle of life. This is accompanied by a conviction that the application of reason will guarantee progress in all aspects of human existence.



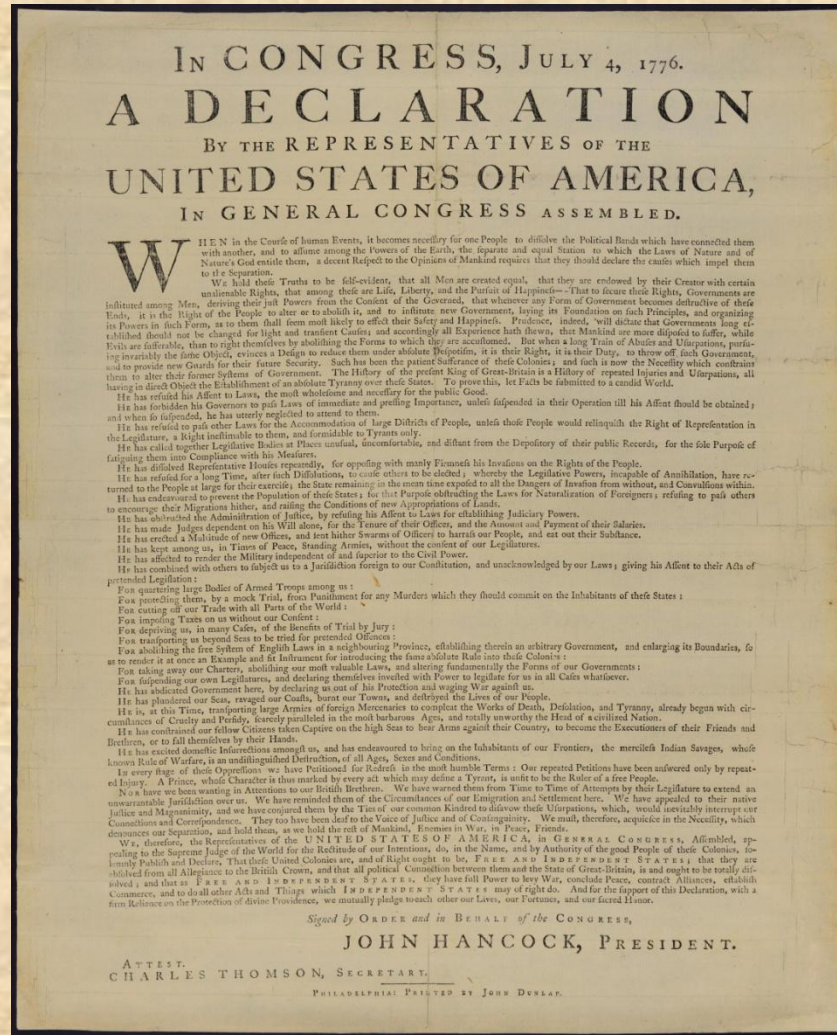
In one sense this is yet another wave of reaction against the **Middle Ages**, when faith and authority are the prevailing themes. More positively it is an offshoot of 17th-century science (the discoveries of **Galileo** and **Newton** being based on rational assessment of material evidence) and philosophy (following the example of thinkers such as **Descartes**).



The Enlightenment has faith in a natural order. Galileo and Newton have revealed the mechanics of the universe. These marvels of ethereal clockwork are taken by the **Deists** (the rational Christians of the day) as evidence of the genius of a rational creator.



By the same token it is assumed that there is a natural structure for human society, in which individuals have both freedom and rights. The injustices visible everywhere in the world are seen as the result of corrupt and superstitious institutions, imposed by unenlightened priests and kings. But human resolution can transform the political scene, as is made evident in the confident assertions of the American Declaration of Independence.



It is an article of faith that in a rational society the people will choose what is good for them. The Enlightenment abounds in educational theories to speed up the spread of reason. But the education of the people must inevitably be a long process. This practical problem is taken as justifying one slightly paradoxical aspect of the Enlightenment - the acceptance of the enlightened despot, the all-powerful ruler who disregards the short-term wishes of his subjects and enacts, for their own good, often unpopular measures of social improvement. There are many such rulers in the last decades of the 18th century, **Frederick the Great** in Prussia being merely an early and outstanding example.



The passion of the Enlightenment for the improvement and reform of society makes it an important element of the climate of opinion which prevails in the early stages of the **French Revolution** (and survives today in the ideals of the social services of democratic nations).



But such principles contain their own flaws. The Enlightenment's optimism can be a recipe for disappointment and is easily mocked (as by Voltaire himself in ***Candide***). And too much reason is dry fare. People crave something more emotionally nourishing. This is provided in religious terms by the 18th-century **revivalists**. And the need to listen to the emotions is forcefully expressed by a child of the French Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques **Rousseau**.

