

Part 1

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**Texts and Contexts:  
An Overview**

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# Reading the Historical Landscape

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The seventeenth century was a turbulent period in English history during which government, agriculture, and manufacture, learning, letters, and religion, underwent irreversible changes with broad and lasting effects on production, exchange, and culture. From a literary historical standpoint the seventeenth century continued the great European projects of renaissance and reformation. In its last decades it prepared the groundwork of the Enlightenment. Its rediscovery of the ancient world extended from the Greek and Latin languages and cultures to the languages and contexts of the Hebrew Scriptures and the republican politics of ancient Rome. The expanding recovery of ancient knowledge combined with the development of experimental science, technological advances in optics and navigation, and increasingly precise instruments of measurement combined to disrupt and rework the ways in which people thought about the world and their relationship to it. New technology and the increasing rationalization of agriculture changed the material conditions of daily life; the work of religious reformation became urgent, its claims and counterclaims issuing finally in the fitful violence of the civil wars, the interregnum, and the Stuart Restoration. In a more secular, less millenarian form, these forces also shaped the revolution of 1688 and the political supremacy of Parliament over monarchy that survives today.

For the purposes of this introduction, the seventeenth century in Britain will be understood to encompass four distinct settlements of uneven and overlapping duration: the last years of Elizabeth I and the Stuart succession, the mid-century civil wars and the interregnum, the restored Stuart monarchy, and the more decisively limited monarchy after 1688. Division into these four

periods privileges political history as the index of the time, but it should be remembered that each of these regimes may also be understood at a higher level of generalization as a continuous series of reactions to changes in the underlying infrastructures of thought, technology, and economics. As this is to be a literary history, we will be most interested in the way these events are manifest in the distinctive writing of the time and how these writings were, in themselves, events. Thus we will be offering not the history of social or political or material life in seventeenth-century Britain but rather an episodic narrative of the literature in which that life was presented by and to those who lived it. Any such narrative must be selective and exclusionary, for the writing of a time, speaking with many voices, addressing many, differently situated ears, necessarily tells more than one story. To render a coherent account of what must have been experienced as inchoate, partial, and fragmented by those who lived it, one must be reductive. It is my view that a frankly reductive story will serve better than either the brutish imposition of a false comprehension and coherence or the collocation of a number of limited and contradictory stories. This latter course, aiming at presenting the multiplicity of voices, ends only in suppressing the criteria of their selection and the interactions among them. I have pursued the first course, endeavoring to make my choices and the reasons for making them as clear as possible while suggesting the indistinct shapes of other, less fully told stories, that lie just beyond its horizons.

History of any sort is necessarily retrospective. In this respect it ought also be said at the outset that, as this is to be a *literary* history, its narrative will be shaped according to what turns out to have mattered to the literature of succeeding times, and it will necessarily also include some attempt to think about how what matters came to matter. Therefore we will ask two parallel questions of the literary records we interrogate: what did they do for and to the people that produced and consumed them? and in what ways do they continue to matter now, for us? “You cannot have your history in the future tense.” So, W. H. Auden playfully tweaked Vergil for structuring the *Aeneid* as a “historical” account of events that will have turned out to be the founding of the empire of his patron, Augustus. Literary history, however, must be told in the future tense because what will turn out to have been historical is revealed only to those who come after, noting and appraising change. The literary historical event is visible in the literary works that succeed it.