

Literature & Humanities Introductory

WRITTEN NOTES VERSION OF THE INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

- Some of this content will appear on the Midterm Exam.
- Material highlighted in the Written Notes version of the lecture (i.e. this document) is most likely to be considered for inclusion in the Midterm Exam, which is fully multiple-choice.
- Image (right): Lemuel Gulliver discourses with the talking horses (Houyhnhnms), from Benjamin Tabart's 1805 edition — for children — of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.



Periodization: historians and literary critics divide time into periods. One common practice is to designate the year 1650 as the start of the Modern Period (also known as modernity), an era characterized by humans making scientific discoveries that then altered their societies and the world. To a significant degree, modernity continues in the present day. Think about how scientific discoveries precipitated the automobile, the airplane, the spaceship, the heart-pacemaker, penicillin, the computer, the cell phone — and the list goes on!

In this course, *Literature and Humanities*, we examine seven literary texts (A through G) that exemplify the arc of modernity. Each of the texts has both an Irish and a larger international component. We chose Ireland as a way of bringing greater focus and coherence to the course as a whole. We could have chosen another country and/or culture, but Ireland happens to be your instructor's area of expertise.

Between 1650 and 1800, there occurred the first great sub-period of modernity, when scientific discovery took a significant leap forward. Scholars use a variety of names to characterize 1650-1800: the long eighteenth century; the Enlightenment; the age of reason (or rationality); the scientific revolution; the neoclassical (or neo-Augustan) age. One characteristic of the Enlightenment was the amassing of both existing and new knowledge in dictionaries and encyclopedias. The most famous such text remains Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*.

At first, the scientists of the long eighteenth century frequently worked on their own, often outside the universities of the day. They communicated by letter, giving rise to the conclusion that, collectively, they constituted an "invisible college" operating as a "republic of letters." In 1660, important English scientists or polymaths (see next paragraph) joined together as a visible institution, which still exists, enjoying high esteem: the Royal Society, headquartered in London, with the Latin motto *nullius in verba* ("take no one's word for it").

Critical to the scientific discoveries of long eighteenth century or Enlightenment was the promulgation of the scientific method, which relies on controlled experimentation or empiricism. We associate the creation of the scientific method with the English philosophe — i.e. Enlightenment polymath (or broad-based thinker) — Francis Bacon and the Irish philosophe Robert Boyle. Boyle used the term "the new philosophy" as a way of describing the advances in science achieved during the Enlightenment.

Important to Enlightenment progress were several female philosophes, not least Irish woman Katherine Jones (Robert Boyle's sister) and French woman Émilie du Châtelet. "Sex and science": based in a mansion in France, the latter collaborated with her lover, French philosophe Voltaire, to help spread across continental Europe the revolutionary scientific theories and discoveries of Isaac Newton.

English philosophe Newton formulated the law of gravity and laws of motion. Newtonian mechanics eclipsed Cartesian mechanics — that is, theories about motion advanced by French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes, who is famous for coining the expression, *cogito, ergo sum*: "I think; therefore, I am."

In addition to his breakthroughs in the areas of gravity and motion, Isaac Newton discovered calculus. Working independently of Newton, German philosophe Gottfried Leibniz also discovered calculus.

Leibniz is known for his controversial ideas about God, which we label theodicy or philosophical optimism. In his short masterpiece, *Candide; or, Optimism*, Voltaire summarized the central idea of theodicy as "all is for the best is the best of all possible worlds." He also presented a caricatured version of Leibniz in a protagonist named Pangloss ("all tongue" or "all words"). Leibniz developed theodicy as a response to ideas promulgated by the French Huguenot (Protestant) philosophe Pierre Bayle.

Voltaire's *Candide* is an example of the kind of text known as a picaresque tale. Such works gained much popularity during the Enlightenment. They generally feature a protagonist who goes on an international journey, which configures as a series of episodes, each of which is didactic (i.e. delivers a life-lesson). As the protagonist travels, she or he receives (but does not necessarily) follow advice from one or more mentors, also known as preceptors. Each preceptor attempts to impart to the peripatetic (i.e. traveling) protagonist her or his worldview — or episteme. We begin the semester with a section of a picaresque tales: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.



Several philosophes applied rational thinking in the scientific mode to the question of how best to order human society (also known as the social contract). We could call such people social scientists or social-contract theorists. One English philosophe, Thomas Hobbes, maintained that humans were inherently — and often violently — selfish and, if left to their accord, would cause lives to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In his book *Leviathan*, Hobbes argued that a strong, decisive leader was necessary in order to prevent society from devolving into *bellum omnium contra omnes* (Latin for "the war all against all"). Hobbes called his well-ordered society a commonwealth. In Part 4 of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the Yahoos, a monkey-like people, may be said to be Hobbesian in that they're socially chaotic.

Several important Enlightenment-era rulers were of the strongman type, although they tended to financially support scientists, artists, and other cutting-edge creatives. Thus, they are known as enlightened despots. Two such rulers are especially noteworthy: (1) King Louis XIV of France, the "sun king," who built a grand palace at Versailles, outside Paris; (2) King Frederick II ("the great") of Prussia (now part of Germany), whose showcase palace was Sans-Souci in Potsdam, in the Berlin area. Frederick participated in the Seven Years' War, which — along with the Lisbon earthquake and triple

tsunami (1755) — shook confidence in the Enlightenment project. The war saw the use of rape as a weapon, as would happen again in the twentieth century (in the Bosnian wars and the Rwandan genocide).

By contrast with Hobbes, the philosophe Jean-Jacques Rousseau of the republican city-state of Geneva, insisted that when in the state of nature, humans live harmoniously with one another. He argued that the introduction of private property led to tension-inducing inequities among members of society. In his book, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau insisted that sovereignty (i.e. political authority) resides fundamentally with the people, who must, therefore, keep authority figures, such as leaders, in check.

For his part, the Irish philosophe Francis Hutcheson saw humans as having “inalienable rights” and as striving to achieve “the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers.” At the College of William and Mary, Thomas Jefferson was taught by one of Hutcheson’s acolytes, William Small. Jefferson incorporated Hutchesonian precepts into the US Declaration of Independence. Of course, that document fails to accord rights to non-Caucasian males. A taxonomy of five human races was advanced in the German Johann Blumenbach’s *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*, which used the term “Caucasian” for white-skinned people and the term “Ethiopian” for black-skinned people.

Hutcheson lived in Catholic-dominated Ireland, but he was a Presbyterian. He attended college in Presbyterian-dominated Scotland. Both Ireland and Scotland interacted politically with Anglican-dominated England, a phenomenon that scholars analyze under the heading, the three kingdoms.

...