In *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson*, Jack Lynch explores eighteenth-century British conceptions of the Renaissance, and the historical, intellectual, and cultural uses to which the past was put during the period. Scholars, editors, historians, religious thinkers, linguists, and literary critics all defined themselves in relation to “the last age” or “the age of Elizabeth.” Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers reworked older historical schemes to suit their own needs, turning to the age of Petrarch and Poliziano, Erasmus and Scaliger, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Queen Elizabeth to define their culture in contrast to the preceding age. They derived a powerful sense of modernity from the comparison, which proved essential to the constitution of a national character. This interdisciplinary study will be of interest to cultural as well as literary historians of the eighteenth century.

THE AGE OF ELIZABETH IN
THE AGE OF JOHNSON

JACK LYNCH
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Preface

Perhaps it is best to begin with what this book is not. It is not a catalogue of Renaissance sources and analogues for Johnson’s works: W. B. C. Watkins produced such a list in 1936, and more than six decades later it needs little modification. Nor does it chronicle eighteenth-century responses to the major works and authors of the English Renaissance – what Johnson’s contemporaries had to say about Skelton, for instance, or Marlowe – since that task is ably fulfilled by Routledge’s Critical Heritage series and other reception histories. Neither yet does it tell the story of eighteenth-century Shakespeareanism or Miltonism, which critics such as G. F. Parker, Michael Dobson, Jean Marsden, Margreta de Grazia, and Dustin Griffin have done admirably. My work, though indebted to all of these, follows a different path, one pointed out, if not blazed, by René Wellek. In 1941, Wellek proposed “A ‘History of English Literary History,’” which he believed “a legitimate and even urgent task of English scholarship” (Wellek, The Rise of English Literary History, p. v). In the intervening half-century, few have shared Wellek’s sense of urgency; but it may now be time to synthesize the scholarship on the history of literature and of literary studies, and to try to discern significant patterns.

This book is just such an essay in the history of literary history: it is a study of the eighteenth century’s conception of the era we have come to call the Renaissance. It addresses the ways in which the age of Elizabeth, Shakespeare, and Milton was conceived as a literary and cultural epoch in Great Britain. For the first time since the Italian humanists insisted on their own break with their putatively barbarous medieval past, British writers looked back on the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries and saw not continuity but a break – they looked at their predecessors across an epochal chasm. Elizabeth’s age was treated as a period both chronologically and temperamentally distant from the age of Johnson.

More important, eighteenth-century thinkers, by marking the terminus ad quem of the previous age, marked the terminus a quo of their own; their
sense of their own cultural identity was inseparable from the identity of their ancestors. I argue, therefore, that historiography amounts to cultural self-constitution, and focus on the uses to which this idea of “the last age” was put. At the center of the project stands Samuel Johnson, one of the most perceptive cultural historiographers of the century, through whose works flow the most important currents of contemporary thought. Johnson is our guide to the various and often competing discourses of the cultural history of the Renaissance.

This work, then, has two central concerns. The first is to argue that eighteenth-century British thinkers had a notion of what we now call the Renaissance and that, while it differs in many respects from our own essentially Burckhardtian Renaissance, it was a genuine periodic conception of the age as a whole. The second is to demonstrate the importance of historiographical language, metaphors, and methods in the culture of the eighteenth century, and thereby to show how historiography is inseparable from cultural identity. I argue, in other words, that eighteenth-century British identity is tightly bound up with what it meant to be modern.

“Modern” is, of course, a notoriously slippery term, and never has a single meaning. Many periodic schemes are operating within a culture at any time: today we measure the lifetime of the modern languages in centuries, modern art in decades, modern popular music in years, and modern computer equipment in months. Even in academic historical discourse, where one might expect greater precision, the word “modern” may legitimately mean post-classical or post-medieval, post-Industrial Revolution or post-Great War – though always post-something, since the present derives its identity from comparison with the past. None of these schemes of periodization necessarily contradicts any of the others, whether in the eighteenth century or the twenty-first. When I make claims about periodization, therefore, I am focusing on only one of the many ways eighteenth-century Britons divided history, the one I find most illuminating. There were others, as when critics like Blackmore and Ferguson drew up schemes for a universal history that subsumed dozens of centuries under a single rubric, or (conversely) when writers in the 1750s looked back on Addison and Steele in the 1710s and remarked on the great distance that separated their ages.

I have had to be very selective. Much can be said about Continental attitudes toward the past, but my attention is focused on Britain. I do not want to suggest that the Renaissance is the only context, or even the most important context, in which to understand eighteenth-century
British culture: Johnson’s age defined itself in relation to antiquity and the Middle Ages, France and Spain, the Druids and the Tahitians. Its culture cannot be reduced to a mere reaction to the culture of two centuries before. The revival of learning is, however, an important context, and while I do not presume to present a comprehensive account of eighteenth-century identity, I try to pay attention to the part one age played in forming another. Even this is far too large a question for any single study to cover definitively, and much has been omitted. Bacon’s place in eighteenth-century science; Castiglione’s role in new notions of politeness; Reynolds’s late fascination with Michelangelo; Shakespeare’s influence on sensibility – all deserve inquiry, but limitations of time and space have kept them out of this book.

Nomenclature is inevitably a problem in discussing a notion that had not yet received a name. A formulation like “Johnson’s Renaissance” is enticing but dangerously anachronistic: it would have made no sense to Johnson himself. As I argue in the Introduction and throughout this work, though, I believe that the eighteenth century had a nascent periodic conception, however inchoate, of the years from roughly the beginning of the fifteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth. Using strictly eighteenth-century terminology (“the restoration of polite letters”) would be misleading and, after twenty or thirty appearances, positively cloying. Relying on more cautious circumlocutions, on the other hand, would be too self-conscious, and would perhaps add little precision. My approach is therefore unapologetically eclectic – sometimes uncritically borrowing terms like “the revival of learning” and even “the Dark Ages” (though always, I hope, with the understanding that the terms are not mine), sometimes using comparatively value-free terms like “the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,” but often simply using the word “Renaissance” to refer to a period that at least chronologically approximates our own idea of the word – or did, before “early modern” began to edge out “Renaissance” in English and history departments.

With other periodic terms I have been less cavalier. I have, for instance, avoided calling the eighteenth century “Neoclassical,” “Augustan,” or “Enlightenment.” Such terms are always reductive and often deceptive, and while their histories would make for an interesting study, it is not mine. That leaves no convenient label, however, for Britain’s notoriously “long” eighteenth century; by “eighteenth century” I usually mean the Restoration and eighteenth century, from roughly 1660 to 1800, and try to be explicit whenever confusion is a real threat.
In writing this book I have been blessed by the assistance of the learned and the shelter of academic bowers. It began as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, where I was fortunate to have three uncommonly perceptive readers, Paul J. Korshin, Stuart Curran, and Maureen Quilligan. Rebecca Bushnell, D’Maris Coffman, Margreta de Grazia, Robert DeMaria, Jr., Nicholas Hudson, John Richetti, Lana Schwebel, Erik Simpson, and Howard Weinbrot all read parts of the typescript at various points of its development, and provided valuable advice. The catalogue of others to whom I am indebted is too long to recount, but this book would not exist without the expertise of the participants of Kevin Berland’s virtual Academy, C18-L, and the flesh-and-blood members of Penn’s eighteenth-century reading group. I am pleased to acknowledge their collective contributions. My colleagues at Rutgers University have been unfailingly supportive, and it has been a real pleasure to work with Linda Bree of Cambridge University Press. I would also like to thank the staffs of Van Pelt Library of the University of Pennsylvania, the Dana and Alexander Libraries of Rutgers University, the Firestone Library of Princeton University, the Bobst Library of New York University, the Butler Library of Columbia University, the New York Public Library, the British Library, and the Bodleian Library for their assistance.


Final thanks go to my wife, Laura.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father.
Note on the texts and citation

Texts are reproduced literatim, with the following exceptions. Obsolete typography – long s, running quotation marks, macrons signifying omitted letters, and so on – is made to comply with modern usage. Inverted letters and other obvious compositors’ errors are silently corrected. Headwords italicized in the illustrative quotations in the Dictionary appear in roman, and in passages predominantly in italics, italics and roman are reversed. Black letter type used for emphasis is italicized. Except where noted, all translations are my own.

Notes provide short-title citations, with full bibliographical details in the Bibliography. In the interest of minimizing intrusive superscripts, I have often consolidated several citations into a single note, limiting them when possible to one per paragraph.
Abbreviations

**Dictionary**  

**Letters**  

**Life**  

**Lives**  

**Miscellanies**  

**Rambler**  

**Shakespeare**  

**1787 Works**  

**1825 Works**  