



The Age of Virtue: British Culture from the Restoration to Romanticism

David Morse

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In the eighteenth century "virtue" was a word to conjure with. It called to mind heroic predecessors from the Roman Republic such as Cato and Brutus and invoked qualities of personal integrity, selflessness, and a concern for the common good, which, though urgently needed, seemed desperately lacking, both in the ruthless party struggles of the age of Anne and subsequently in the all pervading political corruption of the Walpole administration. When the longed-for political savior failed to materialize it was increasingly felt that if virtue existed at all then it would have been sought for among the lower orders of society or else in provincial areas, where simpler and nobler values might still prevail. But with the coming of the French revolution and Romanticism, virtue began to lose its powerful resonances--it now seemed naive and simplistic, all too ready to deny both the complexities of human nature and the possibility of determination by external cultural forces.

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