

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe  
 Edited by James T. Boulton  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

# Daniel Defoe: His Language and Rhetoric

It is characteristic of Defoe that his *Essay upon Literature* should be concerned mainly with technology, with the making of books rather than the writing of them. He demonstrates how printing developed and thus led to 'the spreading of useful Knowledge in the World, making the Accession to it cheap and easy'.<sup>1</sup> His principal discussions of literary style and language occur not in prefaces, critical essays or treatises such as those by Dryden, Addison, Pope or Dennis; appropriately they are to be found in works such as the *Essay upon Projects* and *The Complete English Tradesman*. Their objectives were severely practical. In the first Defoe instructed his age in ways of improving society—by organizing the banking system, the building of roads or the treatment of lunatics. One of his proposals—in complete harmony with the current interest in linguistic problems—was for the founding of an Academy on the lines of the Parisian model established by Richelieu; since the aim of the institution would be to 'refine the *English Tongue*' (p. 29), he was justified in including a discussion of language.<sup>2</sup> The 'complete tradesman', for his part, needed to know how to write business letters, what literary manner to adopt, or how to use technical terminology; thus a consideration of style and language was again proper to Defoe's practical aim. Style, indeed, for Defoe was not an end in itself; it was, as Locke said of language, a means to communicate 'thoughts or ideas to another' and 'thereby to convey the knowledge of things'.<sup>3</sup>

Language was (in this essentially Baconian tradition) for intelligently directed use: hence swearing (against which Defoe inveighed

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* (1726), p. 114. (Note: references to extracts from Defoe's writings included in the Selection printed below are incorporated in the text of the Introduction.)

<sup>2</sup> Dryden had called for a British Academy under royal patronage in the dedication to *Troilus and Cressida* (1679).

<sup>3</sup> *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), III, x, 23.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe

Edited by James T. Boulton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

in the *Essay upon Projects*) was 'senseless and foolish' because it consisted of words which 'signify nothing' and led to the 'superfluous crowding in of insignificant words more than are needed to express the thing intended'.<sup>4</sup> Defoe might well have said with Gulliver that his 'principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse'; he might also have claimed to make language (like the Brobdingnagians their mathematics) 'wholly applied to what may be useful in Life'.<sup>5</sup> And usefulness presupposed intelligibility, that 'free, plain, honest way of laying things open', essential to 'a right Information of things'.<sup>6</sup>

The tradesmen need not be offended at my condemning them *as it were* to a plain and homely stile; easy, plain, and familiar language is the beauty of speech in general, and is the excellency of all writing, on whatever subject, or to whatever persons they are we write or speak. The end of speech is that men might understand one another's meaning; certainly that speech, or that way of speaking which is most easily understood, is the best way of speaking. If any man was to ask me, which would be supposed to be a perfect stile, or language, I would answer, that in which a man speaking to five hundred people, of all common and various capacities, idiots or lunaticks excepted, should be understood by them all in the same manner with one another; and in the same sense which the speaker intended to be understood, this would certainly be a most perfect stile. (p. 227).

Such a 'perfect stile' makes no provision for irony; nor does it allow for the sort of delight the cultivated reader of *Gulliver's Travels* derived from a close attention to those stylistic devices which were designed to hoodwink the less perceptive. In Defoe's view all readers of normal intelligence should respond 'in the same manner with one another'. He obviously did not bargain for the use to which Swift would put the 'Trading Stile' in the *Modest Proposal*; he was, in his own words, 'a Plain Dealer'<sup>7</sup> and his kind of plainness, while it was perfectly suited to his purpose on most occasions, precluded that ironic detachment that Swift could command. Defoe himself required it in

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.* (1697), pp. 130–1.

<sup>5</sup> *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), IV, xii; II, vii.

<sup>6</sup> *Review* (Edinburgh edn.), VI, 127, pp. 505–6. (For comparable views expressed by earlier seventeenth-century writers on the need for 'a plain, easie artificial Stile . . . to treat of Things', see R. F. Jones, *The Seventeenth Century* (Stanford, 1951), pp. 75–110.)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 4, p. 14.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe

Edited by James T. Boulton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

*The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters*; his lack of it was one cause of the misunderstanding which greeted that pamphlet (see p. 87).

To write ironically with success a writer needs to be alert to two audiences: those who will recognize the ironic intention and enjoy the joke, and those who are the object of the satire and are deceived by it. This implies that the ironist has ranged himself with those of his readers who share his superior values, intelligence and literary sensibility; together they look down on the benighted mob. This vantage point Defoe did not share. His Dissenting background engaged his sympathies with those who, on the political and social planes, were struggling to assert their rights, rather than with those whose struggle was to maintain an inherited position and traditional privileges. His education at Revd. Charles Morton's Dissenting Academy, with its emphasis on the vernacular and modern languages, mathematics, geography, and similar subjects with a practical, cash value, cut him off from the classical tradition instinctively assumed by the Tory satirists.<sup>8</sup> And his commercial activities, as well as his experience of business failure, ranged him with the 'Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants' whose language the Royal Society preferred 'before that of Wits, and Scholars'.<sup>9</sup> Defoe, then, wrote 'to serve the World' not through any superior amusement shared with the Pharisees, but through informing, cajoling, and generally educating the Scribes. The 'Mathematical plainness' of language celebrated by Bishop Sprat was his proper medium.

This plainness was not only functional; it was not only a highly serviceable tool for one who did not distinguish between the life of a commercial, practical world where vulgar speech prevails, and the portrayal of that world in literature; this literary manner also had moral connotations of great moment for Defoe. He was in no doubt that a man's language and his morality were closely related, a fact which emerges from his treatment of the 'Wits and Scholars' mentioned by Sprat. He had no time for the wits (especially the 'Wit turn'd Tradesman'); he described them as 'the Froth and Flutter of the

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of seventeenth-century advocates of the vernacular—especially Bacon and George Snell—see R. F. Jones, *The Triumph of the English Language* (1953), ch. X.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society* (1667), p. 113.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe

Edited by James T. Boulton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Creation' (p. 238) and made a sharp distinction between them and men of wisdom or common sense. The question of the scholar's use of language was treated with greater seriousness. Defoe's judgment on 'meer Learned Men' was harsh: their education in Latin makes them 'dull, awkward, and heavy in delivering themselves' (p. 254); there are 'many great Scholars whose *English* has been far from Polite' (p. 29); and Defoe is (like Swift) especially distrustful of clergy, doctors, and lawyers because they rely on 'Habits of Speech' peculiar to their professions (p. 29). This last criticism is both moral and literary. Such men are 'full of Stiffness' in their use of words; they also betray a pride in being different from normal men, an arrogant contempt for ordinary speech which is the basis of honest social intercourse, and a reluctance to share their knowledge with the common man. For his part Defoe asserted his reverence for 'the general vulgar sense' of language in the *Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe*;<sup>10</sup> the very high proportion of words of Anglo-Saxon origin in Defoe's vocabulary confirmed it. In the *Serious Reflections* his view of the interdependence of style and morality is made patently clear. He is discussing honesty and remarks:

The plainness I profess, both in style and method, seems to me to have some suitable analogy to the subject, honesty, and therefore is absolutely necessary to be strictly followed; and I must own, I am the better reconciled, on this very account, to a natural infirmity of homely plain writing, in that I think the plainness of expression, which I am condemned to, will give no disadvantage to my subject, since honesty shows the more beautiful, and the more like honesty, when artifice is dismissed, and she is honestly seen by her own light only; likewise the same sincerity is required in the reader, and he that reads this essay without honesty, will never understand it right.<sup>11</sup>

Stylistic plainness, then, is both appropriate to the subject and a warranty of honest purpose; a man who writes clearly and directly, who is 'plain and explicit' (p. 228), can be trusted. The standpoint assumed is identical with that common in everyday life—that one can judge a man's trustworthiness by his honest face and plain speaking, and if he is one to 'smile and smile' you will know him for a villain. Defoe fully

<sup>10</sup> *Robinson Crusoe*, III, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 26–7. (Defoe's reasoning in this passage closely resembles that found in attacks on pulpit eloquence in the Restoration period. See R. F. Jones's article on that subject, reprinted in his *Seventeenth Century*, pp. 111–42.)

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe  
 Edited by James T. Boulton  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

accepted the logic of his statement in the *Review* concerning a letter from one of his readers:

The Honesty and Plainness of the Stile of this Letter, I hope will offend no body, but rather convince any Man of the Genuine Native Sincerity of the Man.<sup>12</sup>

For Defoe 'plain English and plain dealing' were inseparable.<sup>13</sup>

'Plain English' meant the language of the everyday world where man was moulded by circumstances which tested his courage, sense and ingenuity; the world which made Moll a thief and a prostitute, Colonel Jack a pickpocket, and turned Roxana 'from a lady of pleasure', into 'a woman of business'. The diction, imagery, and proverbial wisdom employed by these characters were a guarantee of the authenticity of their autobiographical narratives; they were intended to reinforce the claim that these accounts were direct transcripts of human experience. The same linguistic features are to be found in Defoe's other writings which were invariably concerned with the actual world of affairs.

His principles, formed by contact with this practical world, were largely unsophisticated as befitted the 'Plain Dealer'; his language was appropriately unaffected. Like Swift in *The Tale of a Tub* or *The Conduct of the Allies*, Defoe could reduce complex issues to a simple formula: man's needs consist of 'Three things, *Money, Friends, and Health*' and without them 'he Dies in a Ditch, or in some worse place, *an Hospital*' (p. 24); 'Self-destruction is the effect of Cowardice in the highest extream' (p. 24); again, in political matters, 'Wisdom, Safety, and Peace' reside solely in 'the Golden Mean';<sup>14</sup> and on his favourite subject of trade—'Trade is the Life of a Nation's Wealth . . . Trade makes the whole World live by, and depend upon one another; Trade makes barren climates fruitful, thinly-inhabited countries populous . . .'<sup>15</sup>—he is well stocked with simple certainties. This is not to suggest that the man was a simpleton or that no serious thought lay behind his ingenuous formulae. Professor Novak (in *Defoe and the Nature of Man*) gives an account of the 'ideological basis of some of Defoe's best themes

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, III, 94, p. 375.

<sup>13</sup> *Essay upon Projects*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> *Review*, IV, 141, p. 561.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 6, p. 23.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe

Edited by James T. Boulton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

and stories', and in so doing he reveals a wider reading in traditional and recent philosophy on Defoe's part than is apparent at first sight. But it is still true that Defoe's reader is invariably aware of writing which, as Coleridge said of Junius, was designed to make a stir in the coffee-house, the lobby of the House of Commons, or a public meeting rather than to be satisfying 'for the closet of a Sidney, or for a House of Lords such as it was in the time of Lord Bacon'.<sup>16</sup> And the language he adopted was fitting: direct, unsophisticated, and lucid.

Defoe expresses anger with a crude vigour: swearing is 'a Vomit of the Brain' and as impertinent 'as if a man shou'd *Fart* before a Justice, or *talk Bawdy* before the Queen' (p. 31). This is the robust speech of the market-place, given extra pungency by the writer's earthy imagination and his closeness to readers who would share his contempt for the *beau monde* among whom swearing was vogueish. A shared scorn for families who gloried in their ancient lineage similarly accounts for the robust vulgarity of his description of 'That Het'rogeneous Thing, *An Englishman*':

*In eager Rapes, and furious Lust begot,  
Betwixt a Painted Britton and a Scot:  
Whose gend'ring Offspring quickly learnt to bow,  
And yoke their Heifers to the Roman Plough:  
From whence a Mongrel half-bred Race there came . . .* (p. 63)

It accounts too for the deliberately coarse lines which follow the Prologue for the opening of the Haymarket Theatre (pp. 117–8); Defoe lowers his tone and language to communicate with greater strength his contempt for the attitudes expressed in Sir Samuel Garth's verses. The frequent and conventionally elevated claims for the Restoration theatre were so much bombast to Defoe and the normal reader of the *Review*. But there is other than this kind of (pejorative) vulgarity in Defoe's writing; also to be reckoned with is his invigorating use of common speech. For example, he uses a harsh-sounding colloquialism (biblical in origin) to add toughness to the centre of a line in *The True-Born Englishman*: 'Fools out of favour grudge at Knaves in Place' (p. 54); idiomatic remarks frequently appear in the poem to show contempt—'Fate jumbl'd them together, *God knows how*', 'Lords, whose

<sup>16</sup> Coleridge's *Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (1936), p. 314.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe

Edited by James T. Boulton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Parents were the *Lord knows who*' (pp. 64, 66); the younger brother in *The Family Instructor* uses a lively vulgarism when he says that his father 'will go thro' stitch with what he has begun' (p. 202); and, judged by standards of stylistic refinement, Defoe's prose often suffers from the clumsiness which is permissible in conversation but not in print.

Much has been made of this clumsiness and of Defoe's prolixity. Ian Watt rightly observes that economy and compactness require labour; they reduce an author's speed of writing and consequently diminish his financial gain when diffuseness is economically profitable.<sup>17</sup> Defoe, it is true, does not discipline the popular orator's tendency to repeat himself, to heap illustration on illustration, and to add details that are strictly superfluous. On the other hand, he does not multiply words to achieve a superficial literary grace or indulge the copious and figurative language of the early romances; each detail, separately considered, is relevant; what he cannot restrain is that fascination—which communicates itself to his audience—with observed facts of human behaviour and environment. When, therefore, he insists that he is 'no Man of Circumlocution, but loves to come directly to the point',<sup>18</sup> his claim is justified only in one particular sense: that he does not write with premeditation; relying on a native sensitivity to word and cadence, he writes at the behest of feeling and common sense. Yet too much can be made of Defoe's stylistic deficiencies; the consequence is to underrate his literary sensibility.

This would be a serious fault. Not infrequently in *The True-Born Englishman* the overt lack of refinement obscures Defoe's command of that 'ease and quickness' which Locke thought essential to verbal communication. Of the so-called true-born Englishman he remarks:

*His own dear Praises close the ample speech,  
Tells you how Wise he is; that is, how Rich:  
For Wealth is Wisdom; he that's Rich is wise;  
And all men Learned Poverty despise. (p. 68)*

These lines have a vigour worthy of Pope; their phrasing and cadence are controlled; and the result is a memorable, trenchant statement of a view expressed by Pope himself as well as by Johnson. Similarly in

<sup>17</sup> *The Rise of the Novel* (Penguin, 1963), pp. 58–9.

<sup>18</sup> *Review*, VIII, 91, p. 365.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe

Edited by James T. Boulton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

the reference to Charles II—‘Throughout his Lazy, Long, Lascivious Reign’ (p. 62)—the alliteration and length of line appropriately reinforce the surface meaning. Again, his hearty contempt for the pillory and the tyranny it symbolizes is amply conveyed in the vivid, pithy descriptions which stay in the mind long after other details of the poem fade. The pillory is by turns the ‘State Machin’, the ‘Stool of State’, the ‘State-Trap of the law’, ‘Great Engine’, a ‘swelling Stage’, a ‘Theater’, ‘the Satyr of the Age’, the ‘Speaking Trumpet of Men’s Fame’, the ‘Herald of Reproach’, and finally, ‘the Bug-bear of the Law’. There is not only imaginative resourcefulness here, but also an understanding of the political value of the easily-remembered, quotable catchphrase that summarizes a shared attitude. The pairs of alliterative words—‘Prejudices and Passions’, ‘causeless Curses’, ‘Ballads and Balderdash’—to be found occasionally in the prose serve an analogous purpose. Furthermore, though Defoe is well known for the length and disorder of his sentences in which clauses—to adapt a remark by Coleridge—sometimes seem to ‘have the same connection with each other that marbles have in a bag; they touch without adhering’<sup>19</sup>—his skill in the short sentence or aphorism should not be disregarded:

There is the Christianity and Justice by which I have been treated; and this Injustice is the thing that I complain of. (p. 181).

The tradesman that is a lover of pleasure, shall be a poor man. (p. 230).

Business neglected is business lost. (p. 231).

Pleasure is a thief to business. (p. 231).

Defoe was certainly conscious of the value of pungent compression; that the aphorisms have a biblical source (as is the case with ‘the tradesman that is a lover of pleasure, shall be a poor man’) or are proverbial in form, merely underlines the fact that he dealt primarily in familiar, traditional ways of thinking and speaking. It should not be assumed however, that Defoe was unaware of formal stylistic devices: he can use antithesis; where the object is concrete, such as money or the pillory, he apostrophizes skilfully (pp. 101, 122–4); and he makes effective use of a series of rhetorical questions to force home incontestable truths and at the same time convey his own surprise that the truths require stating at

<sup>19</sup> *Inquiring Spirit*, ed. K. Coburn (1951), p. 183.



Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe  
 Edited by James T. Boulton  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

all (pp. 40, 232). And no man can more evocatively communicate the deep satisfactions associated with the practical world. One thinks of those experienced by Crusoe or Roxana, of the quiet pleasure of 'H.F.' the saddler in the *Journal of the Plague Year*, when 'the people began to walk the streets again' after the plague, or of this sentence from *The Complete English Tradesman*:

To a complete tradesman there is no pleasure equal to that of being in his business, no delight equal to that of seeing himself thrive, to see trade flow in upon him, and to be satisfied that he goes on prosperously. (p. 231).

'Names and Things directly I proclaim' (p. 75): so says Britannia in *The True-Born Englishman*; and she speaks for Defoe. The real world fascinated him: hence the enthusiasm in his writing on money and trade, on projects, pirates, or immediate political issues; hence too the realistic environments he creates for his characters in the novels, in the *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, and in the dramatized incidents which illustrate his arguments whether they concern pensions for seamen or the qualities essential to a complete gentleman. Whatever the matter under consideration it is presented in a tone and style which emphasize its direct relevance to the world of 'things'. Defoe is invariably concerned with what he can make seem practicable—this is, for example, the touchstone for his case in the *Argument Shewing, That a Standing Army . . .*, and for his proposals in the *Essay upon Projects*. Indeed his handling of any question involved the firm assumption that an argument based on incontrovertible facts, frankly stated, will induce belief. Quite bluntly, after referring to some historical facts in the 'Explanatory Preface' to *The True-Born Englishman*, he continues: 'This is so plain, that he who is ignorant of it, is too dull to be talk'd with' (p. 52). When he remarks 'The reason is plain . . .' (p. 42), or, in *Mrs Veal*, 'This relation is Matter of Fact, and attended with such Circumstances as may induce any Reasonable man to believe it' (p. 134), the premise is the same in each case. It is equally operative in the novels. Having shown the circumstances in which Colonel Jack was brought up, or the difficulties which beset Moll or Roxana at the beginning of their careers; having shown the pressure of 'necessity' which drove them to crime; Defoe assumes that the logic of the events he describes will induce belief in the historical reality of his characters.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-09931-8 - Selected Writings of Daniel Defoe  
Edited by James T. Boulton  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

The prose proper to this demonstration was lucid, unsophisticated, and unornamented, but tough and flexible; it had a close relationship with common speech while revealing sufficient control to convince the audience of the writer's reliability. Defoe had to show—to adapt his words from the *Review*—that he was both a man of action and a man of sense (p. 116). An excellent example of his prose, containing all these essential features, is *Legion's Memorial*. Its imperative clarity conveys the barely-restrained anger and determination of 'the People of England' as they warn their representatives in the House of Commons:

You are not above the People's Resentments, they that made you Members, may reduce you to the same Rank from whence they chose you; and may give you a Taste of their abused Kindness, in Terms you may not be pleased with. (p. 84).

This level is sustained; we feel that the petition originates with a public which thinks, speaks and writes in simple, unequivocal terms. As a consequence the commonplace biblical quotation at the end—'*Our Name is Legion, and we are many*'—takes on a threatening power. The words are no longer a cliché blunted by continual use; they become a token of strength vitalized and substantiated by the tone of the language in the preceding pages.

As with Swift in the *Drapier's Letters*, Junius or Tom Paine, Defoe's authority in such a pamphlet and elsewhere comes mainly from the assurance carried by his prose that he was personally involved alongside his readers in the world he wrote about. It was for him predominantly a business world in which facts and figures were highly important, where technical terms from old or developing trades were increasingly current, or where politics were significant to the extent that they altered the actual conditions in which men lived and worked. This is where literature and popular art of all ages, but especially his own, put the emphasis. Swift's bitterness about the political situation in Ireland (in the *Short View of the State of Ireland*) was expressed in terms of its degrading effects on the lives of Irishmen; Hogarth in 'Gin Lane' vilified the morality of a society which allowed the sale of cheap gin and thereby promoted a coarsening brutality among its poor; and Defoe was anti-imperialistic because further conquests would merely increase