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978-0-521-67505-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Daniel Defoe

Edited by John Richetti

Excerpt

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JOHN RICHETTI

Introduction

Book 11 of Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* includes an uproarious parody of the games of strength and speed featured in classical epics. The presiding goddess, Dullness, presents as a prize to the victor, the notorious publisher, Edmund Curll, a "shaggy Tap'stry" depicting Pope's satiric targets in the poem, Grub Street authors and booksellers. And at the forefront of the picture is Daniel Defoe: "Earless on high, stood unabash'd De Foe" (11, 147).¹ Having one's ears cut off, as suggested by Pope's slanderous depiction of Defoe, was in those days a possible if rare punishment for seditious publication. Pope and the members of his elite literary circle viewed writers for hire like Defoe with contempt as nothing more than literary prostitutes who catered to degraded popular taste or produced political propaganda. Defoe had been pilloried (made to stand in humiliating and dangerous public view, hands and head in a locked frame, elevated on a pillar) for parts of three days in July 1703 for writing *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), a pamphlet the government deemed incendiary. Swift, in a pamphlet in 1708, said that Defoe was "One of these Authors (the Fellow that was pilloried, I have forgot his name) so grave, sententious, dogmatical a Rogue, that there is no enduring him."²

Three hundred years or so later, however, Defoe has had the last laugh on mandarins such as Pope and Swift. Thanks partly to contemporary redactions in film (*Castaway*) and television (*Survivor*), the *Robinson Crusoe* story remains an enduring archetype, just as the book itself is a world classic, translated into many languages. And thanks to the novel's dominance in modern times as a literary form, Defoe is these days a major figure in the history of its development in England, with *Moll Flanders* (1722), *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), and *Roxana* (1724) along with *Robinson Crusoe* read as standard texts for academic study, as founding moments in the emergence of modern fiction. Moreover, it is precisely by virtue of Defoe's career as the versatile professional writer (hack is the word they would have used) that Swift and Pope found so contemptible, that his writings have in the

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last three decades or so come to command increasing attention from literary, social, political, and cultural historians.

The bankrupt merchant turned writer and political propagandist, the object of abuse and condescension from traditionalists in his own day, Defoe is arguably the most important writer of the first thirty years of the English eighteenth century, and perhaps the one who is nowadays most widely read. As the thirteen essays in this volume will demonstrate, he was certainly the most prolific and one of the most versatile and effective writers of his time. A political and religious polemical journalist, a satirical and philosophical poet, an economic theorist, a moralist and social commentator, and of course late in life a writer of long narrative fictions, Defoe produced a richly varied body of work. His literary output was staggering, so much so that just how much and precisely what he actually wrote are matters of scholarly dispute.³ He wrote in many genres, poetic and prose kinds, and he may be said to have inaugurated one characteristically modern mode of publication – the syndicated column, the periodical he called the *Review*, which he produced single-handedly (two and then three times a week) from 1704 to 1713. Defoe, in short, was a major force in the explosion of print and the founding of that free public exchange of political ideas that has been called the bourgeois public sphere in early eighteenth-century England. His restless and omnivorous intelligence, to say nothing of his talent for non-stop articulation, propelled him through a life of writing and political activism without real precedent in England.

As the *Review* especially makes clear, Defoe was a man of the world, deeply immersed in early eighteenth-century politics and economics. A public intellectual well before the phrase came into the English language, he was interested in everything, seemed to have strong opinions about everything, and wrote about almost everything in his world and his time. Brash, opinionated, “so grave, sententious, dogmatical” (in Swift’s sneering phrase), Defoe is perhaps the most indefatigable and energetic author of his day: a veritable writing machine. And yet for all that unceasing torrent of language he produced, Defoe was not chained to his desk. He lived an eventful and indeed danger-filled existence, beginning as a wholesale merchant and entrepreneur and then thanks to bad luck as a businessman/writer – bankrupt after risky speculation and briefly imprisoned for writing *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702) – he was forced to gain his living by writing and as a secret political agent for the powerful Tory politician, Robert Harley, for whom he agitated to promote the proposed union of England and Scotland. From the wreckage of personal and financial disaster, Defoe constructed by virtue of sheer will and persistence a career that made him one of the best-known writers of his time.

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The details of Defoe's life and its relationships with his multifarious writings are a recurring emphasis in some of the essays in this volume, which dramatize his intellectual range and literary versatility in the face of many hardships, trials, and setbacks. A majority of the essays deal, naturally, with the long narratives he wrote from 1719 to 1724, which are the works that will appeal most to contemporary readers and which are the most immediately available and pertinent of his works today. But it is worth noting that these "novels" represent only a small fraction of what Defoe wrote. Moreover, the novels are in fact enriched by being placed in the context of Defoe's non-fictional writings, those political, social, economic, and moral works that occupied him for many years. Defoe's novels, that is to say, encompass not only the lives of their individual actors but also their intersection and involvement with issues within the larger socio-historical world in which they acquire their identities; they are novels of ideas as well as of character. Defoe never stops thinking, questioning, and agitating, and some of the essays in this volume will ponder his provocatively original notions about key topics in his narratives such as money,⁴ commerce, gender, psychology, politics, religion, empire, and crime that link his novels to the rest of his intellectual life.

Without minimizing the rough and tumble side of Defoe's career in the fractious literary and political marketplace of the early eighteenth century, or his self-aggrandizing and self-promoting tendencies, his often reckless, self-destructive, mendacious, and always radically contentious personality, the essays in this volume take Defoe with full seriousness as an engaged and committed writer and even as an important thinker, finding in his works a veritable encyclopedia of the issues central to his time. The journalist and polemicist without peer, the criminologist, the urbanist, the proto-feminist, the early theorist of globalism and imperialism, the poet and satirist, moralist and social critic, the promoter of Britain's mercantile power and prophet of its future imperial glories, to say nothing of the creator of memorable fictions – Defoe fits all these descriptions and works in all these fields. Much more so than Pope, Swift, and other elite writers of the time, Defoe is a representative of the spirit of his age: forward-looking and open to new ideas, enlightened and rationally pragmatic in the moderate eighteenth-century English sense, religious but not fanatical or exclusivistic in his views. As a religious Dissenter from the merchant classes, lacking the university education and the ruling-class connections or patronage other writers of the time enjoyed, Defoe was an outsider who was thereby able, thanks to sheer intelligence and drive, to offer in his works an overview of the age, biased, to be sure, but comprehensive in its ambition and inventive and revealing in its articulations. In a word, he is perhaps the first truly *modern* English writer.

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NOTES

1. *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen & Co, 1963), p. 741.
2. Cited in Pat Rogers, ed., *Defoe: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 38.
3. The most recent and thorough (and for many convincing) reconfiguration of the canon of Defoe's works can be found in a number of books by W. R. Owens and P. N. Furbank: *Defoe De-Attributions: A Critique of J. R. Moore's Checklist* (London and Rio Grande, Ohio: The Hambledon Press, 1994) and *A Critical Bibliography of Daniel Defoe* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), and P. N. Furbank and W. R. Owens, *The Canonisation of Daniel Defoe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Owens and Furbank are the general editors of the ongoing edition of Defoe's (selected) works, *The Works of Daniel Defoe*, 44 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000–8). But no one will ever know exactly what Defoe wrote. Many Defoe specialists disagree with at least some of Furbank and Owens's de-attributions. Some texts they designate as only "probably" by Defoe in *The Works of Daniel Defoe*, such as *Due Preparations for the Plague Year* and *Conjugal Lewdness*, are widely accepted as Defoe's.
4. Money is a crucial subject in all of Defoe's works, and it is important for readers to have some notion of what these sums might be worth in early twenty-first-century purchasing power. There are a number of web sites that will provide an approximation of contemporary monetary equivalents. I would recommend <http://measuringworth.com/calculators/ppoweruk>.

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I

PAULA R. BACKSCHEIDER

Defoe: the man in the works

One of Daniel Defoe's contemporaries, Eliza Haywood, opens *The Invisible Spy* (1755) by taunting the reader: "I have observed that when a new book begins to make a noise in the world ... every one is desirous of becoming acquainted with the author; and this impatience increases the more ... he endeavors to conceal himself." Shortly before her death, Haywood "laid a solemn injunction" to keep her secrets on the person who knew her life best, because she believed "improper liberties [would be] taken with her character after death, by the intermixture of truth and falsehood."¹ Almost from the beginning of his writing career, Defoe could serve as proof of these statements. Although his contemporaries often wanted to "become acquainted with the author" in order to get him arrested, many of his modern-day biographers and critics have dedicated themselves to scrutinizing the works to find the man.

Most people think that a writer can be found in the works and that "writing was his/her life." The writer, however, was a material body, a mortal body. Defoe stood in the rain in the pillory and could not brush the water off his nose. Although he obviously had an excellent constitution and unusual stamina, he had colds, bruises, and surgery. People responded to his material body in ways that affected his behavior and self-perception; they remembered his hooked nose, his habit of crooking his little finger, and his foppishness. Writing was not Defoe's life. Unlike most writers, for whom "life" and its demands are obstacles to writing, except for the brief period of Defoe's poetic aspirations, he preferred life and resorted to writing when enraged, unoccupied, or in economic need. Taken without external evidence, much that he (or any other biographical subject) "revealed" should not be believed. It has been demonstrated by those who study biography writing that the memories of biographical subjects, their relatives, and friends are the most unreliable sources of "facts." Even a private diary can be delusional. Indeed, one found and taken to have been personal can, in fact, have been intended to be read by a sneaking, suspicious spouse.

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Unlike Haywood, who successfully suppressed details of her life, Defoe tried rather repeatedly to control the story of his life. In *An Appeal to Honour and Justice* (1715) he wrote, “I should *even Accounts* with this World before I go, that no Actions (Slanders) may lie against my Heirs, Executors, Administrators, and Assigns, to disturb them in the peaceable Possession of their Father’s (Character) Inheritance.”² *An Appeal* is usually granted the status of a defense of Defoe’s life, if not quite of autobiography. Some biographies of Defoe, for instance, give it quite different degrees of reliability,³ and I remember the exact moment as I reread it for my *Daniel Defoe: His Life* when I stopped believing Defoe, when I “knew” he was prevaricating.

Defoe lived a long time, he was secretive and tricky and had a lot to hide, and he was an exceptionally skillful writer. This last fact is the most complicating; as John Richetti has observed, even as a young writer Defoe had a “striking” ability to slip “easily into narrative mimicry of a persona at variance with his own reality.”⁴ Although biographers and critics have taken “improper liberties,” or at least gone too far in reading some of Defoe’s printed statements as autobiography, as biographers we believe that our most accurate insights about writers come from cumulative experience with their total *oeuvre*. Over a lifetime, a writer’s recurring opinions about society, human behavior and relationships, and politics emerge, as does some understanding of their personality and “reality.” The languages of law and business funnel into the conflation of “character” and “inheritance” in the sentence I quoted from *An Appeal*, which reveals the way Defoe thought and the reality he believed in. Like many people of his time, and especially those with a Puritan heritage, he kept “accounts” of his conduct on earth with an eye on a reckoning in Heaven. Judgments of moral character were always figured into assessments of achievement. Defoe’s focus here is on what he is leaving, his inheritance, which is his “character.” Throughout *An Appeal* he writes about sources of credit, reputation, and perceptions of him and his conduct. As Catherine Ingrassia remarks, property shifted from the material to “fluid, immaterial, and multiple” forms, and they “could be realized only imaginatively.”⁵ Just as he speculated on all kinds of investments in the new credit economy, he speculated on a wide variety of kinds of self-representation in publications; his goal was the same – the amassing of credit that would improve his personal and economic status. All kinds of paper and material credit are conflated in the culture and in Defoe’s writings about himself. His awareness of the power and also the volatility of established authorial personae is evident. His credit as a man, as a former tradesman, as an employee of the queen (he insists it was she for whom he worked), and as a writer are all at issue in *An Appeal*, mutually reinforcing a person and a life story that he cannot quite sustain.

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How free writers ever are from genre conventions, from their own horizons of expectation for the forms in which they write, and from the pressures exerted on them can never be known, but writers have agency, and traces of the mind that created the texts linger. In this chapter I will define some of the places where I find Defoe's mind and reality insistently and dramatically revelatory of his personality. Identity is the meeting point of biological characteristics, who a person wants to be, historical circumstances, and what the world will allow him or her to be. For example, a man may have the tactical mind and physical strength to be a great general, but he must want that destiny, have a war in which to exercise these abilities, and be allowed by the culture to advance to that position. Defoe was one of the most embattled public figures in history. He lacked any of the sources of power – position, family, wealth, charisma. His life was a struggle to hang on to what he wanted to be and thought he was, and he faced frequent, very harsh confrontations with contradicting facts. In Defoe's case, political, religious, and economic forces were especially strong, as were, as we will see, the pressures of his sense of himself.

Defoe's life is a monumental contradiction. He helped create modern counterintelligence and opinion-sampling and virtually invented modern political propaganda. He was a tireless fighter for freedom of the press and religion, single-handedly wrote the first essay periodical for nine years,⁶ and published beautiful economic geographies of his own nation and the world. His novels still intrigue and entertain us. Yet he was also pardoned by two monarchs, jailed repeatedly, suffered the ignominious pillory *three* times, and died in hiding from a creditor who was so tenacious that she took her case to the mighty Court of Exchequer. Who was he? What was Defoe like? How did he perceive himself and his place in the universe? Through a series of quotations, I will offer a few conclusions.

But in the Middle of all this Felicity, one Blow from unforeseen Providence unhing'd me at once. Robinson Crusoe in *Farther Adventures*

And now I began to think my Fortunes were settled for this World ... But an unseen Mine blew up all this apparent Tranquility at once, and tho' it did not remove my Affairs there from me, yet it effectually remov'd me from them, and sent me a wandering into the World again ... *Col. Jacque*

In the middle of what she thinks is her Happiness and Prosperity, she is ingulph'd in Misery and Beggary. *Roxana*⁷

These quotations describe one of the ways Defoe experienced his life. Once he turned away from the dissenting ministry, he followed a well-marked career path that should have led to economic and even political success. He became a

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wholesale hosier, a merchant who bought stockings from the districts that produced various kinds and redistributed them around the kingdom for profit. He prospered with his wide selection of stockings of different thicknesses, lengths, textures, colors, prices, and especially patterns in a time when even the poorer people were beginning to want fashion hosiery. He had a home and a warehouse in Freeman's Yard, Cornhill, an area known for high quality woolen manufacture and for the attractive residences of substantial tradesmen.

By necessity, Defoe practised his trade traveling all over England. Indeed, the travel was one of his reasons for choosing this occupation. As an opinion-gatherer in 1705–1711, and as a merchant-investor and the writer of the *Tour* in the 1720s, he would re-create this life on horseback. One of the most revealing ways to understand a life is to search for the things the person works to keep stable. In his life of arrests, turmoil, and change, what Defoe fought to recreate and maintain tells us as much about him as studies of how he changed over time. In the weeks before he was apprehended for publishing *The Shortest Way*, he described himself to several people as having “a Mind Impatient of Confinement”; that he so consistently created employment for himself that involved travel poignantly glosses that statement.⁸

At the same time that Defoe was building his trade, he began to build the reputation he would need to be elected to, for instance, the Court of Aldermen or even Lord Mayor. The Sheriff appointed him to the petty (or trial) jury in 1684, an unusual responsibility conferred on such a young man. In 1687 he became a livery man of the City, a member of the group allowed to vote for the highest City of London offices, such as auditors, Lord Mayor, and Members of Parliament. He served on the petty jury in 1685–86 and again in 1688, and in 1689 was a member of the eleven-member governing board of Cornhill ward. He paraded as one of the “chief Citizens, who being gallantly mounted and richly accoutred” formed a “volunteer regiment” to welcome and support King William upon his arrival in London. He served in the right offices, joined the right groups, and signed the right documents, including some to protect trade with North America.

His marriage to Mary Tuffley with her £3,700 dowry led to his expansion into the export–import business and trade in wine, spirits, cloth, and other commodities (in today's currency, her dowry would be £400,000 or about \$800,000). He speculated in investments in such risky ventures as diving bells and civet cats. One of the ships in which he invested was captured by a French man-of-war, and there were unexpected losses on cargoes to New England and Ireland. In 1692, he was committed to the Fleet Prison on the complaint of numerous, ordinary citizens, some owed as little as £33; the complaints kept being filed, and as soon as he was released, he would be re-committed.

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Rather than mingling with the first citizens of London, he was housed in squalor with felons and shoplifters.

Defoe would sometimes describe this bankruptcy for the enormous sum of £17,000 as one of the unseen mines that exploded his plan for his life. In *An Appeal to Honour and Justice* he writes, “Misfortunes in Business having unhing’d me from Matters of Trade ...” (194). “Unhing’d” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “to unsettle, unbalance, disorder (the mind)”; “to deprive of stability or fixity; to throw into confusion or disorder.” As a young man, he had elected to turn away from the ministry, but now he had lost both the credit and the means to carry on in his chosen profession. In the years to come, he would sometimes describe going bankrupt as a horrendous, extended process that led him to do “many little, mean, and even wicked things” that even “the most religious tradesman” will stoop to when harassed beyond endurance, even as he continued to describe prosecutions for debt as surprises initiated by his malicious and insignificant enemies.⁹ Both descriptions highlight the contradiction between his self-image and the actual experience in a very public world.

The Shortest Way with the Dissenters (1702) was the second major “unseen Mine.” In an autobiographical account requested by his powerful employer, Robert Harley, who would rise to the highest offices in government, Defoe explained: “I began to live, Took a Good House, bought me Coach and horses a Second Time.” “But I was Ruin’d *The shortest way* ...” (*Letters*, p. 17). Many of his private and published explanations and defenses sound a note of surprise. “That the Govornment, whom I Profess I Did not foresee would be Displeas’d I had it not in my Thoughts That the Ministers of State would Construe That as Pointing at Them, Which I Levell’d Onely at Dr. Sachavrell,” he writes, and “it seems Impossible to imagine it should pass for any thing but a Banter upon the High-flying Church-Men.”¹⁰ A few of the changes in power during Queen Anne’s reign caught Defoe off guard and unsettled his affairs, and he was arrested in 1713 for publishing three pamphlets, including the provocatively titled *And What If the Pretender Should Come*. Defoe, like the characters in his novels, would think his “Fortunes were settled for this World” only to find himself “unhing’d.” In his petition for pardon to Queen Anne, he describes what happened as meanings “wrested against the true design” and finds himself “to his great Surprize ... Misrepresented, and the said Book Misconstrued.”¹¹ In *An Appeal*, he writes, “I leave it to any considering Man to Judge, what a Surprise it must be to me to meet with all the publick Clamour that Informers could invent ...” (*Appeal*, p. 213).

Again in the 1720s Defoe’s fortunes seemed settled, and he lived in a lovely home with a beautiful garden. He wrote books such as *A General History of*

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Discoveries and Improvements (1725–26) that were his favorite kind of book to write and that speak of an unhurried occupation. He hoped to propagate useful knowledge and encourage the present age to invent and improve discoveries. His language is expansive and highly figurative: “Tyre was the Daughter of *Sidon*, and she dwelt so near her Mother, that they went on hand in hand in the Improvement of their Navigation, as well as of their Commerce” (Tyre and Sidon were the two leading commercial ports of ancient Phoenicia).¹² He draws entertaining and instructive examples from Greece, Carthage, Rome, Phoenicia, Egypt, from the past and America, Africa, and Russia in his own time and suggests, with lists of specific benefits, such things as Great Britain taking and re-building the North Africa of Carthage. After lingering on expositions of world history, he compares Great Britain and its strengths to the great nations throughout time and space, and then he recommends immediate action for Britain’s attainment of world domination. He also editorializes against war and tyranny, which, he says, beggar the world. He takes the time to extend lyrical comparisons; of the age of Renaissance exploration, he writes, “Now the adventurous Mariner confin’d himself no more to the meanness of coasting along the Shores Immediately like young Swimmers grown expert, and who scorn any longer to keep within their depth, and in shallow Waters, but boldly swim off into the Channels of the largest Rivers; so have the Mariners.” “Meanness,” “coasting,” and “scorn” give way to the image of the strong, bold, free explorers. But this situation is analogous to the opportunities offered by Africa and America in his own time: “How little then of this newly discover’d World is yet known, compar’d to what there is yet left to know?”¹³ At the same time his imagination was sailing free, he was over-investing and speculating as he had in the 1690s, and old creditors were stirring. He began to write compulsively about the costs of everyday items and even recommended the regulation of prices charged by sellers of common wares including tallow chandlers, his dead father’s occupation. Into this world of expansive dreaming and proposing, new lawsuits for debts intruded, and Defoe was driven into hiding, his life, like Roxana’s, “ingulph’d in Misery and Beggary again” (*Roxana*, p. 149).

I Do allready Find Tis No Very Difficult Thing for me to Get my Bread.

He that gave me Brains, will give me Bread.

I Never Despaird and In the Worst Condition allways believ’d I should be Carryd Thro’ it.¹⁴

Displaying another consistent aspect of his personality, resilience, Defoe set about rebuilding his life after each disaster. Over a number of years, he repaid