
To read A Critical Study of Daniel Defoe’s Verse: Recovering the Neglected Corpus of His Poetic Work as a scholar who has studied Defoe primarily as a proto-novelist and journalist is to get a distinct and intimate view of this icon of eighteenth-century literature. Defoe scholarship, as this book points out, has long favored a vision of Defoe as a prose writer, and studies of British poetry in the first years of the eighteenth century have overlooked his verse. Working against these trends and building on recent work by J. Paul Hunter, Daniel Defoe’s Verse offers a systematic, comprehensive, and well-documented exploration of Defoe’s poetic career. Not just an account of Defoe as a poet (who achieved significant fame in the first decade of the eighteenth century), this book also offers substantial insight into the social world of British literature in the under-examined years between the death of John Dryden and the ascendancy of Alexander Pope. Following Defoe through thick and thin — from private wrestling with faith to dodging public censure on the pillory and, ultimately, fame — the book narrates his career as a poet, all the while showing how Defoe’s sometimes unusual appropriations of extant poetic forms served to intervene in a wide range of struggles both personal and public. The book culminates with extended, original readings of Defoe’s two most substantial verse works, The True-Born Englishman and Jure Divino, which reinforce its central claim that Defoe’s poems deserve more attention than they have heretofore received as carefully measured and often innovative contributions to contemporary literature and politics.

One strength of Daniel Defoe’s Verse is that it draws together important accounts of Defoe’s poetic works currently scattered across individual essays, paratextual materials in editions, and the extended biographical explorations undertaken by Paula Backscheider, Max Novak, and John Richetti. For example, in
the case of *The True-Born Englishman*, we can now see how little agreement actually exists about the “technical merits and nature of the poem” that made Defoe famous in his own lifetime (172). In its comprehensiveness (another strength), *Daniel Defoe’s Verse* clearly benefits from and contributes to the wealth of knowledge currently available about Defoe’s life and times. Starting with his early religious poetry -- a series of “Meditations” that Mueller transcribes in their entirety as an appendix to his study -- the story of Defoe’s poetic career takes flight in Charles Morton’s dissenting academy. There amidst various other seventeenth-century influences that would inform his work as a satirist, the author of *Robinson Crusoe* found the works of George Herbert and John Donne recommended as models (20–22). These “Meditations” reveal the influence of earlier religious poetry on Defoe as well as his personal struggle with his religious commitments. For students of Defoe’s fiction, I would add, these poems shed light on the themes of personal introspection and salvation that structure his first-person narratives. The confusion between penitence and transatlantic exile featured in the first book of the Crusoe trilogy, *Moll Flanders*, and *Colonel Jacque* also finds expression in Defoe’s sense that flight was a means of finding spiritual solace. Laden with “Guilt,” Defoe’s fledgling poetic voice pleads that God “Let Me Not Go, But Flee, / Swift be my Steps, & Swifter my Desyre, / To Such a Refuge to Retyre” (254–5). In the context of a writing career that began (and, as we find, later returned) to such religious reflections, one finds it harder to dismiss the religious reflections of some of Defoe’s most well-known characters as merely irony or strategic piety.

As *Daniel Defoe’s Verse* contends, to measure Defoe the poet against a standard defined by Pope is not merely to buy into the values Pope himself hoped to propagate but also to overlook the fact that Defoe’s career as a public poet was really at an end when Pope’s was just beginning. Building on this observation, the book examines Defoe’s contributions to the field of public poetry with the intention of reassessing their interests, influences, and place in the English verse tradition. For readers more familiar with Defoe the novelist, this work might feel like looking the wrong way through a telescope. The minutely-drawn readings of poems linked to public controversies -- including the contested London election for city officers of 1690, William III’s right to keep a sizable standing army, the proposal for the creation of a medical dispensary for the ailing poor, and the terms of the union of England and Scotland as they were teased out in parliamentary debate in Edinburgh -- provide a stark counterpoint to the globe-spanning fantasies that have made Defoe a favorite of recent literary criticism. This is not to say that all these rhetorical contests did not have exceedingly wide-ranging consequences, but instead that Mueller’s book offers a more locally-circumscribed and time-bound counterpoint to dominant discussions of Defoe’s literary craft.

In describing these varied scenes in Defoe’s poetic career, *Daniel Defoe’s Verse* demonstrates another of its strengths by keeping the matter of literary craft in the foreground. Judiciously delving into questions of genre and prosody, the book’s string
of case studies makes clear that Defoe did “consciously -- and often skillfully --
experiment with, and appropriate for his purposes, various aspects and features of a
range of established poetic genres” (7), including lampoons, panegyrics, ballads, and
the ode. The development of his satires over time reveals an increasingly subtle
elaboration of individual characters (91), and his panegyrics could stealthily cut in
multiple directions. Mueller’s book also demonstrates that Defoe’s somewhat
idiosyncratic preference for writing hymns -- a permutation of the ode -- allowed him
to create and command a communal voice. That this popular appeal worked to
Defoe’s immense advantage is evident in Mueller’s account of A Hymn to the Pillory.
This poem, which is examined as a species of “mock ode” and an inversion of a
Pindaric model, turned what might have been Defoe’s mortification on the pillory
into a “vindication during the very hours of punishment” (100, 103).

Taken together, the biographically-organized explorations that make up the
first part of Mueller’s book reveal a poet with his ear to the ground and his pen at the
boundaries of genres he had at his disposal. They also recognize a poet whose politics
were more complex and situational than has previously been allowed. Defoe’s
commitment to Whig agendas, for example, does not always match up with the aims
of his verse (88–9). One hopes that subsequent studies on the “missing years’ of
English poetry” (88) will tease out the implications of Defoe’s case. Does the
flexibility of poetic genres Daniel Defoe’s Verse documents tell us something about the
practice of poetry in this period? And does the sometimes uneasy link between poetry
and political commitment reflect a pervasive tension between aesthetics and ideology?
Or is this more a matter of individual poets, their values and stylistic preferences?

The question of aesthetic merit figures centrally in Daniel Defoe’s Verse. Among
other things, it is a book that aims to show that Defoe’s poetic oeuvre “can be enjoyed
and appreciated even by a twenty-first century readership, if it is actually read in the
appropriate and relevant contexts” (5–6). Such concerns are understandable in so far
as Defoe’s poems have been eclipsed by his fiction and can seem to expert readers as
the “result of impatience or haste” (Hunter 216). Yet the question of literary
appreciation is a complex one, especially when it is framed across long spans of time
that encompass changes in taste, the institutions that shape aesthetic appreciation and
the very means and meaning of reading. Readers will nonetheless find that the force
of Daniel Defoe’s Verse rests in its capacity to recover those “relevant contexts” and to
demonstrate the value of historically-situated evaluations of literature. Doing precisely
this, the book’s culminating discussions of Defoe’s two major verse works, The True-
Born Englishman and Jure Divino, reconstruct the contexts in which these poems can
be more fully understood: respectively, the standing army debate -- in which
parliament sought to limit monarchic power, in part by “indulging in its growing
xenophobia” and insisting “on an army of native-born Englishmen” (175) -- and the
conflict over dissenters’ legal rights and, specifically, occasional conformity. Drawing
extensively on historical accounts of these political battles as well as contemporary
responses to Defoe’s contributions to them in verse, these analyses reinforce the fact that his poetry was calibrated with specific audiences and rhetorical aims in mind. They also reveal a more familiar vision of Defoe as a writer who held fast to questions of legality when he chose to launch his literary productions into the political melee. In *The True-Born Englishman* he attacked what he saw as unlawful restrictions placed on the monarch. In *Jure Divino* he used his verse to defend Dissenters’ “sovereignty over their minds” and their “right to religious toleration” (240, 250). Such accounts will certainly help reconnect these poems with the concerns that energized them -- much in the same way that *A Critical Study of Daniel Defoe’s Verse* will enable specialists in eighteenth-century British literature to reconnect with Defoe the poet.

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