
Pickering and Chatto’s Works of Daniel Defoe, edited by P. N. Furbank and W. R. Owens, and Defoe’s Review, edited by John McVeagh, have presented scholars of the eighteenth century not just with newly definitive editions of the ten novels that Furbank and Owens allow, in all probability, to be by Defoe, but with forty-three further volumes of writing in other forms, treated with the same scrupulous editorial care. As reviews have commented, this vast and extraordinary collection has made the Defoe canon as a whole—unstable and contested as it remains—newly accessible to scholarship, and these resources have also elevated Defoe studies to a new realm of seriousness.

So who will read this material? Daniel Defoe’s non-fiction has been of some interest to political and economic historians, but it has attracted most attention from literary scholars, as context for Defoe’s novels. Since Defoe is a talismanic figure in teaching and scholarship on the rise of the novel, this makes his non-fiction of some interest to all students of English. Many undergraduate students of the eighteenth century or the novel will have encountered a chunk of The Complete English Tradesman or A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain, read alongside Moll Flanders or Robinson Crusoe. Defoe’s conduct books, economic treatises, travel narratives, histories, and writings in other genres help us to understand some of the ideas and the values expressed in the novels—generally ideas and values associated with the rise of Protestant and capitalist individualism.

What most previous studies of Defoe’s non-fiction have tended not to do, and this includes the editorial introductions to the Pickering and Chatto editions, according to John Richetti, is pay attention to the formal properties of these works in their own right, as products of generic pressures and literary craft (Richetti 38). In their explorations of various kinds of moral challenge and crisis, their attempts to represent the particularities of time and space, and their occasional dramatic
dialogues, Defoe’s non-fictional works help us to understand the genesis of his groundbreaking experiments in realist narrative, as well as some of their peculiarities. They also provide us, in their own right, with an opportunity to explore the relationship between history and form.

Mäkikalli and Mueller’s collection, *Positioning Daniel Defoe’s Non-Fiction*, addresses this gap in scholarship. Though no collection of essays on a subject so vast could be anything other than partial—there is no essay here on Defoe’s *Review*, for instance, or on the works grouped by Furbank and Owens under the heading “Political and Economic Writings”—it makes some very productive incursions into Defoe’s conduct, satirical, political, and geographic writing, as well as into his writings on the supernatural and on real events. The essays are divided into three sections, focusing in Part I on “Rhetorical Strategies,” in Part II on “Formulating Places and Times,” and in Part III on “Educating Women and Men.” Throughout, the emphasis is principally on form. The editors note a critical consensus on Defoe’s “lack of interest in and, indeed, inability consciously to control the formal aspects of his work” (vii), and side instead with J. Paul Hunter’s view that Defoe played shrewdly with form to suit and manipulate his audience (ix).

The decision to place the essays on rhetoric at the beginning of the collection was a good one. These respond particularly directly to the claim for Defoe’s formal adeptness and self-consciousness and provide a firm foundation for the broader investigation that follows. Glynis Ridley’s essay challenges the common conclusion that, because the irony of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* was generally missed (disastrously for Defoe), it constitutes a failure as a satire. Ridley links the pamphlet to textbooks on rhetoric by Defoe’s tutor at the Stoke Newington dissenting academy, Charles Morton, which were rooted in lesson plans that she argues Defoe would have followed as a student. Morton follows classical models for constructing an argument that requires a case to be made through the ventriloquizing of opposing points of view and advises those serious about persuading an audience of some difficult case to present it “three times and in three different ways” (7). Had Defoe’s readership been sufficiently well educated in these principles, argues Ridley, they would have recognized such ventriloquism at work. Penny Pritchard links certain rhetorical features in Defoe’s early work with rhetoric conventional to the educated dissenting clergy of the previous generation. Anyone familiar with Defoe’s writing will recognize what Pritchard describes as the “gestured disavowal or refusal to elaborate” (26). It is fascinating to discover that *apophasia* (pretending “to deny what is really affirmed”) and *paralipsis* (emphasizing “something by pointedly seeming to pass over it”) were standard features in sermons that employed such artless art while disavowing the empty elaborations of rhetoric in favor of the plain truths of scripture. Holly Faith Nelson and Sharon Alker show the sophistication and care with which Defoe deployed an array of tropes in his writings on Anglo-Scottish union. These tropes—principally of marriage and digestion—were used by both sides in this argument and had a
habit of taking on a life of their own. Nonetheless, as Defoe appreciated, they were vital to bringing the idea of union alive in the imagination of the people.

Many of the essays in this collection recall Glynis Ridley’s in their presentation of a Defoe who tended to approach the same subject multiply in a bid to capture and persuade, making his reader responsible for holding these different perspectives in tension. Opening the second section of the collection, dealing with the representation of time and space, Pat Rogers, author of the only major study of *A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain*, brings a fresh perspective to the text by applying to it Gerard Genette’s typology of paratextual elements: peritexts (title pages, indexes), textual augmentations (diagrams, tables, lists), and embedded forms (citations). Rogers compares Defoe’s *Tour* to its closest contemporary relative, John Macky’s *Journey through England* (1714), and finds in Defoe a far more sophisticated bid to capture formally both the material experience of travel—its pace, its hardships, its trajectories and digressions—and the nation itself, in its contemporary state of accelerating social and economic flux. “The *Tour*,” suggests Rogers, in a summary of his argument which deserves quotation in full,

operates as a dynamic contraption whose energies perpetually require adjustments of the formal settings. Paratext defines its goals along with pure text, and apparently marginal elements are constantly invading the centre. This process creates a kind of textual instability, parallel to the unstoppable forces for change within the English nation. (78)

Benjamin Pauley has a nicely related argument to make about the depiction of London in the *Tour*; one which takes us back to Ridley’s demonstration of the way in which Defoe makes his points. London, argues Pauley, presents Defoe with an aesthetic and conceptual problem. The city sits at the centre of the *Tour* both textually and conceptually. Defoe flirted with theories new to his generation, which saw consumption by a rapidly urbanizing population as the driver of an economy geared not just to meeting basic needs and producing national wealth through export, but to generating and consuming its own excesses. A London which appeared to some contemporaries as a luxurious, devouring maw was also, for Defoe, the condition for the prosperity of Britain’s regions. Almost every place in Defoe’s Britain supplies London with something, and those which do not are notable for their backwardness and poverty. Defoe finds London almost impossible to describe: his circumvallation of it (an attempt to describe London’s boundaries) simply confirms its amorphousness; his attempts to locate precise distinctions between such key constituent parts as court and city fail. And yet this failure of formal representation, argues Pauley, is not only a reflection of Defoe’s anxiety at the spatial chaos of his city. It complements his appeal to the reader to imagine an order within this chaos, precisely as the potent energies of commerce defy measurement and control, yet generate the order of national prosperity and power. Defoe, as Pauley describes it, follows the example set by his education in “writing three times” to help his reader capture this paradox, mapping London’s physical disorder in his circumvallation, but also imagining order through symbolic
representation and through projections of a future London where this disorder has been corrected. He writes three times once again, in a pamphlet, a history, and a poem describing the “Great Storm” of 1703. Aino Mäkikalli demonstrates how these three accounts published in the year following the natural disaster, which played a role in establishing Defoe as a public reporter of events, show him experimenting with the narrative representation not just of Christian time (the hand of God in nature), but also of modern, secular, clock time: the time of historical development and improvement, and the time of formally realist narrative. Like Pauley’s, this essay shows Defoe using different modes of presentation to help his reader imagine the relationship between apparently conflicting spatio-temporal modes: one absolute and symbolic; the other particularized and material.

The final section of this collection, dealing with Defoe’s didactic work, opens with another argument for the deft, self-conscious deployment of form. Where they have recognized a political impulse behind The Family Instructor, Defoe’s first conduct book, previous readings have associated it with the Schism Act of 1714 and the need for domestic instruction sympathetic to dissenters such as Defoe, should the Act force the closure of the dissenting academies. But Andreas Mueller argues that Defoe regarded the Act as unlikely to be effective. He thinks it more likely that The Family Instructor’s assertion of patriarchal authority over wayward children is an expression of a widely-shared anxiety about the rise of popular Jacobitism in the years between the Sacheverell trial and the publication of the text in 1715. Here, suggests Mueller, is a writer who recognizes that the audience he is trying to reach—rebellious apprentices and their masters—may not have the “inclination ... education, and time” to read Hobbes on the necessity of subjection to firm government, but that the same message might be “concretised and domesticized” in a more popular and accessible form (144). Where much previous conduct literature, notably the vastly popular Whole Duty of Man (1658), had appealed to its readers through exhortation, Defoe’s use of dialogues invites his readers imaginatively to “immerse” themselves in the drama of household management. Like the rhetorical ploy of writing “three times,” it allows different points of view to be expressed, and it gives the reader responsibility for judging between them.

Rebecca Anne Barr’s essay on The Complete English Tradesman suggests that the text provides further evidence of Defoe’s sense of “the inadequacy of propositional knowledge” in texts seeking to guide human conduct, and the necessity instead for imaginative immersion. Here the reader is asked to identify with the tradesman in what John McVeagh has called “a study ‘of the personality under stress’” (153). If The Family Instructor asks masters to imagine themselves disciplining apprentices, and apprentices to imagine themselves subjecting themselves to that discipline, here the disciplinary relationship is compressed within a single, divided subject, who must continually reflect upon and manage his own conduct, holding “in contradiction the competing demands of the self, morality, and the market” (160). The last essay in the collection sees Defoe
making his reader responsible once again: this time for discriminating between three possible explanations for encounters with apparitions. Like many Protestants of his generation, despite the demise of the Catholic idea of purgatory, Defoe continued to believe that mankind was guided by spirits inhabiting a particular region of the universe. Apparitions might be the delusions of a disordered imagination or the products of a guilty conscience, but they might also be genuine visits from spirit guides. Some recent writers on apparitions—notably Joseph Glanville—had adopted an Enlightenment rhetoric which described them plainly and empirically. Evert Jan van Leeuwen shows that Defoe, on the other hand, reaches for the “religious sublime” through paradox, personification, and metaphor. Where Glanville claims to present self-evident truths that are not contingent on the acts of writing and reading, Defoe asks the reader for another leap of the imagination and works hard to help them make it.

I finished Positioning Daniel Defoe’s Non-Fiction convinced of the argument made in its introduction: that Defoe innovated formally in his non-fiction in order to engage, persuade, and move his reader. The collection does an excellent job of showing us how and of tracing patterns across some of the many genres in which Defoe wrote. It will be required reading for Defoe scholars, and it will be of interest to many students with a more general interest in the popular writing of the early eighteenth century.

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WORKS CITED


