

## 'Daniel Defoe, Master of Genres'

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From the early days of his literary career, Daniel Defoe's reputation as a writer has been marked by a curious dichotomy. Following the publication at the end of 1700 of the verse satire *The True-Born Englishman*, Defoe rose to some considerable fame. The poem became *the* best-seller of the early eighteenth century, reaching an impressive twenty-two editions in Defoe's lifetime and selling in the region of 80,000 copies. *The True-Born Englishman*, as Furbank and Owens have observed, 'transformed Defoe from a relatively obscure pamphleteer to the most famous poet of the moment' (xiii). Yet, within a few years Defoe's fortunes declined dramatically. His extraordinary talent for impersonation and ventriloquism, as well as his willingness to sell his pen, meant that his contemporaries came to regard him as little more than a Janus-faced hack. By 1705, even those who were relatively well disposed towards Defoe felt that he had irrecoverably damaged his reputation: 'Should I defend his good-nature and his honesty,' John Dunton explained, 'and the world would not believe me, 'twould be labour in vain' (Rogers 34). Jonathan Swift famously pretended to forget Defoe's name, labelling him a 'grave, sententious, dogmatical Rogue' (Ibid 38). Similarly, Alexander Pope made Defoe one of his Whig dunces and still saw him standing in the pillory more than two decades after the event (see *The Dunciad*, Book II). Yet, while Pope failed to find evidence of excellence in Defoe's writings, he also believed that there was 'something good in all he has written' (Rogers 40).

Modern evaluations have followed a similar pattern. On the one hand, Defoe's literary efforts have been viewed as marking the beginnings of arguably the most dominant of literary forms, the novel. Reference works such as *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* generously highlight Defoe's 'enormous' literary influence and typically assert that he may be regarded as the 'first true novelist' (263). Indeed, Defoe's talent for creating what Ian Watt has labelled the 'lowest common denominator of the novel genre as a whole' (34), formal realism, has guaranteed him a place in the majority of accounts of the development of this most elusive of literary forms. That Defoe's status as a proto-novelist has remained undiminished is shown by the fact that even the most recent textbook on the novel, Terry Eagleton's *The English Novel*, takes Defoe's work as its point of departure.

On the other hand, however, critics have also variously commented on Defoe's shortcomings as an author of poetry and prose fiction. James Sutherland, for example, remarks that, while the lines of *The True-Born Englishman* are 'not entirely doggerel verse', the poem's good central idea is 'not very prettily put' (67). Perhaps even more telling are his comments on Defoe's greatest (consciously) literary undertaking, the twelve-book verse satire *Jure Divino*. The 'vigorous but uneven verse' of Defoe's magnum opus was, Sutherland imagines, composed 'to the stumblings of his pony as he rode about England' (145). Later biographers have reflected on Defoe's poetic abilities in a similar fashion. Paula R. Backscheider, for example, has

commented that the verse of *Jure Divino* 'approaches the worst Defoe ever wrote' (189). Defoe's prose fictions have shared this critical fate. The 'inordinate number of cracks' in texts such as *Robinson Crusoe* or *Moll Flanders* inevitably generate, as Watt has asserted, 'doubts about the completeness of Defoe's control over his narrative' (98, 100). Indeed, the notion of Defoe as the stumbling author, who 'does not fully understand at all times what he is doing' (Boardman 5), has become something of a commonplace in discussions of his first person narratives. It is not unusual to read that Defoe's ostensibly artless 'see-through' stories 'tumble forward' aimlessly (Eagleton 21, 29).

It is not the purpose of this paper to expose less flattering evaluations of Defoe's ability as a writer of 'literature' as misguided or incorrect. If measured by the poetry of Pope or the prose fiction of Fielding, one may indeed describe Defoe's literary efforts as lacking in refinement and cohesion. However, the numerous exposés of his lack of literary mastery have distracted from and in fact largely obscured one of Defoe's greatest talents, his acute awareness of the functions and importance of genre. This paper represents an (admittedly limited) effort to re-assess this aspect of Defoe's literary undertaking. I suggest that a detailed analysis of one of Defoe's earliest poems, *The Pacificator* (1700), and a strongly contextualised reading of his first conduct book, Volume one of *The Family Instructor* (1715), offers firm evidence not only for Defoe's in-depth knowledge of generic conventions, but also for his ability to employ these conventions effectively. In addition, it will become apparent that Defoe consciously developed further some of these generic conventions when existing formats did not satisfy his polemical intentions.

## 2

Defoe's early literary efforts indicate that he had high ambitions to establish himself as a poet. In the early 1680s he produced a manuscript of poetic meditations and one of his first publications was indeed a verse satire, *A New Discovery of an Old Intreague* (1691), which lampooned a number of known London Jacobites. Political poetry had, of course, long been a tool for gaining social status, patronage and political advancement and, after having produced a series of prose pamphlets in the late 1690s in support of William III's policies, a hopeful Defoe once more turned to verse to express his political ideas. In *An Encomium upon a Parliament* (1699) he reiterated in ballad form many of the sentiments of his earlier pamphlets and continued his attack on the king's opponents. In the following year he produced a further verse satire, *The Pacificator*, which commented on the on-going literary controversy between Sir Richard Blackmore, a well-known City physician and part-time poet, and the so-called Covent Garden Wits, a group of literati who met at Will's Coffeehouse.<sup>1</sup> The very fact that Defoe, as a relatively unknown writer, felt confident enough to become involved in a high profile literary quarrel is noteworthy, since it offers clear evidence of his confidence regarding his own abilities as a writer.

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<sup>1</sup> It may be noted that F. Bastian's assessment of *The Pacificator* as the 'kind of thing' which Defoe 'could have thrown off in a few winter evenings' (221) is yet another example of the general critical perception of Defoe's poetry.

The quarrel between Blackmore and the Wits ensued after the physician published a popular, although artistically mediocre, epic poem entitled *Prince Arthur* (1695). Blackmore's aim was simply to flatter William III and he hoped to achieve this by marrying epic and panegyric and by paralleling the king's reign with that of the mythical monarch Arthur. The result was a poem which was a nakedly propagandistic. Spurred by the success of his poem, Blackmore, moreover, repeated the feat of appropriating a classic verse form for blatantly political ends two years later in the sequel *King Arthur* (1697). The Wits, who loosely grouped themselves around the master poet of the age, John Dryden, naturally took exception to the physician's poetic exploits, which they considered an insult to and abuse of art. To make matters worse, Blackmore had rather unwisely boasted that he lacked formal literary training and had read 'but little poetry throughout his whole life' (Johnson 14). In addition, he freely admitted that he wrote his verse 'to the rumbling of his chariot wheels' between house calls or in coffee-houses (Ibid). Blackmore's assessment of his opponents' view of himself fully hit the mark: because he had never sought their approbation, he commented, the Wits regarded him to be an ignorant 'interloper' and 'unlicensed adventurer' who had invaded their territory (Ibid). The Wits did indeed attacked Blackmore at every turn, highlighting his literary shortcomings and levelling at him the satiric accusation that his blunt panegyric failed its purpose and actually caused injury to its subject.

Defoe's stance in *The Pacificator* toward the literary quarrel was that of an uninvolved observer. He imagined the feud in terms of martial combat between the forces of 'Sense' (Blackmore and his supporters) and of 'Wit'. While the title of his poem suggested that he sought to pacify both sides and bring about a reconciliation, Defoe seemed to be undermining this aim by ostensibly taking a partisan stance. Chronicling the paper war in mock heroic style, he gave a resounding (albeit not final) victory to 'Sense', envisioning Blackmore's 'Squadrons of *Epick Horse*' defeating Wit's 'Heroick Cuirassiers' and 'Satirick Dragoons' (ll.213-15; all references are to the Pickering & Chatto edition edited by W.R. Owens). Moreover, the poem includes several explicit personal attacks on individual Wits, including an anti-Catholic swipe at Dryden (see ll.282-86). Bearing in mind that Defoe was said to have composed *Jure Divino* on the back of a horse, it is perhaps not surprising that most modern commentators (e.g. Novak 144) have interpreted *The Pacificator* as supportive of the part-time poet Blackmore. However, one of the foremost apologists for Defoe's literary art, D.N. DeLuna, has demonstrated persuasively that this is, in fact, a misjudgement of Defoe's rhetorical strategy in the poem.<sup>2</sup>

DeLuna argues that in *The Pacificator*, Defoe employed 'puns and ambiguous constructions to invite subversive, satiric readings of lines', which make Blackmore, not Dryden, the 'poem's principal satiric butt' (424). In this context, Defoe's main rhetorical strategy was to produce a mock-panegyric

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<sup>2</sup> Beside the article referred to in this paper, DeLuna has published two further essays which seek to highlight Defoe's writing skills. See '*Jure Divino*: Defoe's "whole Volume in Folio, by Way of Answer to, and Confutation of *Clarendon's* History of the Rebellion",' *Philological Quarterly* 75 (1996), 43-66, and 'Ironic Monologue and "Scandalous *Ambo-dexter* Conformity" in Defoe's *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*,' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 57 (1994), 315-35.

which played on the standard accusation that the Wits had levelled against Blackmore, namely that his praise wounded its subject. Thus, lines which ostensibly exalted Blackmore actually turned out to 'pointedly ridicule him, wholly contravening the more accessible meaning' (Ibid). DeLuna offers an array of convincing evidence for this claim, but the most effective example of Defoe's use of mock-panegyric is perhaps the verbal ambiguity which is evident in the climactic battle scene beginning, 'When *Nokor's* [Blackmore's] Conquering Troops began t' appear' (l.287). In this section, the reader learned that Blackmore's squadrons shone in 'Poetick Terror' and that his 'Heroic Horse' was 'Dreadful for Sense, for Pointed Satyr worse' (ll.294, 296-7), which, at first sight at least, suggested that Blackmore's poetry was characterised by an almost irresistible polemical force. Yet, these phrases may, of course, also be understood in a rather different sense: 'Poetick Terror' could plausibly refer to Blackmore's poor artistic ability which shocked his readers; 'Dreadful for Sense' could be emphasising Blackmore's 'lack of lucid statement'; the alternative meaning of 'for Pointed Satyr worse' might well be 'feeble satire' (DeLuna 424). In short, Defoe employed intricate verbal play in order to redress the imbalance which his explicit attacks on the Wits created. Only if the subtle use of mock panegyric in *The Pacificator* is taken into account does the detached stance of the poem's voice develop its full force. Defoe, it seems, was indeed taking a step back from the literary quarrel between Blackmore and the Wits, and, importantly, he was manoeuvring himself into a position superior to those involved in it, including Dryden.

In this context, Defoe's playful use of armies of poetic sub-genres is noteworthy, as his personified verse forms offer an interesting and often ignored insight into his self-image as a poet. In one of the battles between Sense and Wit, Defoe imagined the Wits relinquishing several poetic provinces: the '*Epick Horse*', the '*Satyrick Dragoons*' and 'two Brigades of Light Horse, call'd *Lampoons*' (l.216) were irrecoverably lost. Interestingly, Defoe chose to elaborate only on the nature of the latter type of verse:

Old Soldiers all, well beaten to the Wars,  
Known by their *Roughness, Ugliness, and Scars*;  
Fellows, the like were never heard nor read of,  
"*Wou'd bite sometimes enough to bite ones Head off*  
(Ibid ll.217-20)

The personal attack in verse, the lampoon, was thus not one of the more refined poetic genres. Indeed, Defoe clearly believed the reverse to be true: it was coarse and perhaps aesthetically inferior to other poetry. As a result, the lampoon had rarely brought artistic acclaim to its author. Yet, at the same time, Defoe suggested, it was a battle hardened, tried-and-tested form of verse, which, like 'Old Soldiers', was characterised by experience, wisdom and resilience. More importantly perhaps, if employed correctly, the lampoon represented a highly effective and sometimes devastating rhetorical tool, one which had the potential, as Defoe's lines pointed out, to make heads roll. The Wits themselves had once been masters of the lampoon, but they had lost this powerful poetic province to a new master.

At this point in the poem the reader might plausibly assume that the lampoon fell to '[Blackmore's] *Nokor's* fury' (l.222), although this was not explicitly confirmed. The significance of the passage did not become clear until some two hundred lines later: the new master of lampoon, it is eventually

revealed, is no other than 'Foe' himself (l.421). By fashioning himself as the foremost lampoonist, Defoe not only claimed for himself a leading position among contemporary poets, he also aligned himself with *the* poetic authority of the age, Dryden, whose satires had provided a recent model for the lampoon. Modern criticism suggests that Defoe was justified in doing so. More importantly, however, Defoe himself proved within twelve months of his claim to poetic eminence that it was not entirely unfounded: selling 80,000 copies of a verse satire which commented pejoratively on the ancestral roots of his readership was no mean feat.

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The well-known repercussions of the publication of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* for Defoe meant that after 1706, the year when *Jure Divino* appeared, he virtually ceased to be a poet. Having been convicted of seditious libel and suffered three days in the pillory (Pope was still drawing attention to the event more than two decades later in *The Dunciad*), Defoe was no longer able to take the moral high ground which was so important for the satirist. Once in government employment, Defoe's approach to writing changed noticeably: from around 1704, as Rogers has pointed out, he 'tended to write as a defender [of the ministry], rather than as a critic or subversive, as formerly' (6). Defoe loyally supported ministerial policies in countless pamphlets and in his newspaper, *The Review*. The newspaper essay demanded a new style of writing of Defoe: its relative brevity (three to four pages) meant that any argument had to be presented in a condensed fashion, reduced to only one or two key points with very little elaboration. In other words, the polemical content had to be offered "bite-size" for ready consumption. The attraction of this form of publication were the two significant advantages which the newspaper had over the pamphlet: firstly, it appeared several times per week (*The Review* appeared bi-weekly soon after its inception and later turned tri-weekly) and, secondly, it was a comparatively cheap purchase. As a result, the newspaper did not only tend to have a large readership, but it could also force home incessantly a relatively basic point over an extended period of time – until the reader had internalised the newspaper's central message.

The pamphlet, in contrast, had a more limited readership, but it did offer the important advantage of much greater wordage, allowing Defoe to produce more elaborate and more widely contextualised arguments. The majority of Defoe's pamphlets extended to at least twenty pages (most ranged to between forty and fifty pages, some exceeded one hundred pages), which offered him enough space to produce lengthy partisan accounts of the historical dimension of a particular issues, in order to simultaneously support his own stance and undermine that of his opponents. In addition, he was able to cite relevant passage from the publications he sought to attack and refute these in some detail. Bearing in mind that Defoe was widely known to be the man behind *The Review*, a pamphlet also offered some welcome anonymity. Indeed, the majority of eighteenth-century pamphlets were published anonymously and in this regard, Defoe was no different from his fellow writers. Hiding one's identity could be especially convenient when the author was making contentious assertions in a highly agitated political atmosphere, as, for

example, during 1714-15, when Defoe was defending his erstwhile employer and protector, Robert Harley (now Earl of Oxford), from accusations of high treason. Importantly, Defoe realised during this campaign that one pamphlet would not be enough to produce a notable impact on general political opinion, no matter how convincingly and skilfully he argued Oxford's case in it. Always acutely aware of the nature of his readership and how best to address it, Defoe proposed a new tactic to his former employer: 'I find the way to Talk with them is by Little and Little, gaining upon their Furious Tempers by Inches' (Healey 445). The result was a series of four *Secret History* pamphlets, which, in essence, tried to recreate the tautological nature of the newspaper, but without compromising the finer details of his arguments. All the while, Defoe was, of course, concealing his authorship of the pamphlets.

For several years after the publication of *Jure Divino*, which ran to almost four hundred pages, Defoe did not produce any extended pieces of writing. This changed in January 1715, when volume one of his conduct manual *The Family Instructor* appeared. The lengthy tract exceeded four hundred pages and, while he was a highly prolific writer, it would have taken Defoe several months to produce this text. In many ways, the publication of a full-length conduct book at this time in Defoe's career is rather curious. He was preoccupied with clearing his former employer's and his own name of accusations of Jacobitism, he was experiencing financial difficulties after losing his employment as a ministerial writer, and he was facing yet another trial for seditious libel which could potentially end in capital punishment. Why, one has to wonder, did Defoe spend a considerable amount of time and effort on a text of over 400 pages which seemed to be concerned exclusively with domestic religious issues, when his professional and personal life was in considerable turmoil?

The answer, I think, may be found in the historical context of *The Family Instructor*.<sup>3</sup> Between 1714-16, the kingdom was shaken by a series of Jacobite-inspired public disturbances. George I's coronation day (20 October 1714), for example, saw riots in over twenty English towns, during which the new king was insulted, known Jacobites celebrated, and nonconformist meeting houses attacked. Subsequently, every public anniversary precipitated flamboyantly anti-ministerial, pro-Jacobite demonstrations, which usually involved flag-waving and bell-ringing, the consumption of copious amounts of wine, the intimidation of residents, fighting and, on some occasions, explicit demands for a second Stuart restoration. By July 1715 the Whig government had become so alarmed by the disturbances that it hastily passed the draconian Riot Act, which sought to suppress tumultuous assemblies with the threat of the death penalty. In the volatile atmosphere of the period after Queen Anne's death, contemporaries could be excused for believing that there was a very real chance that the Protestant succession would be reversed.

It is not difficult to see that the rhetoric of *The Family Instructor* was shaped by the events of the months during which the text was written. Defoe was a lifelong supporter of the Protestant succession and opponent of Jacobitism, and as such he took a very dim view of the anti-Hanoverianism of

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<sup>3</sup> I have argued this more extensively elsewhere. See Chapter 4 of my Ph.D. thesis, 'The Public Voices of Daniel Defoe' (University of Huddersfield, 2005).

his rioting fellow subjects. Predictably, Defoe's conduct book was characterised by a heavy emphasis on the notion of obedience to the higher powers. The early pages of the book reminded the reader of the natural hierarchy (God – Man – Beast) and the traditional patriarchal hierarchy within families (Father–Mother– Children/Apprentices). The remainder of the book then offered in a highly repetitive fashion a juxtaposition of examples of commendable obedience and deplorable rebellion. The dutiful children of Defoe's fictional family take pleasure in their submission to their father's government, asserting that they are 'glad to do any thing to answer his End' (84). Indeed, in the concluding dialogue between the father and one of the submissive children, the extent of the child's obedience eventually becomes total. There is no hint of any thoughts of resistance in the child's words: 'I am entirely resolv'd to be guided by your [the father's] Instructions, to follow your Rules, obey your Dictates, and submit wholly to your Direction, let the Difficulty be what it will to me' (120-21). Similarly, another one of Defoe's model children is seen to have fully internalised the biblical command '*Children obey your Parents in all things*' (94), declaring that she would be 'Any thing rather than a Rebel to God and my Parents' (95). The obedient children are rewarded with a sense of happiness and a harmonious life in a well-governed family. In contrast, the rebellious oldest son who continuously rejects his father's authority is ejected from the family home and eventually suffers a miserable, somewhat Faustian death.

By commenting on the state of the nation through the use of the metaphor of the family Defoe was, of course, doing nothing new. The family unit had long been employed by political philosophers and commentators as an allegorical microcosm of the political state. Indeed, the domestic sphere was generally regarded to be the foundation on which the well-being of the political nation rested. This also meant that any corruption of private morals inevitably had negative repercussions for the public sphere. In his *Discourses Concerning Government* Algernon Sidney explicitly made this link between private morality and political stability by stating that 'liberty cannot be preserved, if the manners of the people are corrupt' (252). One of Defoe's fellow Dissenters, Richard Baxter, extended this notion by asserting, typically, that 'most of the mischiefs that now infest or seize upon mankind throughout the earth, consist in, or are caused by the disorders and ill-governedness of families' (cited in Shanley 79). By seeking to rectify the morals of the individual in order to achieve national political stability, Defoe was merely following a well-established tradition. In this context, it is perhaps no coincidence that the best selling seventeenth-century conduct manual, *The Whole Duty of Man* (a text which Defoe recommended in *The Family Instructor*), was once again re-issued in 1714.

There was, however, something unusual about Defoe's *The Family Instructor*. By 1715, the conduct manual had 'moved decidedly in the direction of brevity', often containing little more than a collection of maxims (Backscheider, 'Introduction' 5). Defoe, in contrast, offered his readers several extended case studies of obedient and rebellious 'subjects'. In other words, *The Family Instructor* did not merely preach to its readers and impose ideas on them, but attempted to persuade them by employing the perhaps most forceful of rhetorical tools, the power of example. This he did repeatedly and in a highly tautological manner: Defoe, in fact, offered only two models –

family members who willingly subordinate themselves to their father's power (either immediately or after an extended struggle) and one family member who fails entirely to take his place in the patriarchal order of his family. What Defoe had produced was, in essence, a combination of the repetitive nature of his newspaper articles and the more detailed approach he employed in his pamphlets, which clearly marked out his guide book from others published at this time.

That the choice of form and the length of the text was no coincidence was indicated by Defoe in the preface to the second edition of *The Family Instructor*. Here he admits that the initial format was to be a 'Drammatick Poem', but that he discarded this idea due to the 'Restraint on one Hand, or the Excursions on the other, which the Decoration of a Poem would have made necessary'. In order to speak to his reader directly, Defoe wanted to produce realistic stories with individualised characters which reflected closely the background of his readership. The artificiality of rhyming couplets and the formal constraint of the verse satire simply did not allow Defoe to produce the naturalism he felt was needed to manipulate his readers. For one, verse would have severely restricted the masterful reproduction of the (in the main) entirely believable familial conversations which we find in *The Family Instructor*. In addition, the 'Decoration of a Poem', as Defoe called it, would have made it near impossible to convey the delicate psychological interplay between the personal needs of the individual family member and the subjection of these needs to the government of the father for the greater good. Defoe's experiment in conduct literature is successful on both accounts.

#### 4

What, then, do *The Pacificator* and *The Family Instructor* tell us about Defoe? A good way of answering this question is perhaps by referring to a recent comment made by Gabrielle Starr concerning the way in which Defoe approached the issue of genre. Starr's assertion that Defoe was neither 'overly concerned with maintaining the boundaries of genre', nor 'primarily concerned with pushing those boundaries, either' (499), neatly reflects the general critical view of Defoe's lack of interest in and control over the formal aspects of his work. Yet, the two examples discussed in this essay seem to suggest otherwise. In *The Pacificator* Defoe competently, if not masterfully, employed the conventions of the mock-panegyric and purposely stayed within the parameters of classical verse satire. He was after all hoping to establish himself as a major poet and, traditionally, the rite of passage for any aspiring writer had been the demonstration of his abilities *within* the boundaries of a particular genre, not the transgression of these boundaries.

In contrast, with *The Family Instructor* Defoe moved beyond the conventions of the ordinary conduct book. He did not merely follow the usual formats of either a brief series of maxims or a more extensive religious treatise, but produced a text which was unlike anything he had written before or which contemporary booksellers offered for sale. Indeed, Defoe himself clearly struggled to classify his work, and only uneasily agreed that one might call it a 'play', because it contained lengthy sections of conversation between characters (preface, second edition). His extended prose commentary between the dialogues, however, meant that *The Family Instructor* did not



truly qualify for this label either. What had happened, of course, was that his book had simply pushed beyond the generic boundaries of conduct literature and moved his own writing closer towards a genre that later became known as the novel. Significantly, this process – the development of conduct book – was a deliberate act. True, Defoe appears to have been motivated by socio-political reasons rather than aesthetic/literary concerns, and we must not forget that he was first and foremost a polemicist. But, as a very able polemicist, he knew that he had to bend, and sometimes change and adapt, the rule of the genres he was working in to achieve his rhetorical goal. Even if he did not produce an endless list of undisputed literary masterpieces, we do well to remember that Defoe did not stumble aimlessly from one genre to the next, but that he competently mastered some important literary genres and cleverly and purposefully developed the conventions of others. In this sense, it is not too much to say that he was a ‘Master of Genres’.

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