

Mr. Review on the "Glorious" Tatler and the "Inimitable" Spectator

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Article:

No other contemporary prose writer of comparable stature commented so often in print on the Tatler and the Spectator as Daniel Defoe. From June 1709 until June 1713 he discussed or mentioned them in twenty- five separate issues of his Review. Yet Defoe's attitude toward these periodicals has not been clearly understood. William Lytton Payne believes that Defoe "venerated" the Tatler and the Spectator, while occasionally differing with the latter. (1) Michael Shinage, on the other hand, argues that Defoe was "envious of the successful climb of Richard Steele, as well as the joint success of Addison and Steele with their Tatler and Spectator papers;" thus he was "less than charitable." (2) Richmond P. Bond states that Defoe wrote of the Tatler in the Review "with much respect," "early recommended" Isaac Olckerstaff, and "from time to time continued to praise the paper," making only one "mild comment" in criticism. (3) Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom find Defoe a "critic" of Addison's methods in the Spectator, who criticizes too "petulantly." (4) If we recognize that these scholars each emphasize certain comments among Defoe's many in the Review, their contradictory estimates can be partly reconciled. In fact, he both respected and envied these periodicals, though at different times. His praise for Bickerstaff's succession to his own former endeavours declined, however, when the success of the Tatler the Spectator so eclipsed that of the Review.

What makes Defoe's viewpoint in the Review even more difficult to decipher is his use of irony, which has been problematic for readers from the time of his being pilloried for The Shortest Way with the Dissenters until recent critical discussions of Moll Flanders.

Maximillan E. Novak argues that we must not consider Defoe a "plain peaker and stylist" but an "ironist" and, consequently, that we "must always expect irony of Defoe, whether in Moll Flanders or in an ephemeral pamphlet." (5) Leopold Damrosch, Jr., nevertheless, points out that in many of Defoe's works it is hard "to be sure of his intentions or to know how these intentions, even if they could be determined, should affect our opinion of the work. Critics have struggled with increasing despair to unravel this problem...when is Defoe consciously exploiting an ironic effect, and when is he simple unaware of it?" (6) Thus even in the generally straightforward, unadorned Review, with its thinly disguised persona, we cannot always be certain whether Defoe is praising or blaming the Tatler and the Spectator. Among his earliest comments in the Review there are traces of irony, which becomes more frequent and apparent as Defoe's public disagreement with his fellow journalists increases. But in some particular passages the reader faces uncertainty.

Defoe initially viewed the Tatler, Bond remarks, "as more of a colleague than a rival in the doctrine of Moderation." (7) Accordingly, his first two references to Bickerstaff, which come several months after the Tatler began on April 12, 1709, call respectfully for its assistance (see the Review for June 12 and December 14). Mr Review's first lengthy allusion to the Tatler occurs on March 2, 1710, the date of its one-hundred-fortieth issue, and shows him still favourably disposed. But it also exposes one cause of later resentment; for Defoe connects Steele's new enterprise to his own "Advice from the Scandal Club," a feature of the Review from February 1704 until May 1705 and also of the Little Review from June until August 1705. So Mr Review declares of this connection:

When first this Paper appear'd in the World, I erected a Court of Justice, for the censuring and exposing Vice, and for a due Discouragement of the scandalous Manners of the Age ... recorded in the vast Journals of our Scandal Club; but ... I laid aside the Herculean Labour for a while, and am glad to see the Society honour'd by the Succession (in those just Endeavours) of the Venerable Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq. (VI, 563a)

Defoe's claim is accurate, though it was not acknowledged by Steele then or later. (9) He preceded Steele in trying to reform manners in an entertaining segment of the periodical. Thus "Venerable" seems unironic praise and best wishes for a fellow reformer. In the same issue Defoe reverses the debt by creating a short-lived department with a Tatler-like heading, a License-Office supposed to last until "the laudable Endeavour and just Authority of Esq. Bickerstaff" make it unnecessary. He would not likely have used this device were he already resentful or envious.

Before the Tatler ceased publication on January 2, 1711, Mr Review made several more brief references to it. Twice he links Bickerstaff to female readers. The Review prints an anagram on March 30, 1710, intended "(as the Tatler says) ... for the Benefit of the Female Readers" (VII, 7b). On May 9, 1710, Defoe notes that the Sacherverell crisis has affected even "the Tattler (sic), the Immortal Tattler, the Great Esq. Bickerstaff himself," who "was fain to leave off talking to the Ladies" (VII, 70a). Doubts about the Tatler's lightness of tone emerge for the first time in these remarks on the ladies, while the combined effect of "Immortal" and "Great" may be ironic. Defoe later came to charge the Spectator with not being earnest enough; here we see him, not very deftly, mocking Steele's audience as too feminine.

The other references before the Tatler's demise are less indicative of a clear attitude. For instance, on June 22, 1710, during the fall of the Whig Junta, Mr Review joins ranks with Bickerstaff on behalf of the government that supported both Defoe and Steele. (10) As an aside, while justifying their patron, the Lord Treasurer Robert Harley, Mr Review adds the possibly ironic clause "If it be true, as the Mighty Bickerstaff has Testify'd" (VII, 146a). Defoe's fellow moderate Whig, Steele, had received more open and rewarding patronage as the government's official gazetteer, so, in fact, he was more "Mighty;" Defoe likely resented that preference.

Mr Review poses as a fellow author under attack on December 14, 1710, when he overtly faults the Tatler for the first time: "For my part, I have always thought that the weakest Step the Tatler ever took, if that compleat Author may be said to have done any Thing Weak, was to stoop to take the least Notice of all the Barkings of the little Animals, that have Condol'd him, Examin'd him &c." (VII, 449a-b). Though the italicized qualification may well be ironic, the fault is venial enough. But the seeds of Defoe's later criticism were sown by the time of the Tatler's expiration. He expected reforming periodicals to be, like his own, more righteous and less apologetic.

Before the Review first comments on the Spectator, which began on March 1, 1711, Mr Review observes, apparently without envy, the frequent use of the names Bickerstaff and Tatler in other periodical publications (see the Review for February 22 and April 21). When the Tatler's successor finally gets his attention in May, however, Mr Review's attitude is definitely changed, so that he more openly admits disagreement with and ill feeling toward the new periodical. He begins the issue of May 9 with these words:

I Never, till now, have presum'd to say I could find one Fault or Flat, in that Universally, and indeed Deservedly Approv'd Author, who we formerly called Tattler (sic), now Spectator; and I believe he will bear with me now, for I shall use him with a just deference to his Extraordinary Merit, and have as much care of hurting him, as an Occulist should, if he was Couching a Cataract.

The Thing, I confess, shock'd me at first View: They say there is a Vice in Nature, that gives a secret Gust of satisfaction, in seeing our Superiors in any Vertue commit a Mistake, and perhaps I am Guilty of it with the rest. (VIII, 97a-b)

The reversed condescension of "our Superiors" and the pseudo-scientific detachment of the oculist make this passage more clearly, though not artfully, ironic. Now open in his criticism, Defoe devotes the whole issue to "the Fashion to go into Mourning" presented in Spectator no. 64. He suggests that the Spectator has overstepped his knowledge by writing about trade, the Review's announced province. He obviously relishes the triumph of showing himself superior in this instance to the Spectator, while he displays ostensible, ironic "Deference" to a revered author, who might forget but surely would not omit important arguments.

On June 2, 1711, Defoe again devotes an entire issue of his periodical to the Spectator, this time to no. 69 of May 19, from which he quotes a paragraph about the barrenness of English soil. Mr Review introduces the quotation with this apology: "And that I may not seem to do Wrong to any Man, much less to an Author I so exceedingly esteem, I must crave the Spectator's Leave to quote from him what he is pleas'd to tell us, and I hope it is true, he has quoted from Natural Historians, and I am not to doubt but he can produce his Authors" (VIII, 122a). Since such authors would know little about trade, Defoe finds the Spectator again encroaching where he is not well enough informed. His likely irony is centred on a parenthetical thought, "much less to an Author I so exceedingly esteem," though followed up by the cringing verb "crave" and the italicized clause. Then Mr Review twits the Spectator for lacking patriotism: "It is unaccountably surprising to see such an Account of England from so celebrated a Pen as the Spectator" (VIII, 122b). This issue points the Spectator back toward its proper sphere, as Defoe conceives it, and away from subjects that belong to the Review. Willing to tolerate and even recommend an ungrateful successor in the improvement of manners, Defoe does not so easily brook rivalry on trade from the same pen. We may also deduce from this issue Defoe's grounds for thinking his periodical superior: he believes the Review to be more patriotic, more informed, and more manly, in other words, more truly British, than the Spectator.

Addison's and Steele's approach he also judges too gentlemanly for British readers. Raillery designed to laugh men out of their follies is central to the style and morality of the Tatler and the Spectator. On August 14, Mr Review calls the efficacy of raillery into question. Perhaps, he argues, these periodicals have been too genteel:

The Tattler (sic) and Spectator, that happy Favourite of the Times, has pleas'd you all; indeed you were asham'd not to be pleas'd with so much Beauty, Strength, and Clearness; so much Wit, so Gentlemanly Reproofs, and such neat Touches at the vulgar Errors of the Times: But Alas! Are we to be laughed out of our dear Brutality? Our Vices are too deep Rooted to be Weeded out with a light Hand; the soft Touches, the fineness of a clean Turn, nay, the Keenest Satyr, dress'd up in, and couch'd under gentle and genteel Expressions, has no Effect here; that Gentleman that has all the Art of pleasing, may yet complain of the few Converts he has made, considering the Expence of Wit that he has laid out upon them. (VIII, 246a)

Though Addison and Steele may have been "happy" in their success in attracting readers, they fail Mr Review's pragmatic test of moral suasion. He mentions, as an example, the campaign to make swearing unfashionable in Tatler nos. 13 and 137 and calls it "a pretty Thought." He then imagines one reader's incredulous reaction to such journalism: "Senseless Rascal! G-d damn him, he lies 'tis not out of Fashion, and it shan't be out of Fashion, and if it be, I'll bring it into Fashion again by G-d" (VIII, 246a). Mr Review prefers plainer words to tell middle-class readers that swearing is sinful and foolish. Though some envy appears in the phrase "that happy Favourite," the paragraph makes a substantive comment on the periodicals' utility. Since Steele and Addison insist that they want to be useful to readers, Defoe's belief that they are too full of sweetness to convey much light is notable in early criticism of the Tatler and Spectator. His dissenter's voice can be clearly heard berating his gentlemanly betters.

In two more issues of August 1711 Mr Review criticizes the periodicals. The first, on August 18, contains a gentle rebuke. Writing again as a fellow author now concerned about readers' charges of dullness, Mr Review declares that "the late Glorious Tatler" erred in telling readers that he was sometimes dull "by design" (see Tatler nos. 38 and 234). Mr Review then contrasts a coffeehouse reader's drowsy view of a Spectator as "Damnable DULL" with the same reader's reaction to the same paper, after a nap: "this Spectator would make any Body laugh, he is a very witty Fellow" (VIII, 255b). Without being at all severe, Defoe is able to point out that even the "late glorious" Tatler and the now revered Spectator are sometimes considered dull. Defoe's irony in this issue is more skilful and assured. The other critical issue, on August 23, disputes a remark made in Spectator no. 139, for August 9, that Peter the Great is an exemplary figure. Defoe's fervent commitment to the settlement of 1688 precluded his praising any absolute monarch or accepting such praise, unanswered, from a source as widely read as the Spectator. However, although he frequently debated political matters with other periodicals such as the Tory Examiner or the Whig Observator, Defoe seldom disagreed with the Tatler or the Spectator over politics.

Defoe's next objection has the more usual moral basis. October 2 Mr Review disputes the view of paternal authority expressed in Spectator no. 181 (for September 27), and quotes from a letter in that issue. Whereas the Spectator advises that a father should be more forgiving of his child, Mr Review insists that true disobedience deserves just punishment. As preface to this disagreement, which again takes up the whole issue of the Review, Defoe includes his usual deferential apology for disagreeing, which seems in each occurrence more likely to be ironic. He writes:

There is not a Man in this Nation that pays a greater Veneration to the Writings of the inimitable Spectator, than the Author of the Review; and that not only for his Learning and Wit, but especially for his applying that Learning and Wit, to the true Ends for which they are given, viz. The Establishing Vertue, in and the Shameing Vice out of the World; and I premise this, because what I am going to say, which tho' it may vary a little, yet is not design'd in opposition to what the Author has advanced. (VIII, 329a)

"Inimitable" is a compliment that Defoe can no longer use unironically. Yet there may still be present in these comments grudging praise for a fellow reformer of manners, who could be more effective were he more like Defoe himself in his opinions.

Three more times in the following winter the Review finds fault with the Spectator, on January 24, March 15, and March 29, 1712. In the second of these issues Mr Review reacts very promptly to Spectator no. 324, on the street bullies called Mohocks. Again he attacks the Spectator's genteel style:

Now, really, Gentleman, after all that can be said; the Spectator, were he to speak like an Angel, was he to Argue with the Mohocks) to the End of his Volume, and talk till the Seven Stars came to be Fourteen; should he enlarge upon the Ungentleman, the Unchristian, the Brutish, and the Senseless Diversion of Committing Inhumanities and Murthers in the dark, upon People they have no particular Quarrel at, it would all signifie nothing to a Protestant Flail ... when he has said all he can, one Protestant Flail against a Hundred of the best Spectators he wrote, for any Wager of my Money, I am persuaded it shall sooner work a Cure. (VIII, 614b)

For all its artistry the Spectator seems ineffective to Defoe in reforming social offenders. A stick would be more useful than raillery against Mohocks, who are not likely to be laughed out of their unsocial acts. This criticism is so fundamental that Defoe cannot use irony to make it oblique.

Several other issues, while not written about specific topics discussed in the Tatler or the Spectator, evince considerable jealousy of them. On December 6, 1711, Mr Review wonders aloud bitterly why a writer who does not want to be as brilliant and witty as the Spectator can only be regarded in his trade as a political hack. Resentment of his contemporaries' rating him below the Spectator comes out even more strongly on May 13,

1712, when Defoe represents the opinions of a wit as follows: "This bright Piece, says he, is the Spectator; that dull Scurrilous one is De Foe; I know them, says the Confident F--1 as well, as if I had seen them write it; so Curses and Praises, like the hist and the Clap'd at the Theatre, go by the Gusts and Humours of the Mob" (VIII, 714b). Fashion, not judicious reading, Defoe implies through his ironic use of a fool as spokesman, kept the lighter Spectator more popular than his worthier Review, whose circulation continued to decline. (11) Defoe's comments in the last volume of the Review include his bitterest about the Spectator, on December 30, 1712, about three weeks after it ceased publication. When Mr Review asks readers to leave him room to moralize as a digression from writing about trade, he adds: "not that I purpose to put in for a Spectator, mistake me not, good Folk, no I understand the Person whose Province that is, and who with so just applause has carry'd it on, and my own Station, too, as also the mighty Charity of the Day, as to Censure, better, than to expose myself so far" (IX, 80a). Defoe goes on to defend his conduct as editor: "I thank God I can openly say, I neither speak or forbear to speak, in hope or fear to please or displease any Man upon Earth. My case differs from all your other Writers; they court you to read, invite you, propose to make you smile, and contrive to do it; that you may read and buy their Papers" (IX, 80a-b). Defoe, still priding himself on the plain speaking of the Review, criticizes the Spectator for being too light in its style of admonition, for making too many readers smile. The resentment of the author who willingly gave up the reformation of manners to Bickerstaff may be seen in the ironic clause "I understand the Person whose Province that is" and the phrase "the mighty Charity of the Day, as to Censure." The reference to his own humble "Station" and his lack of concern whether he pleases readers affirm again Defoe's belief in his moral superiority to his apparent betters in periodical writing.

In the Review's last issue, for June 11, 1713, Defoe makes a final reference to the Spectator, which suggests how much its success weighed on his mind. Describing what the age devoted itself to, he states that the Review "has been my Whore, at least formerly, when it pleas'd you" (IX, 214b). He writes of other periodicals: "One Man makes a Whore of one Man's Works, and one of another. The Examiner is some Peoples Whore, the Guardian others, and a few Fools make Whores of their own. How many have ravish'd the Spectator" (IX, 214a). The contrast between the "many" who wanted the Spectator and the solitary figure who adores his own Review puts Defoe again in splendid isolation. The Spectator may have been fashionable and successful, he suggests, but the Review allowed one man to speak the truth plainly, if unpopularly.

Defoe's response to the Tatler and the Spectator is not straightforward in either content or style. At first hopeful for assistance in reforming the age, regretful about some papers on trade and disappointed with an insufficiently serious tone, Defoe welcomes a fellow editor, gradually grows more ambiguous in his feelings and expressions about Steele and Addison, and comes at last more openly to resent their success. His comments in the Review map out the relationship on his side, mostly unacknowledged on the other, of three of the most prominent periodicals of Queen Anne's reign. They demonstrate a characteristic problem of Defoe's writing and a significant point of view toward the Tatler and the Spectator. The earnest middle-class writer finally judged the gentlemen who wrote with ease to be deficient in their vocation.

Notes:

1. Mr Review: Daniel Defoe as Author of the Review (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), P. 5.
2. Daniel Defoe and Middle-Class Gentility (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), P. 89.
3. The Tatler: The Making of a Literary Journal (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 129, 189.
4. Joseph Addison's Sociable Animal: In the Market Place, on the Hustings, in the Pulpit (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1971), pp. 21,45. The Blooms refer only to two issues critical of the Spectator and neglect the rest. They note one occasion when Addison was so "shaken by Defoe's accusation of moral laxity" that he redefined his position in a later Spectator (p. 45). In their more recent Addison and Steele: The Critical Heritage (London, Boston, and Henley; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), the Blooms neglect Defoe's many comments in the Review but include less significant contemporary reactions to the Tatler and the Spectator.

5. "Defoe's Use of Irony," Stuart and Georgian Moments: Clark Library Seminar Papers on Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century English Literature, ed. Earl Miner (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 198, 218.
6. "Defoe as Ambiguous Impersonator," *Modern Philology*, 71 (1973), 153. As Max Byrd points out in his introduction to Daniel Defoe: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), "Recent critical discussion, which occasionally warms up the scholarly presses in a way Defoe might have liked, has revolved around the question of his artfulness" (p. 12).
7. Bond, p. 189.
8. Defoe's Review: Reproduced from the Original Edition, ed. Arthur Wellesley Secord (New York: Facsimile Text Society, 1938), VI, 135a. All references are to this edition and are included in the text.
9. See Bond, pp. 7, 44-45, 128-30; and Walter Graham, "Defoe's Review and Steele's Tatler--The Question of Influence," *JEGP*, 33 (1934), 250-54. On the reformation of manners see also William N. Bauer, "Defoe's Review and the Reform of Manners Movement," *Neophilologus*, 66 (1982), 149-59.
10. J.A. Downie, Robert Harley and the Press: Propaganda and Public Opinion in the Age of Swift and Defoe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 78-79, 103; Bond, pp. 49-59.
11. See Charles Eaton Burch, "Notes on the Contemporary Popularity of Defoe's Review," *Philological Quarterly*, 16 (1937), 210-13; and Downie, "Mr Review and His Scribbling Friends: Defoe and the Critics, 1705-1706," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 41 (1978), 345-66.