

The rise of the Periodical Press in the 18th Century

Historians have long recognized that the large body of periodical literature surviving from the eighteenth century, along with the smaller amount preserved from the seventeenth century, is an important source of insight into the early development of modern society in the West. Newspapers and other periodicals—magazines, reviews, and a miscellany of other publications difficult to characterize precisely—provided eighteenth-century readers with fundamental information about their world and with news of the ways in which it was changing. It is not surprising that this voluminous printed record also yields evidence to those seeking to understand that world from the vantage point of a subsequent era.

The avalanche of political writing whetted the contemporary appetite for reading matter generally and, in the increasing sophistication of its ironic and fictional manoeuvres, assisted in preparing the way for the astonishing growth in popularity of narrative fiction during the subsequent decades. It also helped fuel the other great new genre of the 18th century: periodical journalism. After Defoe's *Review* the great innovation in this field came with the achievements of Richard Steele and Joseph Addison in *The Tatler* (1709–11) and then *The Spectator* (1711–12). In a familiar, urbane style they tackled a great range of topics, from politics to

fashion, from aesthetics to the development of commerce. They aligned themselves with those who wished to see a purification of manners after the laxity of the Restoration and wrote extensively, with descriptive and reformative intent, about social and family relations. Their political allegiances were Whig, and in their creation of Sir Roger de Coverley they painted a wry portrait of the landed Tory squire as likable, possessed of good qualities, but feckless and anachronistic. Contrariwise, they spoke admiringly of the positive and honourable virtues bred by a healthy, and expansionist, mercantile community. Addison, the more original of the two, was an adventurous literary critic who encouraged esteem for the ballad through his enthusiastic account of "Chevy Chase" and hymned the pleasures of the imagination in a series of papers deeply influential on 18th-century thought. His long, thoughtful, and probing examen of Milton's *Paradise Lost* played a major role in establishing the poem as the great epic of English literature and as a source of religious wisdom. The success with which Addison and Steele established the periodical essay as a prestigious form can be judged by the fact that they were to have more than 300 imitators before the end of the century. The awareness of their society and curiosity about the way it was developing, which they encouraged in their eager and diverse readership, left its mark on much subsequent writing.

Later in the century other periodical forms developed. Edward Cave invented the idea of the “magazine,” founding the hugely successful Gentleman’s Magazine in 1731. One of its most prolific early contributors was the young Samuel Johnson. Periodical writing was a major part of Johnson’s career, as it was for writers such as Fielding and Goldsmith. The practice and the status of criticism were transformed in mid-century by the Monthly Review (founded 1749) and the Critical Review (founded 1756). The latter was edited by Tobias Smollett. From this period the influence of reviews began to shape literary output, and writers began to acknowledge their importance.

Journalism is certainly deemed today as a distinct force in the political, social and economic activities of a community. This rise of journalism is, however, not a sudden or casual incident. The periodical press, as it is called often, as a matter of fact, has attained its present power and position, after a lively history, the origin of which may be traced as back as the sixteenth century.

The first periodical, published in Europe, was The Gazette, which appeared in Venice in 1536. It was a manuscript newspaper, intended for public reading, and it contained the general informative news regarding the war of the Venetians with the Turks. · That bit of periodical, however,

laid the foundation of a new aspect of literature, and from that humble beginning, the periodical press has become a gigantic force of the modern world.

Although journalism, as a distinct type of literature, began its steady march in England in the 18th century, the germ of the English periodicals might be traced during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, some news-sheets were published during the Elizabethan age, but they were extremely irregular in their appearance. Actually, those news-sheets were published only after some important incidents, or affairs, such as the great flood, the fire, and so on.

The first regular English periodical appeared in the form of a weekly in 1622. Thomas Archer and Nicholas Bourne were responsible for its publication. The periodical contained only exclusively the news of foreign wars which it had been permitted to publish. That sort of publication actually constituted the first English newspaper, and was called The Corantos. The publication continued to appear till 1632, when it was banned. It, however, reappeared in 1638, with Nicholas Bourne and Nathaniel Butter as its organizers. Of course, the publication of the periodical was not much favoured by the King, and the attempt to suppress the periodical was frequent.

The English periodical, however, gained a new impetus during the Civil War. The frayed temper and the clash of political interests gave rise to the immense power of the press. A host of journalistic writings, in the form of news, books, periodicals, etc., appeared. The *Corantos* was superseded by *The Diurnalls*, which began to publish home news for the first time in 1641. Different periodicals were also found engaged in the defence of the rival parties. Among such periodicals *The Posts*, *The Spies*, *The Scouts*, *The Mercurius Aulicus*, *The Mercurius Academicus*, *The Mercurius Brittanous*, *Mercurius Politicus* and *The Mercurius Pragmaticus* may be mentioned.

The freedom of the press was curtailed by Cromwell in 1655, and the only periodical paper permitted was the official organ *The Publick Intelligencer*. That was a weekly, intended for the purpose of propaganda, on behalf of the Government, and it continued to come out till the Restoration in 1660. Among the organisers of the periodicals of the time, Henry Muddiman was particularly a prominent figure. He was surely the greatest of all seventeenth-century journalists and published several remarkable organs — *The Parliamentary Intelligencer*, *The Mercurius Publicus* and *The London Gazette*. Henry Muddiman's periodicals enjoyed the licence of the Government of Cromwell. Of course, *The London Gazette* constituted the most popular and representative press.

With the Restoration, the freedom of the press was restored, and a large number of periodicals came out and flourished on different matters. The art of journalism began to change, and its advertising and entertaining aspects were carefully recognized. Advertisement became a regular feature, and the system of the charge of advertisement came into vogue.

The first English daily – The Daily Courant– appeared in 1702. It continued for nearly 33 years and enjoyed a good deal of popularity in the enlightened circle of readers.

The bitter rivalries between the Tories and the Whigs, at the beginning of the 18th century, gave scope for the rapid expansion of the periodical press. The Review of Defoe, which appeared in 1704, was the first leading step in the matter. The Review was a Whig organ, and its abusive and critical writings brought its editor into disrepute. The Review was followed by The Examiner, which was an organ of the Tory party. The celebrated authors of the period, like Jonathon Swift and Matthew Prior, regularly contributed to the journal. Both The Review and The Examiner were almost entirely political, but they contained much that was satirical, and they were certainly something more than journalistic lampoons.

The land-marks of journalism in England became patent in the publication of two immortal periodicals The Tatler, and The Spectator. The Tatler was published by Richard Steele in 1709, with the help of Joseph Addison,

Steele endeavoured to make it a newspaper, but it proved to be a great literary creation, and its essays became the most popular elements of interests. With him actually began periodical essays.

The Spectator of Addison began in March 1711. It continued, in a more comprehensive and effective form, the tradition of The Tatler. Addison was a genius, and his periodical became one of the most significant literary achievements of the 18th century. Sir Roger, Addison's central figure, has remained till now one of the most fascinating creations in literature. Both The Tatler and The Spectator gave a new impetus to journalism and endowed the periodical essays with the charm as well as suspense of a novel.

Dr Johnson, a great name in the English literature of the eighteenth century, produced, between 1750 and 1752, The Rambler, which appeared twice weekly. Most essays in The Rambler are found to have moral themes, but the morality, preached by Dr Johnson, is practical, and not theoretical. Dr. Johnson was also associated with the paper The Idler, to which he contributed a series of weekly essays from 1758 to 1760. The Idler essays have all lighter touches and satirical notes.

A political periodical of the time was also brought out by Steele under the title The Plebian. Henry Mackenzie's Mirror (1779) and Lounger (1785) may be cited in this connection.

The rise of the periodical press is a conspicuous feature in the literary history of the 18th century, which is called the age of prose and reason. To build the mighty edifice of 18th-century prose, no mean contributions have come from the periodicals, particularly of Defoe, Steele and Addison.

The noteworthy Periodicals in the 18th Century:

The expiry of the Licensing Act in 1695 halted state censorship of the press. During the next 20 years there were to be 10 general elections. These two factors combined to produce an enormous growth in the publication of political literature. Senior politicians, especially Robert Harley, saw the potential importance of the pamphleteer in wooing the support of a wavering electorate, and numberless hack writers produced copy for the presses. Richer talents also played their part.

Periodicals

The London Gazette- Originally titled the *Oxford Gazette* and is perceived as the first real newspaper in England that was published in 1665 by the government. The Gazette was “a complete innovation, replacing the traditional format of the news-book with a half sheet folio: a two-page newspaper, set for the first time in double columns, and...for the rest of the seventeenth century this was to be the normal format for an English newspaper” (Sutherland 11).

The Tatler- A periodical that was in publication from 1709-1711 and was co-authored by Sir Richard Steele and his colleague Joseph Addison. The paper began as one separated into four sections of news but then gradually included a more essay-type style. Its stated purpose was to inform readers of political news and to provide entertainment. "It contains news-reporting and partisan essays, championing Whig values; moral crusades, in particular against dueling and gambling; essays on contemporary manners and morals; Oriental tales; short stories; allegorical dream-visions; and readers letters" (*The Tatler*).

The Spectator- (1711-1713) Another periodical in which Richard Steele and Joseph Addison worked together. This was the first attempt for the two writers to publish the paper everyday for their readers. Also in this paper was the new persona they created in "Mr. Spectator" who "managed to embody and to allegorize the operations of the paper he inhabited" (Damrosch 2465).

The Gentleman's Magazine- a pamphlet produced monthly created by Edward Cave from 1731-1868. Although it contained a variety of information like the newspaper, it represented a new form of presenting news as a magazine. The writings in this magazine consisted of works from several books and other pamphlets combined, with "an ever-

widening range of fresh materials: biographies, poetry, parliamentary debates” (Damrosch 2475). Samuel Johnson was among those authors who contributed their work to the magazine.

The Female Spectator- Eliza Haywood contributed to the first female newspaper titled *The Female Spe*

Spectator which from 1744-1746 was a pamphlet periodical that circulated monthly for its readers.

The Rambler- (1750-1752) A John Payne periodical with a majority of it's essays written by Samuel Johnson. Payne's objective was to teach his readers, and the writing dealt with how to “deal with the disappointments inherent in life and with the setbacks to ambition” (Rambler).

Authors

Richard Steele- (1672-1729) An author who wanted to teach and impress his readers, Steele was the *London Gazette* editor and author of *The Tatler*. His writings made sure to include the reader into it's articles and essays, and “For the rest of the century [Steele's] first task was to devise a persona unusual enough to define [his] paper, and engaging enough to sustain it” (Damrosch 2462).

Benjamin Harris– (-1720) An English writer who was jailed for accusations concerning “violating the printing and bookselling laws of King Charles II” (Brown). The works in question were his *A Protestant Petition* or his *London Post*. “Harris’ most successful venture into the book publishing field” was his *The New-England Primer* in 1687-1690 (Brown).

Eliza Haywood- (1693-1756) A romantic novelist who wrote “sensational romantic novels that mirrored contemporary 18th-century scandals” (Haywood). The author of *The Spectator*, “each number presented an essay focused on a single topic with several illustrative fictional stories interspersed” (Damrosch 2468). “*The Female Spectator* continued to sell, in a four-volume collected edition, for more than two decades after its periodical run had ceased” (Damrosch 2468). Other works of Haywood include *The Female Dunciad*, 1729, and *The History of Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy*, 1753 (Haywood).