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Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, Volume 44, 2015, pp. 121-142 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/sec.2015.0009

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“Interloping with my Question-Project”: Debating Genre in John Dunton’s and Daniel Defoe’s Epistolary Periodicals

RACHAEL SCARBOROUGH KING

In the first decades of the eighteenth century, two of London’s most notorious and influential print pioneers engaged in a personal and professional dispute that left a lasting impact on what would become the public genre par excellence: the periodical. This essay explores the underappreciated connection between John Dunton and Daniel Defoe, and its consequences for developing concepts of authorship, publication, and authority, as it materialized in the epistolary periodical, a crucial turn-of-the-century genre. While the wide-scale use of reader letters in early periodicals has been acknowledged if not fully appreciated in contemporary scholarship, Dunton and Defoe devoted copious space to both printing and commenting on submitted correspondence. In Dunton’s question-and-answer paper, *The Athenian Mercury* (1691–7), and Defoe’s periodical essay, the *Review* (1704–13), and journalistic work, *The Storm* (1704), the authors debated the role of manuscript letters in the “public prints” in a way that highlighted the periodical as a vehicle for community information, opinion, and expertise. In the early, experimental periodical form, an epistolary metadiscourse emerged that filtered the status of print publication through the discussion of letters. This pervasive self-reflexivity would remain a defining feature of the periodical genre.¹

Printed periodical news and opinion was still a “new thing,” in Defoe’s
words, when the two men began writing, and they emerged from the same
community of dissenting printers and preachers. But while they were at one
time collaborators, their relationship quickly soured. In Dunton’s memoirs,
the prolific bookseller, author, and printer accused Defoe of plagiarism,
or of what Dunton termed “Interloping with my Question-Project.” The
“Question-Project,” also known as “Athenianism,” was Dunton’s phrase
for his genre-defining periodical, The Athenian Mercury, which scholars
now agree was Britain’s first question-and-answer paper. It consisted of
purportedly reader-supplied questions and the answers of the “Athenian
Society,” which claimed up to a dozen members but in fact included only
Dunton and two associates. In a 1706 work, Dunton wrote that Defoe had
“done me a sensible Wrong” by adopting the question-and-answer format
in Defoe’s own news miscellany, the Review. While Dunton had no qualms
about plagiarism of content, as The Athenian Mercury constantly reprinted
existing texts as answers to questions, he considered the genre of the
question-and-answer his literary “Property,” calling the “Design” the “Child
of my Brain.” The quarrel with Defoe concerned Dunton’s self-perceived
prominence as a generic inventor.

Dunton’s ire notwithstanding, the extent of Defoe’s plagiarism is highly
debatable. While the Mercury consisted entirely of lists of readers’ queries,
the Review followed its news sections with supplemental letters, not all
of which drew responses from the author. I will return to the question of
Defoe’s debt to Dunton. But what I want to emphasize here is how Dunton’s
unfamiliar notion of intellectual property—which located originality not in
the author’s writing but in the print worker’s novel use of genre—modeled
a cyclical and communal version of authorship and readership, one that
depended on the cooperation of readers as contributors. By foregrounding
reader letters, Dunton and Defoe were able simultaneously to take a number
of actions necessary in their unstable literary milieu: to foster and coordinate
reader communities; to put forward a notion of collectivity that helped
legitimate their anonymous, unfamiliar texts; and to interrogate the shifting
relationship between manuscript and print as media of publication. Jody
Greene and Mark Rose have each demonstrated the instability in concepts
of originality and literary property evident in the period between the lapse
of the Licensing Act in 1695 and the first “Copyright Act” of 1710, an instability
that I argue Dunton and Defoe both assuaged and took advantage of through
their extensive incorporation of reader letters. Early periodicals created
literary circuits in which participants could oscillate between the positions
of reader and writer; their insistent heterogeneity and multi-vocality offered
readers a stake in the texts through the possibility to challenge the editors
on matters of fact, politics, and literary style.
At the same time as these periodical authors trumpeted communal knowledge, they began to differentiate between manuscript and printed texts and to elevate the editor for his role in mediating between letter writers and public readers. As Dunton attacked Defoe for “stealing” the question-and-answer format, and as Defoe defended his methods against both Dunton and later competitors, a shift materialized: while the earlier author displayed an omnivorous media appetite that viewed any piece of writing as fodder for circulation, the later began to divide manuscript and print into what we would recognize as a more modern hierarchical schema. As Defoe praised manuscript for its authenticity but print for its preservative and authoritative status, his self-reflexive commentary on printed letters initiated nascent divisions between writing and printing, readers and authors, private and public. These topics would remain at the forefront of periodical writing throughout the eighteenth century.

In this essay, I draw together two fields of inquiry that have recently received prominent scholarly attention—periodical and epistolary studies—to offer a new understanding of the centrality of letters to early periodicals. Scholars of periodicals have established the genre as an “especially important and lively subfield” of print culture, showing how its takeoff signaled print’s impact and set the stage for the emergence of the novel. Printed periodicals have been “given a place of privilege in the foundation of the public sphere” because they were seen to enable, for the first time, the wide-scale discussion of politics and culture. Meanwhile, studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters describe epistolarity as multimodal, not print-centric. The prominence of the letter genre in periodicals, novels, and magazines demonstrates that the “relationship between script and print is emphatically simultaneous not sequential: that is, correspondence and printed letters co-existed in multiple and complex ways.” Even as critics recognize this media interconnection, however, recent epistolary studies have tended to shift away from printed letters—in particular, from the epistolary novel, the focus of much earlier scholarship—and toward archival study of manuscript correspondence. Despite the acknowledged scope of printed letters, scant attention has been paid to the complicated nature of epistolary periodicals.

Given the ongoing scholarly divide between printed periodicals and manuscript correspondence, the letters in early periodicals have generally been understood in two ways. First, they served as “truth claims” whose goal was to establish credibility and legitimacy. J. Paul Hunter argues that documents like letters, diaries, and eyewitness notes are important to late seventeenth-century narrative because they “assert factuality” and “claim to represent what the present-day world was like.” Such fact-establishing writings were part of a larger trend in which all sorts of texts, including
those we now identify as fictional, included elaborate declarations of truth. Second, letters played a role in generating the public sphere by, paradoxically, representing the private. Critics including Kathryn Shevelow, Michael McKeon, and Manushag Powell explain the early periodical as a site for the public discussion of private concerns, such as familial relationships and gender roles, which often appeared in the guise of reader letters. The periodical was crucial to the public sphere, these critics argue, because it drew a contrast between the publicity of print and the privacy of manuscript.

But early modern and eighteenth-century letters complicate binary distinctions between manuscript and print and between the present-day categories of private and public with which each medium is often associated. Readers and writers did not see a direct relationship between the genre of the letter and privacy or the domestic sphere: letters were often written in groups and read aloud, with multiple people advising or adding notes in a process of “social transaction.” Letters from this period also raise multilayered questions of authorship, since they were frequently dictated to clerks or compiled from the stock phrases of epistolary manuals and commonplace books. They were metadiscursive texts, almost always including discussion of systemic features such as handwriting, postage, paper quality, length, and the possibility of interception. As studies of social authorship—Margaret Ezell’s term for the communal, fluid nature of manuscript publication—have shown, manuscript continued to be a vital medium for the creation and circulation of literary and scientific texts into the mid-eighteenth century, one that emphasized “interactive, dynamic, and ongoing exchange” among groups of readers. By grounding discussions of authorship, authority, and medium in the genre of the letter, the era’s epistolary periodicals engaged, complicated, and, perhaps, subverted many of these characteristics of manuscript circulation. For Dunton, attention to epistolary discourse and media of communication brought to the fore questions of authorship, originality, and literary property. For Defoe, it led to concerns with proof, truth, and authenticity. The capacious form of the epistolary periodical enabled each author to propose and scrutinize printing innovations at a moment of almost unprecedented change in the literary marketplace.

Epistolary community in The Athenian Mercury

John Dunton’s breakout hit, The Athenian Mercury, offers a useful starting point for consideration of eighteenth-century periodical publishing trends, but Dunton’s claims of absolute novelty notwithstanding, it also emerged
from an existing tradition of printed letters. The first printed news sources, including newsbooks in the 1640s and newspapers in the 1660s, gathered their news from diplomatic, mercantile, and personal correspondence, referring constantly to “letters received” as their source of information. Political pamphlets frequently styled themselves as letters from “a gentleman in town to his friend in the country,” while collections of “found” letters, such as *Familiar Letters: Written by the Right Honourable John late Earl of Rochester, and several other Persons of Honour and Quality* (1697) and *The Post-boy Rob’d of His Mail: Or, The Pacquet Broke Open* (1692), provided both actual letters and early epistolary fiction. And a scholarly periodical like the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, while not presented in the question-and-answer format, printed ongoing reader correspondence and distributed questionnaires for foreign travelers. Whether readers believed they were reading “real” letters or saw the letter genre as a convenient framing device, “[t]he reading public in Britain and the colonies was thoroughly accustomed to encountering letters everywhere in print culture.”

From this perspective, Dunton seems a figure of pure print culture, a proto-Benjamin Franklin who viewed his own life as a printer’s “case” to be set, impressed, and altered like so many pieces of type. His constant writing and printing displayed a new mode of expressing subjectivity in print, in which “knowing himself became publishing himself, personal identity a matter of finding himself on the page,” and the “discursive mobility” of the printing press enabled a series of “experiments at getting print to work in his favor.” He was aware of both the material and imaginative possibilities of the press, which he viewed as an extension of himself—a technological “prosthesis”—that was an appropriate medium for almost all of his writings. But he was no less interested in the possibilities and procedures of manuscript composition and, in particular, in the omnipresent genre of the letter, which formed the backbone of his most famous literary novelty. Epistolarity allowed Dunton to engage a number of themes that recurred across his career: a disavowal of the title of author (he preferred “scribbler” or “rambler” when describing himself) combined with a fierce claim to generic originality; a tenuously upheld promise to maintain his own and his correspondents’ anonymity; and a sense that any text was open to future improvement and emendation through an ongoing cycle of provocation and response. He operated in a literary environment in which the border between personal letters and print was not clearly demarcated; his *Mercury* made this state of affairs apparent.

Dunton seems to have viewed almost any text, written or printed, as material for his own authorial efforts, a fact his surviving correspondence reveals. Over the course of his career, he rarely published a work that did
not include significant epistolary aspects, whether it was his use of letters from his wife and mother-in-law to “prove” that he was justified in seeking a loan of £300 from his wife’s jointure, or his frequent reprinting of a “letter to his creditors” to avoid arrest for his debts. He marked incoming letters with brackets and other printing instructions. For example, at the top of a tender, conciliatory, and laboriously inscribed letter from his estranged wife, Sarah, dated July 1699, Dunton scrawled, “For a letter to Incognito,” a name he used to sign printed epistles. Two years later, Sarah lashed out at him for using her letters “too banter an laugh att me an my mother by your magoty printen.” Another correspondent, who signed his 1710 letter “JW” and warned Dunton against printing more letters from a female acquaintance, ended with a similar accusation: “There’s no writing to a man that prints every Thing.” The question-and-answer concept obviated this objection; in the periodical, Dunton printed not “found” or “rob’d” letters but those whose authors affirmatively wanted to see their words in print.

Claiming ownership in the genre of the question-and-answer, which he described as his “sole Right and Property,” thus allowed Dunton the benefits of both novelty and imitation. He could use reader letters to produce large quantities of text and tap into the existing trend for printed letters while offering greater participation and interaction to the reading community. He could also assert his property in the paper and its “design” even though his two collaborators, Richard Sault and Samuel Wesley, did much of the actual writing. Dunton did have some justification for his grandiose claims as he appears to have been one of the earliest authors explicitly to solicit letters to the editor and to use the conceit of a club of respondents to create the sense of collective investigation. This sense spread rapidly: by the paper’s second weekly number, the authors were thanking readers for their “encouragement by a great many Letters to continue our Gazett” and promising to “endeavour as general a satisfaction as we can.” While there is no known cache of letters sent to the Mercury to prove actual reader response, as exists in the case of The Tatler and The Spectator, the authors’ constant references to incoming letters, and their requests to readers not to re-send letters or ask previously answered questions, indicate a popular reaction. Dunton stimulated reader identification with the periodical as he claimed to recognize repeat writers’ “hands,” invited female correspondents and set aside special women’s issues, and noted that his paper provided an ideal source of coffeehouse “Chatt and Entertainment.”

Because the process of writing and receiving letters was so central to the printed periodical’s stated mission, epistolary topics soon came to comprise a significant chunk of the paper’s content. The Mercury, like any letter, featured constant and sudden shifts from topic to topic. The fourth number, of April
4, 1691, began with the question “Whether there is a Vacuum?” followed by “What is the cause of Titillation?” (meaning tickling), “Why doth the Hair and Nails of dead People grow?” and finally “What sort of Government is the best?”32 There was a steady stream of interest in the publication itself, the letters it received, the people who sent them, and the timeliness with which the authors responded to readers. In the advertisement to the first issue, of March 17, 1691, readers were told to expect the “Resolution” of their questions “by the next Weekly Paper after their sending.”33 By the third number two weeks later, the authors noted that, since “the Questions grow so fast upon us, among which are several Duplicates with Complaints of their not being yet answered,” they had decided to increase the publication schedule to twice weekly, on the post days of Tuesday and Saturday.34 On April 11, correspondents were asked to hold off on sending more questions until the current backlog had been addressed. The authors claimed in the preface to the second volume, just two months after beginning the project, that they had already received more than 4,000 questions; this theme of an overworked Athenian Society continued for years. In September 1691 they appealed, “we must earnestly desire all persons whom it may concern, to hold their Hands and Pens, and let us take Breath a while, and get rid of those CART-LOADS of Questions which are yet upon the File, and are likely to press us to death under their weight.”35

Indeed, the paper’s author-editors were unequivocal about the debt they owed to their “Querists” in supplying content. The device was ideal not only because it was, in Dunton’s words, “surprizing and unthought-of,” but also because it provided easy copy.36 In the preface to the first volume, Sault and Wesley wrote, “those concerned in the Composition … are not very ambitious to the name of Authors.”37 The goal was not to produce new knowledge, but to circulate it in a new form. The writers noted that they should “be glad of better Information; and when it appears will very willingly retract their Errors.”38 The Athenians deferred to readers and cited their sources, naming Aristotle, Descartes, Boyle, and the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society as authorities. They acknowledged the benefits of the epistolary genre, writing in December 1691, “‘tis to Us much easier to write the Volume than the Preface, because half of one is supply’d to our Hands, but all the other must be pure Invention.”39 But they faced reader critique that the periodical read too much like a commonplace book; as one querist asked in July 1691, “Why [do] you pretend to such strange things, and yet in effect tell the World nothing but what we all know already?” Dunton’s response: “what one may know, another does not, and diffusing knowledge is a sort of improving it, perhaps the best way.”40 The best defense of his design was to “diffuse” knowledge and authority through a community of readers
and writers. The “epistolary pact” of the *Athenian Mercury* meant that any reader was also potentially a correspondent: “To read the periodical was, at least theoretically, to be empowered to write, thus to assume complicity in the production of the text.”41 But while Dunton disclaimed authorship of his text, he jealously guarded the question-and-answer format of the work and attacked those, including but not limited to Defoe, who “interloped” upon his terrain.

This not-quite-modern notion of literary property stands counter to the contemporary distinction between an idea in general and the copyrightable expression of that idea. It allowed Dunton to position his readership as an interactive community and to disperse authority for the text among the group. By figuring periodical publication as epistolary conversation, in which any reader unhappy with an answer could request “a fuller satisfaction in the next Paper,” Dunton integrated the continuous, exchange-oriented logic of letter writing into the realm of print.42 But the new medium also afforded changed possibilities; as Dunton wrote in his memoirs, the genesis of the “question-Project” lay in anonymity: “the first rude Hint of it, was no more than a confus’d Idea of concealing the Querist and answering his Question.”43 The authors continued in the preface to the first volume: “The Design is briefly… to remove those Difficulties and Dissatisfactions, that shame or fear of appearing ridiculous by asking Questions, may cause several Persons to labour under, who now have opportunities of being resolv’d in any Question without knowing their Informer.”44 While some correspondents signed their real names to their questions, and while the makeup of the “society” may “have been an open secret at least within bookselling and publishing circles,”45 the normative stance of the publication was to favor “secrecy.” And as Lawrence Klein and Patricia Meyer Spacks have shown, this was the primary eighteenth-century meaning of “privacy,” which referred more to a distinction between open and closed intelligence than to one between public and domestic spheres.46 While we now associate personal letters with privacy, they in fact lacked secrecy, as they were subject to interception by parents, husbands, or government agents, or to requests to be read aloud. The Athenian Society, meanwhile, was “fix’d … both as to Number and Privacy,” but was “willing to receive any Gentleman’s Thoughts upon what we write.”47 The printed letter, as the Athenians figured it, enabled a level of “privacy” that surpassed that of manuscript.

By focusing on the importance of epistolary secrecy and anonymity, insisting that the *Mercury* was written by a society and never signing his name to the paper even as he claimed the “sole Right and Property” in the question-and-answer genre, Dunton positioned himself simultaneously as printer, bookseller, newsmonger, author, editor, reader, and correspondent.
This profusion of paradoxical impulses may help explain why he was unable to keep up with the print marketplace as tastes apparently shifted toward a more codified, hierarchical relation between readers and producers. In 1710, Dunton’s correspondent “JW” advised him, “if you have Essays or Letters that are valuable, call ’em Essays & Letters in short and plain language, & if you have any thing writ by men of sense & on subjects of consequence it may sell,” but added, “Such Titles as Athenian Phoenix … are so senseless & impertinent that ’twould spoil the credit of any author that should use them.” Indeed, Dunton seems to have been unable to cope with the overall surge in competition occasioned by the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 as the Mercury rapidly declined before folding in 1697. While he tried to continue capitalizing on the paper’s success, signing books “by a member of the Athenian Society,” he never recaptured the Mercury’s influence and spent his later years ineffectually ranting against former colleagues in hundreds of pages of memoirs.

It is in these texts that Defoe, known at the time as a Whig hack writer, repeatedly appears. One of Defoe’s first published poems was titled “To the Athenian Society” and appeared, attributed to “D.F.,” among other dedicatory poems at the opening of Charles Gildon’s History of the Athenian Society (1692). In his memoirs, Dunton praised Defoe as “a Man of good Parts, and very clear sense,” but added that Defoe suffered from “not only the ITCH and Inclination, but the Necessity of writing.” These attacks stemmed from the question of literary property; as Dunton wrote, “To this (sneaking) Injustice of Interloping, Foe has added that of Reprinting a Copy he gave me,” an act that usurped Dunton’s rights as a printer. Dunton blamed Defoe for adopting the question-and-answer form in the Review, but the innovation had already become a transportable genre divorced from any individual progenitor. In the experimental literary environment of the early eighteenth century, Dunton—who advocated for reinstatement of the Licensing Act—was unable to maintain his “property” in the question-and-answer.

**Authenticity and authority in Defoe’s print periodicals**

The first issue of Defoe’s Review of the Affairs of France appeared in February 1704, when Dunton was busy trying to recover his Athenian authority. Despite the widespread adoption of reader letters in other periodicals, Dunton seems to have singled out Defoe, whom Dunton critiqued in multiple texts and quoted by name on the title page of his self-justifying memoirs, The Life and Errors of John Dunton Late Citizen of London (1705): “He that has all his own Mistakes confest,/ Stands next to
him that never has transgrest,/ And will be censur’d for a Fool by none,/ But they who see no ERRORS of their own./ Foe’s Satyr upon himself.”

Regardless of Dunton’s continual plagiarism charges, Defoe varied the *Athenian Mercury* model in the *Review*. He used readers’ letters not as the main text but as a supplement, or, as he wrote, a “little Diversion … at the end of every Paper.” Not all of the letters to the *Review*’s “Scandalous Club” required specific answers; many were commentaries on the *Review* or other periodicals, while others discussed public affairs or readers’ remarks in earlier numbers. That is, the letters in the *Review* functioned much more like present-day letters to the editor than like the “Dear Abby” style of the *Athenian Mercury*. As with letters to the editor, Defoe dispensed with them when space demanded. While presenting his work as a newspaper, he had actually shifted to essayistic opinion writing, subordinating reader response to his own polemical articles on politics, finance, and culture: “He was there to argue about the events of the time—to satirize the wrong view and to assure his readers that his interpretation of events was the proper one.” By altering Dunton’s question-and-answer format, Defoe moved the periodical toward a model in which a central eidolon would monitor and coordinate a more authoritarian reading experience.

Defoe’s periodicals included extensive reflection on his own and other news writers’ use of the letter genre. From the beginning to the end of his career and in works of poetry, news, and fiction, he dwelled constantly on the material circumstances of writing for “the World” in the early eighteenth century. In doing so, he developed a media-centric interest in fact, proof, and authority that laid the groundwork for later associations of print with fixity and truth and of manuscript with ephemerality and rumor. But even as his writing normatively contrasted the reliability of print with the instability of manuscript, in practice he positioned letters as proof of his printed assertions, delegating authority to the handwritten “original.” By reading the *Review* alongside his journalistic work of the same year, *The Storm*, we can better understand how Defoe used reader correspondence not merely to claim a (perhaps spurious) factuality, but also, and more broadly, to work through the oscillating relationship between manuscript and print as media of authority. In the question-and-answer sections, he engaged directly with the print marketplace and the shifting nature of periodical authorship in the early eighteenth century.

While Defoe, unlike Dunton, rarely mentioned his rival by name, he appears to have been self-conscious about potential comparisons; in the preface to the 1705 collected edition of the *Review*’s first volume, he noted that “Receiving or Answering Letters of Doubts, Difficulties, Cases and Questions … was the remotest thing from my first Design of any thing in the
World; and I could be heartily Glad, the Reader of this Paper would excuse
me from it yet,—But I see it cannot be, and the World will have it done.”
He did, however, continually critique the best-known newspapers of the new
century, not by claiming ownership in the periodical genre but by claiming
competency in its conventions—one of which was the use of letters. Part of
almost every *Review of the Affairs of France* was taken up with commentary
on what Defoe terms the “Errors and Nonsense of our News-Writers.”
He gave an example in the first issue, as he mocked “The London Post of the 21st
of August last, where in Advice from the Hague, by way of Lisbon, we are
acquainted with some News from Paris.” He sarcastically continued: “this
is just as Direct an Intelligence, as if they shou’d say, There are Letters from
Jamaica, by the last East India Ship, which give a more particular Account of
a great Fight in Flanders.”
A few weeks later, Defoe charged the author of
*The Post-Man* with “filling up his Papers with long Harangues of his own,
and making News for us, when the Posts were not come in to supply.” That
is, while other authors only pretended to have letters to authenticate their
news, Defoe repeatedly promised to leave the “originals” of his readers’
letters with his printer, “for any Person to peruse that doubts the Truth of
them.” This verification was the more necessary in a “publick print,” he
noted, as “I cannot satisfie my self to say any thing in Print, without either
being very sure of my Authorities, or letting the World know upon what
Foot, as to Credit, they are to take it.” “Credit” and “Authority” derived
from the letter, the backup to Defoe’s printed assertions.

As in the *Review*, where Defoe affirmed communal authorship by denying
that he was the actual author of his printed letters, in *The Storm* he repeatedly
asserted the material existence of the correspondence he used to create the
text; the “fact” of the letters’ existence served to authenticate the “facts”
conveyed in the writing. In this, his first book-length work, he married
the innovations of periodical publication to the established position of the
codex format. When the Great Storm struck in late 1703—killing more than
8,000 people and destroying innumerable buildings, particularly in Bristol
and London—Defoe immediately interpreted it as a national news event.
Five days after the storm, he placed advertisements in two London papers,
the *Daily Courant* and the *Gazette*, in which he announced his intention to
“preserve the Remembrance of the late Dreadful Tempest” with an “exact
and faithful Collection” of stories. He asked witnesses to send him letters
describing the storm, and the account he produced presented about 70 letters
interspersed with his own narration, selections from scientific treatises, and
sermons given before and after the hurricane. As had Dunton before him,
Defoe deflected his authorial position in *The Storm*, calling himself the
“Editor” or “Compiler” of the work and writing that he gave “the World the
Particulars from [his correspondents’] own Mouths, and under their own Hands.” He included his correspondents’ names, places of residence, and, often, occupations. Once again, communal knowledge was required to produce journalistic authority.

But while Defoe insisted that the epistolary, handwritten source of the work’s content vouchsafed its authenticity, the letters’ remediation into print created concerns as well. Large portions of the book were taken up with asserting and explaining the truth of his narrative and in particular with exploring the role that print could play in creating a factual record. He established a hierarchy of scale in the first line of the work, writing, “Preaching of Sermons is Speaking to a few of Mankind: Printing of Books is Talking to the whole World.” He continued: “[I]f a Book Printed obtrudes a Falshood, if a Man tells a Lye in Print, he abuses Mankind, and imposes upon the whole World, he causes our Children to tell Lyes after us, and their Children after them, to the End of the World.” Thus, before he could begin his narrative of what happened, he felt compelled to discuss the question of how he knew what happened and what was the best way to transmit this information. Print publication, he argued, placed more rigorous requirements on the author and historian than did speech or manuscript: “where a Story is vouch’d to him with sufficient authority, he ought to give the World the Special Testimonial of its proper Voucher.” In The Storm, that voucher is the handwritten letter, amplified and given additional weight, but also complicated and perhaps undercut, by the medium of print.

The letter genre offered Defoe a method to prove through print, a function that was in need of explicit elaboration in the early eighteenth century. In The Storm, he contrasted the letters’ supposedly reliable authenticity with the sections of his narrative that were “abstracted from the publick Prints” and, therefore, “not particularly vouch’d.” As he continued, “several Branches of this Story … were too easily credited, and put in Print,” a mistake he rectified by collecting “Letters from the respective Places where such things have happen’d.” Whether or not The Storm and the Review included “actual” letters (although it seems safest to assume that both works comprise a mix of letters that Defoe received in the mail and wrote himself), his recourse was to the media characteristics of the source text. Manuscript represented a personal level of proof that print could not yet attain. The epistolary metadiscourse of the early periodical created an emphasis on secrecy and testimony—on the specific, perceived ability of the letter to bear witness to the truth within a community of readers. By relying on letters to structure and support his news writings, Defoe placed his works in the world of epistolary
communication, with which readers were familiar, and he brought this world into the realm of print.

But Defoe’s epistolary journalism also always exposed a gap that print could not cover, whether it was between the printed letter and its manuscript original—with irreproducible elements such as handwriting, postmarks, and folding—or between the letter and the speech in whose place it supposedly stood. His early works often expressed a sense of this abyss, which he tried to cover but, in fact, further revealed by stressing his sources’ status as eyewitnesses of the events he was reporting. As author of *The Storm*, he described himself as an “Eye-witness and Sharer of the Particulars,” and the “Testimony” of the letters came from those who were also “Eye-witnesses.” By reading the letters, the reader transforms into a kind of eyewitness as the plain style of the prose enhances its factual status: “The Plainness and Honesty of the Story will plead for the Meanness of the Stile in many of the Letters, and the Reader cannot want Eyes to see what sort of People some of them come from.” But he also betrayed doubts about his ability to convey the “literal truth” of his facts and feelings to the reader. “No Pen can describe it, no Tongue can express it, no Thought conceive it, unless [of] some of those who were in the Extremity of it,” he wrote of the storm, questioning the reliability of his printed book despite the apparent superfluity of “authentick Vouchers” in the form of letters. Remarkably, he repeated this sentence almost verbatim in *Roxana* twenty years later; when Roxana reunites with her long-lost daughter, she writes, “No Pen can describe, no Words can express, I say, the strange Impression which this thing made upon my Spirits.”

Defoe’s early journalism offered a language for describing not only proof and truth but also the failure of print accurately to depict and transmit.

Scholars have tended to look to Defoe’s journalistic writings to explain his later novels, and they have offered persuasive analyses of the relationship between the two. I argue, however, that we should view Defoe’s journalism not primarily as preparation for the series of fictions he wrote toward the end of his life but as essential to understanding his methods and preoccupations throughout his prolific career, and as central to developing definitions of the periodical genre. These writings offer key evidence of his authorial strategies and self-positioning in the media landscape. The *Review*’s overt concern with its own relationship to other periodicals betrays a fixation on the conditions of the marketplace as almost every issue of its first two years included some critique of the London newspapers’ reporting, grammar, or subject matter. Defoe highlighted questions of proof and fact in order to differentiate his own writing in a forum that was already beginning to seem crowded. The letter became important as a genre of proof because it was a personal document
that could stand in for a named source of authority, lending that authority to the more anonymous and, thus, undependable print medium.

In this way, the *Review* and *The Storm* point toward a shift in ideas about the printed letter. Readers eventually would cease to expect claims about accuracy or rely on assurance that the “originals” actually existed. In the epistolary periodicals, Defoe insisted that the materiality of the “hand” writing the letter was proof of the text’s factual existence and of its moral authority; at the same time, he emphasized the growing dominance of the print medium. Defoe occasionally deferred, like Dunton, to the authority of his readers, requesting, for example, “the Assistance of the more Capable Part of the World” as he protested that he was “not, as was pretended in the *Athenian Mercury*, a Professor in all the Heads.”

Yet he also lectured and condescended to them in a way that emphasized the growing split between author and consumer. In the preface to the *Review*’s first volume, he complained about readers’ assumption of correspondence, writing of these “importunate Cavils,” “I am Letter baited by Querists, and think my Trouble to write civil, private Answers to teazing and querulous Epistles, has been equal, if not more troublesome, than all the rest of this Work.”

As editor he began to arrogate to himself the right to instruct his readers without incorporating their feedback, a stance that became more prominent over the course of the *Review*’s lifetime as reader letters became less so.

Both Defoe and Dunton thus alternated between asserting the primacy of print and demonstrating their continued reliance on manuscript letters and personal reading communities. As I have shown, a clearer understanding of the function of epistolary periodicals can help us to dislodge the teleological narrative that sees print as having an inherent fixity and authority. Dunton’s vacillating comment in answer to the question, “Whether has Gunpowder or Printing done the greatest Mischief to the World,” that “Printing has done more service and disservice too,” indicates the ongoing debate around the expanding uses of the print medium that became a topic of such concern for the early periodical. Dunton was also unable to articulate a clear relationship between his paper, his readers, and “the publick.” In response to a query in August 1692, “Can you tell us what good was ever yet done by your *Athenian Mercury*?” he cycled between the practical and the imaginative, the particular and the national:

Not therefore to insist on the mighty benefits, which (if they are not very ungrateful) the Stationers, Printers, Hawkers, Coffee-houses, &c. (very profitable Members of the Commonwealth) must own they have receiv’d by our *Mercury*, nor to boast of its merits in helping to carry on the *War against* France, by advancing the Royal Revenue some thousands per An. (pence we mean) by
the *Penny Post* … And lastly, to say nothing how helpful we have been to the *Pastry-Cooks*, &c. we think we may in earnest, and without *vanity* pretend that our Paper has been of some real *use* both to the *publick*, and in many particular cases of high moment: For the first, none can deny but we have rais’d a kind of *Learned Ferment* in the Nation … since we have set the World a *talking*, they have fallen a writing too.”

This, again, was a trope with legs: Mr. Spectator would go on to joke about the benefits *The Spectator* provided to “the publick” in the form of paper with which to wrap spices, light pipes, and line pie-panes. The *Mercury* and its generic descendants activated a readership of potential authors who experienced a continuous literary sequence that ran from wastepaper through personal letters to periodical and book publication.

The turn of the eighteenth century marked an experimental, self-reflexive moment in which authors across a range of printed publications turned their attention to their own conditions of reading, writing, and circulation. The ongoing analysis of reader letters and the genre of the question-and-answer allowed Dunton and Defoe to articulate a version of the periodical that favored communal authorship arising out of a mixed-media environment. The familiar genre of the letter helped readers understand new genres of print and signaled to them the importance of building reading communities that would engage in ongoing exchange and interaction. Letters bridged manuscript and printed worlds, offering a shortcut to authorship and readership for emerging constituencies. At the same time, the periodicals’ commentary upon the appearance of printed letters within their pages allowed authors to begin separating out the categories that would come to define eighteenth-century literature: of public print, private manuscript, and the authorial figures who had a special ability to span the two spheres.

The first general-interest periodicals appeared at a crucial moment of flux in the literary marketplace. Rose argues that the shift from licensing to copyright constituted a shift from a “regime of regulation” to a “regime of property” in which the author was established as the sole creator of a text. But the 1710 Statute of Anne appeared at an early moment for this “specifically modern” view of authorship, and “in the first decade of the eighteenth century the conception of the author as proprietor was still in an early phase of development”—a point emphasized by Dunton’s attempt to claim ownership over a genre rather than a text. His failure to maintain his “property” reveals the changing circumstances of print publication in the early eighteenth century. Dunton and Defoe, I contend, were negotiating a transition from a circumscribed literary sphere wherein the authority of a book derived from its writer’s reputation to a literary market flooded by
anonymous books and requiring new methods of credentialing. Each dealt with this unstable literary environment by highlighting his paper’s epistolary makeup. Reader letters were a metonym for interactive literary communities and dispersed authorship. Epistolary periodicals offered a mode of proof that bridged the conventions of manuscript and print publication, and in the early eighteenth century this multimodality could vouch for a work to an extent unattainable by print alone.

NOTES

I would like to thank Collin Jennings and Pamela Smith for their advice on early drafts of this article. This essay developed from a paper on the panel “Interactions between Eighteenth-Century Authors, Readers, and Publishers” at the 2013 ASECS Annual Meeting, and I am grateful to the panelists and audience members, and particularly to the convener, Eve Tavor Bannet, for their feedback. Finally, thanks to the anonymous reviewers at SECC for their insightful responses.

1. Manushag Powell notes that from the eighteenth century on, “Periodicals have a tendency toward self-reflexivity that seems to surpass that of other genres.” Michael Warner has also highlighted the self-reflexivity of early periodicals, arguing that publications like The Athenian Mercury and The Spectator included “feedback loops” in order to demonstrate the existence of the public they claimed to be addressing. Christina Lupton, focusing on the novels of the mid-eighteenth century, argues that discussion about literary media was a key feature of the century’s popular literature. Manushag Powell, “Afterword: We Other Periodicalists, or, Why Periodical Studies?,” TSWL 30, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 447; Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” in Publics and Counterpublics (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 11–12, 99–100; Christina Lupton, Knowing Books: The Consciousness of Mediation in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), x, 1.

2. Daniel Defoe, A Review of the Affairs of France, and of All Europe, as Influenced by That Nation (London, 1705), n.p. The first British newspaper, the bi-weekly London (Oxford) Gazette, appeared in 1665; weekly, bi-weekly, and tri-weekly periodicals only began to multiply after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695. Paula Backscheider consistently calls Dunton and Defoe “friends,” despite their later quarrel, and highlights Defoe’s dissenting education at Newington Green where a key pedagogical influence was Samuel Annesley, later Dunton’s father-in-law. But Maximillian Novak, while noting the ongoing literary relationship, questions “whether Defoe ever actually worked with Dunton or was a close friend,” since Dunton’s business reputation was already declining at the end of the seventeenth century. Paula Backscheider, Daniel Defoe: His Life (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 18–20 and passim.; Maximillian E. Novak, Daniel Defoe, Master of

4. James Tierney points out that Sir Roger L'Estrange’s periodical *The Observer: In Question and Answer* (1681–83) was the first to use the Q&A format. The paper worked as a kind of catechism, using only the form, not the function, of letters; it did not solicit reader letters or present itself as an actual collection. James Tierney, “Periodicals and the Trade, 1695–1780,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain Volume 5: 1695–1830*, ed. Michael F. Suarez SJ and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 481.


7. Defoe was not the only one to adapt the question-and-answer format or to face Dunton’s wrath. Thomas Brown and William Pate started the *London*, later *Lacedemonian, Mercury* in February 1692 as both satire of and competitor to *The Athenian Mercury*, criticizing Dunton’s claim to have “an uncontrovertible Patent for answering all Queries exclusive of all men else.” Other periodicals, including the *Jovial Mercury* (1693) and the *British Apollo* (1708–11), also used the question-and-answer device. Stephen Parks, *John Dunton and the English Book Trade: A Study of His Career with a Checklist of His Publications* (New York: Garland Pub., 1976), 94–7; Tierney, “Periodicals and the Trade, 1695–1780,” 481.


10. Jared Gardner has focused on the key role of the “editorial function,” as opposed to the author function, in early American magazines, arguing that the “careful guidance of the editor” created a “collaborative and interactive … periodical space” that “worked to collapse the distance between author and reader.” Gardner, however, focuses on the political valence of this stance, seeing the heterogeneous magazine as an embodiment of federalist values. Jared Gardner, *The Rise and Fall*


14. Important exceptions include Brant’s *Eighteenth Century Letters and British Culture* and Gary Schneider’s *The Culture of Epistolarity* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2005), both of which emphasize the interrelation of manuscript epistolary practices and printed letters.

15. This is true even of *The Spectator* where the prominence of letters has long been acknowledged but under-theorized. Apart from Richmond P. Bond’s introduction to his *New Letters to the Tatler and Spectator* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1959) and Eve Tavor Bannet’s essay “Epistolary Commerce in *The Spectator*,” I am unaware of any extensive considerations of the periodical’s letters. Bannet focuses on the style of the letters to argue that *The Spectator* served as a letter-writing manual, demonstrating polished epistolary style for diverse readers. Powell has analyzed the epistolary *Rambler* essays but argues that they diverge from earlier epistolary periodicals in that Johnson wrote almost all of the letters himself and did not solicit reader correspondence. Eve Tavor Bannet, “Epistolary Commerce in The Spectator,” in *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses*, ed. Donald J. Newman (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2005), 221, 224–5; Powell, “Johnson and His ‘Readers’ in the Epistolary *Rambler* Essays,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 572, 577.


Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), xvii.


22. Dunton was the bookseller for the latter, written by Charles Gildon, whom Dunton later commissioned to write a History of the Athenian Society.


29. Dunton, Life and Errors, 257.

30. The Athenian Mercury 1.2 (24 March 1691). Because copies of the Mercury survive in different formats and with varying pagination, I provide the volume and issue numbers, along with the date of the issue, for easiest reference; I have silently changed old-style dates to new style. The issues of the Mercury cited here were accessed via the ProQuest British Periodicals database, which lists the publication as the Athenian Gazette, a title Dunton used for the first few numbers before switching to the Mercury for the remainder of the run.

32. AM 1.4 (4 April 1691).
33. AM 1.1 (17 March 1691).
34. AM 1.3 (31 March 1691).
36. Dunton, Life and Errors, 256.
37. AM, “The Preface to the First Volume,” 1.1 (17 March 1691). According to Dunton’s agreement with Sault and Wesley, the collaborators were responsible for the prefaces affixed to the collected volumes. Bod. Lib. MS. Rawl. D. 71.
38. *AM* 2.17 (21 July 1691).
40. *AM* 2.17 (21 July 1691).
42. *AM* 1.1 (17 March 1691).
50. Dunton, *Dunton’s Whipping Post*, 89.
55. Powell has focused on the importance of the eidolon to the development of the periodical in *Performing Authorship*, arguing that authorship involved self-commodification that was made visible through the eidolon. The eidolon enacts authorship so that “periodicals require rather than avoid interaction with their readers.” Powell, *Performing Authorship in 18th-Century English Periodicals*, 3–4, 14.
56. Paula McDowell argues that in his *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Defoe asserts a (factually incorrect) lack of printed news in the 1660s in order to contrast the modern reliability of print with a backwards, oral past. In this text, she writes, “media forms that are in reality copresent and interdependent are modeled as in some sense competing with each other.” A similar dynamic, I argue, exists in the epistolary periodicals. Paula McDowell, “Defoe and the Contagion of the Oral: Modeling Media Shift in ‘A Journal of the Plague Year’,” *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (January 2006): 104.
57. Greene argues that Defoe’s writings on licensing and copyright—she focuses on another 1704 production, the *Essay in Favor of the Regulation of the Press*—typify his period’s attitudes toward the emerging centrality of the author figure. Greene, *The Trouble with Ownership*, 107.


62. Defoe, *A Review of the Affairs of France*, 115. The editors Defoe criticized defended themselves in open letters “to the author of the *Review.*” In July 1704, the author of the *Daily Courant* denied that he had misquoted from the *Leiden Gazette* a month earlier. “I was wrongfully accus’d of imposing upon the Publick,” he wrote, adding that Defoe “ought not to publish such a Letter”—in which the original charge was made—“unless he were satisfied the Fact related in it were true.” “To the Author of the Review of the Affairs of France,” *The Daily Courant* (London), July 19, 1704.


64. Mary Poovey has highlighted these as key terms in Defoe’s works across the “fact/fiction continuum, arguing that Defoe often returned to the question of how the print medium could inspire belief even in a factually untrue narrative. *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), 105–10.


72. Defoe, *The Storm*, 64.


77. Defoe, “A Supplementary Journal to the Advice from the Scandal Club; For the Month of September 1704,” in *A Review of the Affairs of France* (London, 1705), 3.


80. *AM* 8:1 (12 July 1692).


83. Johns, *The Nature of the Book*, 31–2. Defoe emphasized this transition in the *Essay on the Regulation of the Press*, in which he argued that under the Licensing Act an individual licensor might reject a work “because the Man was not approv’d that wrote it, and a Book was Damn’d for the Author, not the Author for the Book.” *An Essay on the Regulation of the Press* (London, 1704), 5.