Forum

Defoe's History of the Alphabet

TO THE EDITOR:

Scholarship has implications. How, for example, does it negotiate a system that has been accumulating for centuries? In this context, I explore the implications of Paula McDowell's article "Defoe's *Essay upon Literature* and Eighteenth-Century Histories of Mediation" (130.3 [2015]: 566–83), which examines a quirky work by Daniel Defoe. In particular, I look at this work's relation to the alphabet, biblical scholarship, and current political claims.

Defoe's Essay upon Literature propounds the fiction that "all" knowledge, literature, and science originated with Moses and that the first letters were the Hebrew imprinted by the finger of a god at Mount Sinai (London, 1726; print [37]). To say that the polytheistic ancients would have considered Venus a whore and Bacchus a drunkard if only they had had alphabetic letters contradicts the obvious fact that they had the same letters used by Defoe and still used today. Equally fallacious is an attempt to discredit oral narratives while peddling the belief that patriarchal accounts were orally preserved over millennia. Defoe appears to concede that the Egyptians developed the hieroglyphic, though he questions its intelligibility one hundred years before its decipherment (10), then says that they copied it from the Israelites but "corrupt[ed]" it and that Babylon, where cuneiform writing was invented, had "no appearance of anything Written" (76, 17).

Such misstatements recur throughout Defoe's work, not just the first "third of the way through," as McDowell maintains (568, 572). Rather than "armchair exploration," as she calls Defoe's history of writing systems, this is dangerous obsession and ignorance (571). McDowell's article fits this work into media and mediation history by arguing that Defoe lauds printing, which makes books cheap and popular

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ticles in previous issues or on matters of

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and whose later developments advance knowledge. Can we redeem a work based on fallacies and contradictions by identifying it, somehow, as "an illuminating link" (568), an originator of "a nascent area of intellectual inquiry" (581), "a ladder to liberty" (574), a "learned yet wouldbe popular text" (569) that "anticipates" later work (569, 572, 573, 580, 581)? Defoe's *Essay* is more accurately described by opinions that McDowell cites—that his essays are in general "bad" writing, "a kind of nearly demented pedantry"—but apparently dismisses (580).

Printing and media, instead, can promote ignorance in which a system is invested—thus piling up more biased matter and weighing down library shelves by multiplying tomes in a misguided tradition. Though antiquated notions in Defoe's *Essay* have been debunked, they are still resurrected in different guises today by claim systems dependent on them. They are supported by some scholarship; by Hollywood films about the Flood, Exodus, and other such stories; and by a public that still believes in literal biblical accounts.

It matters little that it's no longer possible to assume that the Bible is the "oldest" version of the stories it contains. One antecedent after another, uncovered from the sands of time over the past 150 years, shows that biblical accounts derive from mythological precedents and are equally fictional, not unique. The nineteenthcentury geology (of Charles Lyell) and biology (of Charles Darwin) and discovery of Gilgamesh fragments discredited the accounts of the Creation and the Flood, events that Defoe dates, and others still date, with certainty. Most scholars (including several Israeli scholars) no longer consider Moses, the "Conquest of Canaan," the Kingdom of David and Solomon, and other common myths to be historical.

Added to a massive number of publications (editions, translations, dictionaries, invented atlases, etc.) by a well-financed biblical industry, claims like Defoe's resurface in works printed by modern publishers and are propagated in the mass media, including the Internet. Leonard Shlain's *The Alphabet versus the*

Goddess (New York: Viking, 1998; print) has Yahweh give the alphabet to his chosen men and dismisses "Phoenicians" as morally and religiously inferior, incapable of inventing the alphabet (68-71)—just as Defoe insists it is "wrongfully" ascribed to the Phoenicians. In newer strategies, since denying that Phoenicians and Aramaeans started alphabetic writing systems is no longer an informed option, their scripts are appropriated as Hebrew or as "paleo-" or "ancient Hebrew"—thus backdated all the same, merged with claim-essential biblical accounts, to make Hebrew look older than it is. For example, many sources maintain that the Jazr ("Gezer") Calendar, from the eleventh century BCE, was written in "ancient Hebrew" at a time Hebrew did not exist. (Square Hebrew derives from square Imperial Aramaic, which emerged long after the Jazr Calendar was written.) Balanced scholarship recognizes the Jazr Calendar as Phoenician or south Cana'anite. The alphabet, one of the greatest inventions in history, is continually subjected to other appropriative agendas. Marshall McLuhan considers it "Graeco-Roman" and, like Defoe, labels writing systems that prepared its way as "unwieldy" (Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man [New York: McGraw, 1964; print] 4, 87).

Even to acknowledge that Phoenician is "generally held" to be the first alphabet (as Mc-Dowell concedes [571]) is a euphemistic misconception, since Phoenician is a Greek term for the Cana'anites demonized in biblical stories (Defoe thought the Israelites "shou'd have destroy'd" them [25]) and for the Carthaginians vilified by Romans as Poenicus (in English, Punic, which can mean faithless and treacherous). The alphabet's origin is now part of standard scholarship. About 2000 BCE, Cana'anites in southern Palestine developed twenty-eight signs to represent twenty-eight sounds in their language, using significant shapes (e.g., ox, house, wave, eye, palm), partly inspired by pictorial hieroglyphic; around 1500 BCE, inhabitants of Ugarit, in northwest Syria, used cuneiform technology to write the same sounds; Cadmus (q-d-m), the founder of Thebes, took a later form to Greece,

where fewer signs were adapted to Greek sounds; the original twenty-eight sounds are preserved in Arabic letters; Latin script borrowed Etruscan but reversed its writing direction. It is a supreme irony that the tool Canaʿanites invented is used to belittle and erase them.

While Defoe is useful (when read with appropriate mediation) in a course on the English novel, it's David Hume who attempts to enlighten us about traditions and ideas of Godfor which he was almost excommunicated. In "The Natural History of Religion," he concludes that polytheism is "sociable," whereas monotheism harbors "intolerance" (Four Dissertations [Bristol: Thoemmes, 1995; print] 60-62). Monotheism and single texts cultivate exclusivity, obsession, and unsalvageable pedantry—the infectious type seen in Defoe and in others who continue to plow fields Hume thought were everlastingly barren. While McDowell is of course not responsible for the chronic nature of biblical literalism or for scholarly circumlocution and the exploitation of religious ignorance in political claims, her article could have better pointed out the need to unlearn intellectually dangerous and regressive knowledge.

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Reply:

It has been a long time since anyone has called Daniel Defoe's writings "dangerous." A religious dissenter, Defoe was arrested, imprisoned, and pilloried by the English government for publishing *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), a pamphlet that mimics the rhetoric of the High Church Tory Party in order to critique religious intolerance and zeal. Yet Basem Ra'ad singles out Defoe's *Essay upon Literature* (1727) as an example of "intellectu-

ally dangerous and regressive knowledge" and as exhibiting "dangerous obsession."

Disturbed by what he takes to be Defoe's biblical literalism, Ra'ad uses my essay chiefly as an opportunity to advance his own largely unrelated arguments and concerns about "current political claims," twentieth-century texts that my essay does not discuss, and views "propagated in the mass media, including the Internet." He seems scarcely to have read my essay, and certainly not to have taken the time to understand its key terms or central claims, and he repeatedly misrepresents what I say. Instead, he has cobbled together a few quotations from my essay to construct a platform for his own agenda.

While Ra'ad has interesting and useful things to say about the origins of the alphabet—a vast and complex area of study that is not the central subject of my own essay-he has ignored the conjunction in my essay's title, "Defoe's Essay upon Literature and Eighteenth-Century Histories of Mediation" (my emphasis). One would never guess from Ra'ad's letter that my article addresses, in addition to Defoe, such wildly diverse authors as Francis Bacon, Edward Stillingfleet, William Temple, William Warburton, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Adam Smith, Dugald Stewart, Thomas Astle, and Nicolas de Condorcet. One goal of my essay is to suggest what kinds of new knowledge might be learned by grouping Defoe's Essay and other texts together as members of an emergent genre that I call "histories of mediation." Another is to argue that in the Enlightenment, debates about tradition were the dominant discourse about what we would now call media, mediation, and communication. I encourage *PMLA* readers who might be interested in such an argument to read my essay and to judge its claims, content, and scholarship for themselves.

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