

The Solar Eclipse of April 22, 1715, and Family Quarrels in Daniel Defoe's *The Family Instructor*

By Irving N. Rothman

ONE AIM OF A WRITER is to interpret society's mannerisms in a way that might urge readers to reflect upon their own experience. In eighteenth-century literature, the theories of John Locke endorsed the primary importance of individual experience.¹ If, indeed, humans were born with a clean slate, a *tabula rasa*, a lifetime of adventure or misadventure filled that blank page with descriptions of the paradoxical nature of human conduct. Among the most successful realistic novelists, Daniel Defoe mesmerized readers with the experiences of a shipwrecked sailor on a deserted island, in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), with the plight of a woman born in Newgate prison to a mother transported to America, in *Moll Flanders* (1722), and with the success of an indentured servant who proved to his master that African natives treated kindly could improve the productivity of a slave owner's plantation, as narrated in *Colonel Jack* (1723).

But before *Robinson Crusoe* and his other novels, Daniel Defoe provided English society with a conduct book that prefaced these great novels that have earned him lasting fame. In his conduct books, Daniel Defoe exposed conflict in family life and sought remedies for family dissension, arguments between husbands and wives, and the disobedience of children. In 1715, Defoe wrote *The Family Instructor*. The book was so popular that in 1718 he issued a second volume, a sequel, providing additional stories about family disharmony.

These conduct books, intended to answer political and social conflicts, also had political ramifications in voicing opposition to the Schism Act (1714) which sought to empower the Anglican Church and disenfranchise dissenting religions.² The fictional nature of Defoe's narratives sought to mask his political opposition to Queen Anne's law, which was passed at the time of her death and never actually took effect, finally being withdrawn in 1718. To a writer, filling up the metaphorical blank page with real text on an actual printed page is a challenge. No experience

On April 22, 1715, the population of England and Wales experienced a solar eclipse for the first time in 500 years. The event, described in advance by William Whiston and Edmond Halley, captured the imagination of the nation. It was spread to a popular audience in the new medium of the broadside, a one-page low-cost handout. The image of the moon as a dark object hiding the splendor of the sun allowed Daniel Defoe in the second volume of *The Family Instructor* (1718) to draw an analogy between a rancorous wife, envisioned as the moon, and a frustrated husband, described as the sun. The wife's angry behavior eclipsed the husband's expectation of a family willing to submit to religious discipline.



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is exempt from the author's view. Thus, Defoe, who draws upon the knowledge of sailing in *Robinson Crusoe*, the machinations of a business woman seeking security in *Moll Flanders*, and the economics of the slave trade in *Colonel Jack*, has the capability to engage the latest science. In the second volume of *The Family Instructor*, the newly established science of eclipses of the moon provides a telling metaphor for the experiences of one family's dysfunctional behavior.

Dramatic Narrative

At the beginning of the second volume of *The Family Instructor*, Defoe describes a man of

moral conduct whose discipline is undermined and who despairs of raising a family responsive to his beliefs and his commands. His actions are, at the worst, eclipsed, by a termagant wife who quarrels with him constantly and prevents family peace. Defoe tells us that the man is so frustrated by his wife's actions that he has thrown aside all reason and finds himself "conversing with himself . . . without calling his Reason and Conscience of Duty to his Assistance" (p. 1). He laments the fact that neither his wife nor his children are paying attention to his demand for obedience or demonstrating moral conduct:

What can I do, says he, when a Woman is arriv'd to such a height as to make a Mock of me in my own Family? She has brought Things to such a pass, that I do not think it is my Duty to pray among them any more; she openly told me, before my Children, that I need not give my self the Trouble to keep up the Ceremony; that they none of them value it; that they hate the Offering for the sake of the Priest; and that they care not to join with me . . . (2).

That night he met his family, pretending to be little concerned

about his family's intransigence. His wife ignored him after supper and, calling her "Maid to bring her a Candle . . . away she goes to Bed, taking no Notice of him, or of the usual Family-Order." Thus, Defoe presents a situation where the husband ignores the wife and the wife ignores her husband, illustrating a family conflict that can only grow worse as it proceeds. Defoe explains the "Breach was now made, and every thing contributed to make it wider" (3).

Defoe describes the growing animosity between husband and wife: "they were continually quarrelling, and falling out with one another; their Humours jostled in every Trifle, upbraiding one another's Sincerity, Affection, Integrity, on every little Occasion; reproaching the least Miscarriage, reviling one another with Bitterness, and forgetting nothing that might tend to make them disagreeable to one another; peevish, waspish and fretful, even when they agreed best, and scandalously furious, and hot when they fell out" (4). One has only to read the daily newspapers reporting family conflict, abuse, separation, and divorce to understand that readers of the twenty-first century are not unfamiliar with the feelings expressed in Defoe's era. The consequence of their argument led to confusion in the household as children and servants sided with one parent or the other, further contributing to the dissension of the household:

Hardly any Discourse happen'd between them however mildly it began, but it ended in a Broil; she would thwart him in every thing he said, and he contradict her as often . . . that, it was impossible to preserve any Harmony among the Children; two of them, one Son and one Daughter, taking part with the Father; and another Son and two Daughters with the Mother; so that as the Father and Mother differed, the children differed, and that with such Heat, as to fill the House with Disorder (4).

The conflict takes on momentum as a consequence of a solar eclipse that occurred on April 22, 1715. Defoe explains that "the Eclipse of the Sun was the Subject of all Conversation at that time, having been, as is well known, so Total, and the Darkness so great, as that the like had not been known in that Age, or some hundreds of Years before" (5). When the wife asks her husband to explain the nature of an eclipse, he uses the opportunity to continue his tirade against his wife. Defoe has the husband explain "that the Moon was like a cross Wife, that when she was out of Humour, could Thwart and Eclipse her Husband whenever she pleased; and that if an ill Wife stood in the Way, the brightest Husband could not shine" (5). Readers who eagerly sought to learn details of solar eclipses were all the more willing to apply their new knowledge to an age-old problem, family conflict.

The wife turns the debate upon her husband, complaining that he thinks wives gain their sparkle only if they acquiesce to their husbands and live in their husbands' limelight. Defoe presents the story as a playwright with the wittiest dialogue:

She flew in a Passion at this, and being of a sharp Wit, you do well, says she, to carry your Emblem to a suitable height; I warrant, you think a Wife, like the Moon, has no

light but what she borrows from her Husband, and that we can only shine by Reflection; it is necessary then you should know, she can Eclipse him when she pleases.

Ay, ay, says the Husband, but you see when she does, she darkens the whole House, she can give no light without him. [Upon this she came closer to him.]

Wife. I suppose you think you have been Eclips'd lately, we don't see the House is the darker for it.

Husband. That's because of your own Darkness; I think the House has been much the darker.

Wife. None of the Family are made sensible of it, we don't miss your Light.

Husb. It's strange if they don't, for I see no Light you give in the room of it.

Wife. We are but as dark as we were before; for we were none of us the better for all your Hypocritical shining.

Husb. Well, I have done shining, you see; the Darkness be at your Door. . . .

Wife. At my Door! am I the Master of the Family! don't lay your Sins to my Charge.

Husb. No, no; but your own I may; It is the Retrograde Motion of the Moon that causes an Eclipse.

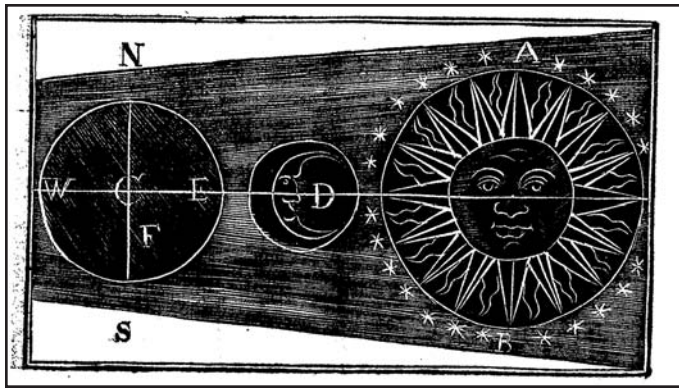
Wife. Where all was dark before, there can be no Eclipse.

Husb. Your Sin is, that my Light is your Darkness. (5-6)

The father concludes his argument with political innuendo. He says, "If Half the Family, or any of the Family separate, it is a Schism in the House; and the Unity being broke, the rest is but private Worship, and may as well be done alone" (7). The reference here is to the Schism Act of 1714 which forbade the Dissenters (Protestants separate from the Anglican church) from bringing a family instructor into their homes. Defoe sought to circumvent the law by bringing into peoples' homes a book—not a forbidden human tutor or clergyman—that could render instruction to families.² Thus, he sought to breach the conflict between the high church and the Dissenters, between Tory and Whig.

April 22, 1715 Eclipse

Defoe's decision to bring the eclipse of April 22, 1715, into his narrative proved an astute move. His conduct book with its political implications offered an argument that sought to ameliorate religious conflict by addressing domestic problems. To impress his point, he introduced a scientific phenomenon that had captured the attention of the nation. Although his use of the eclipse in his story is satirical and ironic, his verbal ingenuity renders it an original metaphor for the psychology of human conduct. His facility with words—his clever wit and his ability to provide credible dialogue—turns the episode into a memorable study of family conflict. When he has the wife described like the moon hiding the transcendence of the sun, he shows the wife emasculating her husband. The husband who radiates light is prevented from doing so by the wife whose impiety keeps the family in the dark. The wife, of course, objects to the idea that women gain their strength, fortitude, knowledge, and perseverance only by virtue of their husband's grace. The wife/moon and husband/sun metaphor does not hold up, of course, if one grants Locke's premise that all can achieve understanding by the accumulation of knowledge through sensational apprehension and



500-YEAR ECLIPSE—Englishmen thought the world was coming to an end with the eclipse. In *The Black-day, or, A prospect of doomsday, exemplified in the great and terrible eclipse, which will happen on Friday the 22d of April, 1715: . . . According to. . . Mr. Halley . . . and Mr. Whiston*. London: J. Reed and R. Burleigh, [1715?].

the association of ideas. But the ill-tempered frustration of the husband and the rancorous nature of the wife fuel an argument enriched by the striking nature of the eclipse that had occurred three years earlier.

Edward Halley and Daniel Defoe were contemporaries. Halley (1656-1742), who first determined how to predict eclipses, was born four years before Defoe (1660-1731) and lived eleven years after Defoe's death. Defoe who read everything and followed reports of the Royal Society of London doubtlessly followed Halley's career. A year before the eclipse of 1715, Halley had produced a paper showing how one could readily compute and thus predict the advent of the eclipses of the sun and moon.³ Halley drew from recent scientific developments. In 1605, Johann Kepler (1571-1630) had described the nature of the corona of the sun in an eclipse. Giovanni Domenico Cassini (1625-1712) attempted a more detailed description of the corona in 1706, but they both appeared to have thought that the corona was a lunar phenomenon lit by the sun behind it.⁴ That this interpretation does not enter Defoe's description suggests Defoe's sophisticated understanding of scientific data.

In *The Family Instructor*, the wife responds in anger to her husband: "you think a Wife, like the Moon, has no light but what she borrows from her Husband." Defoe might well have been a reader of detailed scientific studies, such as Newton's study of optics (1664) when sunlight was defined by the separation of its colors in a prism.⁵ He does not grant to the moon a separate source of light. It represents darkness and blackness and, in the case of the wife, the moon anthropomorphizes into a dark vision with a black heart.

Halley predicted "that in 1715 a total solar eclipse would sweep across southern England and Wales, the first time that London has been so-visited since 1140 (and 878 before that)."⁶ What affected religionists so markedly was a detailed map that Halley issued "entitled The Black Day" which offered "a prospect of Doomsday" and anticipated a "great and terrible eclipse which will happen on 22nd of April 1715."⁷ Faced with the oppression of the government in the passage of the Schism Act, which was forced through Parliament by the will of Queen Anne, Dissenters might have felt the end was near. They could

not have known at the time of passage that Queen Anne's death would essentially vitiate the intent of the Act.

Apart from the domestic crisis in *The Family Instructor*, portending the doom of family unity, and with Dissenters facing penalties for violations of the Schism Act, the English also concerned themselves with apocalyptic change resulting from the end of the Stuart throne. With no heirs, Queen Anne (1665-1714) was the last of the Anglican Stuarts. Any number of Roman Catholic Stuarts could have ascended the throne had the English wanted to restore the throne to the descendants of the exiled James II (1633-1701), but they did not want a Roman Catholic ruler. Thus, the English throne reverted to the Austrian Hanovers. Jacobites who refused to accept the legitimacy of the Hanover court surely thought the world was coming to an end in the spring of 1715. The eclipse seemed a sign of impending doom.⁸

Halley contacted numerous colleagues who would be positioned as witnesses throughout Wales and southern England in a 138-mile swath at the width of the country to report the events of April 22.⁹ Halley also published a new document, estimated to have been published in March 1715, designed to provide an advanced description of the nature of the eclipse,¹⁰ entitled *A Description of the Passage of the Shadow of the Moon over England, In the Total Eclipse of the SUN, on the 22d Day of April 1715 in the Morning*.¹¹

Apart from his actually being able to view the eclipse in London, Defoe had a number of broadsides available to him before the event, as had the general public, as well as Halley's account of the event and reportage in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society. Halley and the scientific world also had access to a wealth of information through data collected at the Greenwich Observatory which, however, never gained publication.¹² One can imagine the trepidation Englishmen felt with the anticipation of doomsday occurrences threatening them and a series of broadsides flooding the market in a new venture to popularize and disseminate newsworthy events. The country had reached a state of hysteria.

Broadsides, printed single-sheet documents, made text and illustrations available to the general public at low cost, the equivalent today of an internet web page. According to Walters, William Whiston (1667-1752) and the printer John Senex (1678-1740) "had pioneered the production of broadsides intended for the public presentation of astronomy."¹³ Among broadsides that enticed the populous were William Whiston's *Scheme of the Solar System* (1712), on sale for 2s 6d; Whiston's *Calculation of the Great Eclipse of the Sun* (1715) at 6d; Edmond Halley's *Description of the Passage of the Shadow of the Moon over England* (1715), 6d; Whiston's *Compleat Account of the Great Eclipse of the Sun* (1715), 1s; and Halley's *Description of the Passage of the Shadow of the Moon* (1715), 6d. Not until 1718 did Halley provide the general public a detailed report of the events of 1715 in *An Exact Description of the Total and Visible Eclipse of the Moon*, at 6d, although his full account appeared not in a broadside but in the *Philosophical Transactions* (1714-1716).¹⁴

In his narration of the wife's acrimonious response, Defoe does not accord to the moon an independent light source. In fact, the "darkness" attributed to the moon serves inexorably to illustrate the wife's moral decay, her iconoclastic vacuity, and the

darkness that informs her negative response to moral instruction. The wife tries to declare herself independent of her husband, but eighteenth-century society does not allow the division. She functions, as does the moon, with its diurnal cycle and its purposefulness in comprehending distinctions to be drawn between night and day, with the implicit understanding that the wife cannot divorce herself from duties required throughout the day and into the night. She serves to fulfill cyclical events. Feministic imagery allows interpretation comparing the monthly graduation of the moon's growth with menstrual cycles. Paglia interprets this ontology of cyclic menstruation:¹⁵

Woman does not dream of transcendental or historical escape from natural cycle, since she is that cycle. Her sexual maturity means marriage to the moon, waxing and waning in lunar phases. Moon, month, menses: same word, same world. The ancients knew that woman is bound to nature's calendar, an appointment she cannot refuse. . . . She knows there is no free will, since she is not free. . . . Whether she desires motherhood or not, nature yokes her into the brute inflexible rhythm of procreative law. Menstrual cycle is an alarming clock that cannot be stopped until nature wills it.

Indeed, mythology has granted the moon feminine qualities with Cynthia, the goddess of the moon, anticipating childbirth. The epithalamium, the classical poem celebrating marriage, features Cynthia at the beginning before the marriage anticipating the union of the couple and the subsequent celebration of new birth.¹⁶ Thus, in traditional literature, the moon has been linked to family. In Defoe's *The Family Instructor*, where family is destroyed by wanton willfulness and obdurate behavior, the darkness of the moon, as representative of a miscreant wife, confirms the husband's impression that his ideology—his ambition, his patriarchy, his faith, and his exemplary conduct—has been stifled and his light obscured.¹⁷ If the eighteenth-century population was terrorized by the prospects of the solar eclipse with its doomsday prediction, it also found terror in a hapless marriage.

Endnotes

¹John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Collated and annotated by Alexander Campbell Fraser. 2 vols. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1894.

²Irving N. Rothman, "Defoe's *The Family Instructor*: A Response to the Schism Act," *PBSA* 74 (1980): 212-20.

³Duncan Steel, *Eclipse: The Celestial Phenomenon That Changed the Course of History* (Washington, D.C.: The Joseph Henry Press, 2001), 90.

⁴Steel, 138; ⁵Steel, 139; ⁶Steel 166.

⁷*The Black-Day, or, a Prospect of Doomsday. Exemplified in the Great and Terrible Eclipse, which will happen on Friday the 22d of April 1715. . . . According to the most exact calculation by Mr. Halley. . . . and Mr. Whiston. . . .* London: Printed and sold by J. Read and R. Burleigh, 1715?

⁸Alice N. Walters, "Ephemeral Events: English Broad-sides of Early Eighteenth-Century Solar Eclipses," *Hist. Sci.* 37 (1999): 11, fn. 22; Nicholas Rogers, "Popular Protest in Early

Hanoverian London," *Past and Present*, no. 79 (1978): 70-100.
⁹Steel, 167.

¹⁰Walters, 39, fn.20. The document is dated April 10, 1715, in the Harvard Houghton copy, probably the date on which Nicholas Luttrell, collector of ephemera, purchased the piece (in Steel, 167).

¹²Steel, 166.

¹³Walters, 21.

¹⁴Edmond Halley, "Observations of the Late Total Eclipse of the Sun on the 22d of April Last Past . . .," *Philosophical Transactions*, 29 (1714-16): 245-62, in Walters, 4.

¹⁵Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Yale University Press, 1990. 10.

¹⁶Edward O'Neil, "Cynthia and the Moon," *Classical Philology* 53.1 (January 1958): 1-8.

¹⁷See James A. S. McPeck, "The Major Sources of Spenser's 'Epithalamion,'" *JEGP* 35 (1936): 183-213; Robert Hope Case, *English Epithalamia*. London: Lane; Chicago: McClung, 1896; and Irving N. Rothman, "Fielding's Comic Prose Epithalamium in *Joseph Andrews*: A Spenserian Imitation," *MLR* 93.3 (1998): 609-28.

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