

Calico Bill and the Calico Madams: Fashion, Print, and the Public

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1. Violence

According to the Old Bailey Records, "down with the Calicoes" (quoted after Lemire 1991, 35) was a cry often heard on London's streets in the summer of 1719. Several newspapers reported violent attacks against retailers and consumers of calicoes, that is, cotton cloth imported from India. While the word 'calicoes' was used to describe all kinds of imported cotton textiles, here it meant fashionable clothing made from Indian cottons in particular. On June 13, for example, the *Weekly Journal* recounted the following incident:

On Thursday last a great Tumult began among the Weavers in Spittle-Fields, who [...] committed several Disorders and Outrages on the Bodies of Persons wearing Calicoes, and printed Linnen, and burn'd all such sort of Goods as they could get out of the shops where they were to be sold [...]. The Damage done by those Rioters in several Parts of this City, appears to be very considerable; for they spar'd none, even those of the best Fashion who wore Callico, either tearing or spoiling them with Aqua-Fortis, Ink, &c. (*Weekly Journal, or British Gazetteer*, No. 1378)

These riots were only the latest manifestation of an ongoing conflict of interests between home-grown producers of clothing, using predominantly wool, and importers of a new style of clothing, mainly made from much lighter cotton materials (cf. Rothstein 1964; Aiolfi 1987).

2. Rational Arguments

In the following, I want to employ the example of calicoes, and especially the debates and actions surrounding them, to analyse the role of newspapers and magazines in relation to the spread, or containment, of fashionable clothing. Back in 1719, the English manufacturers of woollen products requested Parliament to introduce a new law against the importation and wearing of calicoes to protect their business (cf. Plummer 1972). In order to strengthen their case, the London Weavers' Company hired Daniel Defoe as a lobbyist to produce a twice-weekly paper named *The Manufacturer: or, The British Trade truly Stated. Wherein The Case of the Weavers, and the Wearing of Calicoes, are Consider'd*. The weavers wanted Defoe to convince MPs to vote in the desired fashion; and although the paper bears a price tag of three half-pennies, it was apparently given free to MPs.

In the first issue, published in autumn 1719, Defoe establishes the paper as a reasonable substitute for the violent riots that plagued London during the summer:

But some tell us, Printing is a Kind of Mobbing; and so they say, the Weavers are but playing the Street Game over again. To this they answer, That if they should grant it, they know nothing

that they should lose by the Argument, seeing, if they can rear the Callicoës off of the Women's Backs by a piece of Paper, or in plain English; if they can reason them down, and argue them off, 'tis hop'd the Ladies will not complain of being frighted. (No. 1)

The *Manufacturer's* argument against calicoes sounds straightforward:

Custom, in short, has lock'd up the Weavers' Looms, that they cannot weave; and ty'd up the Hands of their Employers, that they cannot give them Work; and, by Consequence, has taken the Bread out of their Mouths, and left them and their Wives and Children to starve. All this is owing to the Custom, or Fashion, of wearing Callicoës instead of Stuffs, Cotton instead of Wool and Silk, and employing Pagans and Indians, Mahometans, and Chineses, instead of Christians and Britains. (No. 1)

The sentiment is echoed in a pamphlet entitled *The Female Manufacturers Complaint*:

[A]ll this suddain Change, which is apparently to the Ruin of so many Thousands of your Petitioners, is brought about in Favour of a tawdry, Pie-spotted, flabby, ragged, low-priz'd Thing, call'd Callicoe; a Foreigner by Birth; made, the L...d knows where, by a Parcel of Heathens and Pagans, that worship the Devil, and work for a Half-penny a Day. (1720, 9-10)

Defoe and the weavers argue from within a balance-of-trade theory. Wool, the advocates of such theory had long proclaimed, was to be at the heart of the English economy, and had to be defended against the "present vogue of a Free-Trade" (Blanch 1694, n.p.). Against Josiah Child's popular liberal *New Discourse of Trade* (1693) the importance of wool for the English economy was stressed: "So great a dependance [sic] hath the Trade of this Nation upon the Woollen-Manufacture, that [...] Nine parts in Ten of our Exported Commodities doth come from the Sheep's back, and from hence alone is the Spring of our Riches" (Blanch 1694, 2-3). Consequently, England should continue to make the best of it:

[W]ere we but diligent in securing the Manufacture of our English and Irish Wooll, improving of it according to its natural Excellencies, and those Advantages we enjoy, and afterwards in disposing of it to the best advantage abroad, and securing the Benefit of the Merchandize to our own Nation; those Effects would still give a good price, and we should come to an equal Balance in a populous and glorious People. (Blanch 1694, 2)

Defoe himself had updated the argument – now the main evil is calicoes, not the clandestine exportation of wool – just recently in his *A Brief State of the Question, Between the Printed and Painted Callicoës, and the Woollen and Silk Manufacture, as far as it Relates to the Wearing and Using of Printed and Painted Callicoës in Great Britain* (1719). Others, however, had argued against Defoe that calicoes only supplant those textiles which would otherwise be bought from Europe (Asgill 1719; for mercantilist theory in general, and mercantilist restrictions on calico trading in particular cf. Mukerji 1983).

3. Persuasions

On this account, the *Manufacturer* seems to present a perfect case of a Habermasian public discourse:

A public sphere that functioned in the political realm arose first in Great Britain at the turn of the eighteenth century. Forces endeavouring to influence the decision of state authority ap-

pealed to the critical public [*räsonierende Publikum*] in order to legitimate demands before this new forum. (Habermas 1989, 57)

The better, more rational argument would finally win, and not the physically stronger side. But although Defoe might claim such a position for himself, there are several points that question such a noble attitude.

First of all, Defoe brings forward an argument that is already known to everyone anyway. By the end of the seventeenth century, all arguments between the proponents of liberal free trade on the one hand, and proponents of a mercantilist balance-of-trade theory on the other, were well exchanged (cf. Appleby 1978, 248-50; Lemire 1991, 21-31; Aiolfi 1987, 105-20). Endless pamphlets, books, and newspaper articles had argued for or against wool or calicoes, and Defoe is only repeating some of those arguments here. However, and even more importantly, Defoe is done with these rational arguments after the first couple of issues. So, what happens once the rational arguments are exchanged?

The thirty-first issue celebrates the passage of the proposed bill against calicoes through the Commons – and it seems no coincidence that earlier scholars have assumed that the *Manufacturer* had come to a natural end with this issue (Gosselink 1978, v). Defoe, however, kept on writing, and now the paper had to find its own audience beyond the members of parliament. It is in these issues that Defoe gives evidence of his knowledge of a much stronger power than reason. Instead of presenting rational arguments, Defoe works every trick in the book to influence and manipulate. The aim was no longer to rationally convince MPs, but to emotionally persuade the general reader.

The best example of Defoe's technique is his allusion to the plague. In issue No. 67, he disputes that he 'meant' to say in the previous issue "that in the general, Callicoës were infected with the Plague". Nonetheless, Defoe seems happy to exploit people's fear of the plague, which had recently broke out in Marseille: "It would be very hard that so Terrible a thing as the Plague should be brought among us, by a thing that is in it self a Plague of another kind, a Plague to our Commerce, and a Destruction to our Poor" (No. 67; cf. Nos. 66-69; 78; 81; Gosselink 1978, xix-xiii). Defoe devotes four complete issues to linking the plague with this other kind of plague, which is, of course, the spread of calicoes in England: "And if I did call it a Callico Plague, alluding to the spreading of the Evil in the Humour and Fancy of the Women, I do not think but the Allusion is apposite, and to the Purpose" (No. 7). Defoe knows that there is no logical connection between the danger of the plague coming to England and the importation of calicoes. But even when he stresses how improbable the infection through calicoes might be, he still links the two, again and again. In the end, even a paper that was financed by a specific interest group did not, as Habermas has it, appeal "to the critical public in order to legitimate demands before this new forum" (1989, 57). When it comes to the fashion of calicoes, reason does not seem to be of much use.

4. The Power of the Press

Publishers at the beginning of the eighteenth century were well aware of the possibilities and limitations of print publications (cf. Winkler 1998, 289-304). In an essay in the *Original Weekly Journal*, the author – and many think this author might have been Defoe himself – is quite outspoken about the general reader's mundane motivations:

There is something so wicked in the Gust of Men's reading palates in this Age, that they love what is Malicious; something Wicked, in every paper. One Dram of Treason pleases better than a pound of Wit. In lower Things, any Thing that is Malicious; any Thing Slandrous, any Thing ill natured, sells better than the brightest Piece of Virtuous Wit that can be Written [...]. (22 February 1724; quoted after Winkler 1998, 294)

However, even though Defoe's devices might have helped to sell his periodical, this does not necessarily mean that he was successful in convincing the reader. *The Weekly Journal* asserted against those who would wish to believe otherwise, that reading does not mean agreeing: "To be read, you must surely know [...], is one thing, and to be approv'd of, another; and if you think, Sir, you have the kind Encouragement of the Town, because a pretty many of your Papers are sold, you certainly deceive yourself in that" (13 January 1728; quoted in Winkler 1998, 293). Readers might want to be informed, but they also might just want to be entertained, they might want to know what the opposition thinks, or might just be nosy; they might consent, or dissent.

5. The Fear of Fashion

Defoe's *Manufacturer* reveals that what he feared most were not the rational arguments of his opponents but consumers who had their own, uncontrollable motivations for consuming. What Defoe, being himself a failed mercer, feared as much as readers reading for the wrong reasons, were consumers buying clothes for the wrong reasons – and it was those unruly consumers that he tried to address. For the *Manufacturer*, England's ruin was the rise of the wrong fashion:

[O]ur own Growth, and the Workmanship of our own Poor, flighted, and put out of Fashion; the Stuffs, Druggets, and Cloths; the Silk, and Silk mixed with Wool, all discourag'd, by a foolish and fatal Humour possessing our People; a Humour, I say, of running into the Wear of Calicoes, and East India toys, as a universal Fashion [...]. (No. 4)

The only cure is to change the fashion: "[I]f you can once prevail with the Women to leave off wearing them, you need not concern yourself about importing them; for, once get them out of Fashion, and it will be the most effectual Prohibition in Nature" (No. 3; cf. No. 37). Instead, however, Defoe has to witness how "some new Whim runs away with the Town's Fancy, or some foreign Knick-Knack becomes the Fashion" (No. 56), so that finally the "whole Nation [is] dress'd up in a new Gewgau [sic] of Painted Calicoes and Linnen" (No. 12). And Defoe gets really carried away here with the knick-knack and the gewgaw: "[T]he Calicoes, ay, the Calicoes, Sir, the Callicoes" (No. 7), he cries out – his words multiplying at the same rate as the contagious objects he is condemning.

Defoe has to acknowledge that fashion follows its own rules, and that in order to stand any chance against the whims of fashion, he has to employ similar techniques as those

fashion traders who are "cooking [the calicoes] up to the gay Imagination of our Ladies" (No. 2), that is, as those advertising and promoting new fashions. He had to produce some kind of anti-advertising, cooking down the calicoes, so to say. But is that possible?

6. Calico Bill and the Stamp Act

The last parliamentary act designed to bring an end to the weavers' misery before the 1720 'Calico Bill', was the same act that was supposed to put a lid on the rise of periodicals. The precise title of the bill read:

An Act for laying severall Duties upon all Sope and Paper made in Great Britain or imported into the same upon chequered and striped Linens and upon certain Silkes Calicoes Linens and Stuffs printed painted or stained and upon severall Kinds of stampt Vellom Parchment and Paper and upon certain printed Papers Pamphlets and Advertisements [...]. (10 Annæ, c. 18)

What came to be known as the famous Stamp Act regulating the publication of newspapers, was at the same time attempting to regulate the use of calicoes. And the connection between the two, I want to argue, is far from accidental. What these two goods have in common is the technique of printing: both employ the repetitive use of the same stamp to produce great quantities of more or less identical products, both reach the consumer without him or her having any contact with the producer, and both are the product of various contributors. Whereas mass print-communication disrupts the co-presence of speaker and listener in verbal communication, capitalistic mass-production of clothes disrupts any interaction between the producer and the wearer of a garment. Other than verbal communication, a newspaper comes to the reader by means of various actors: writers, paper makers, printers, publishers and retailers, at least. Similarly, the delivery of calico gowns involves weavers, printers, traders and retailers, at least. The anxieties that such (pre-industrial) mass production induced were equally similar: The availability of identical information to everyone (who can read) threatened hierarchies built on traditional information management; the availability of identical clothing for everyone (who can afford it) threatened hierarchies built on strict appearance management. In both cases, the usage of these goods becomes much more difficult to direct: Who controls the meaning of a newspaper? Who controls the meaning of a calico gown?

7. The Discourse of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*

The most successful paper at the time of the Stamp Act was the *Spectator*, reaching – if one wants to believe Addison's own estimation – up to 60 000 daily readers. The *Spectator* and the earlier *Tatler* were not only championed by Habermas as prime examples for the "self-enlightenment of individuals" (1989, 42), they were also the prime institution for censoring fashions, and other apparently frivolous activities. In the last thirty years, this apparently liberal, rational, non-coercive discourse has come under attack for its tendencies to exclude women, foreigners, effeminate, the aristocrats and the labouring poor, and generally everyone not conforming to the white, male, heterosexual, middle-class ideal implied in these papers (cf. Mackie 1997). The

disclosure of the constructedness of such apparently natural order appears to lie at the heart of many critical-minded historical cultural studies.

The Habermasian reading suggested that the papers were hassled by the state because they were spreading a liberal rationality, which would ultimately endanger those in power: that is, the aristocracy (but cf. Winkler 1998, 125). Contrary to this, post-structuralist or cultural studies readings suggest that the papers do not undermine but underline the position of those actually in power: that is, in this case, the white, male bourgeoisie. What both sides seem to agree upon is that the papers, in the words of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, "gently coerced" their readers "with a mixture of satire and example, into the ways of tolerance and good manners" (1986, 83; cf. Gordon 1995). What is under debate is whether this is a good thing or not. That readers might make up their own minds seems of little importance to both sides.

8. Preaching the Good, Selling the Evil

A late twentieth-century reader of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* might easily be forgiven for assuming that these papers had the power to infiltrate people's minds and change people's behaviour, if one considers the material form in which these essays come to us today after nearly three-hundred years of canonization. The eight stately toms, into which the edited essays are bound, do not only wear a grave, navy-blue jacket, they also bear nothing less than the stamp of Oxford University Press (Clarendon). They are arranged in continuous book form, furnished with footnotes and an index. Surely, one is tempted to assume today, people believed the ideology brought forward in these papers, if it was imposed on them with such authority.

However, modern editions do not only rearrange the original periodicals, they also leave out nearly half of what the original consumer held in his or her hands. Of the diverse advertisements, which often filled the complete back page of the folio half-sheets (on early advertising cf. R. Bond 1953), only those mocking variations are reprinted that Addison and Steele commissioned themselves – the rest is omitted. Consequently, the first words of Donald F. Bond's introduction to the definitive scholarly edition of the *Spectator* could only be: "The periodical essay" (1987a, xiii). Such focus makes it easy to announce in the preface that it simply "has not been practicable to reproduce the advertisements of the original sheets" (D. Bond 1987b, vii).¹ That the *Spectator* could have been something else to the contemporary reader than a collection of well-wrought, satirical-yet-reasonable essays seems to be worth little consideration.

However, the same paper that published a long letter complaining about the "Inconstancy" of fashion and its negative effects on businesses (*Spectator*, 1712, No. 478), and that set out to persuade women to "endeavour to make themselves the Objects of a

¹ Instead, advertisements are referred to extensively in the footnotes to provide the necessary context for some of the essays. In a way, this acknowledges the fact that many essays only make sense in the context of such advertisements, and that such context must be re-presented to the modern reader; nonetheless, such placement into footnotes upholds the distinction between the text proper, and the supplementary context information.

reasonable and lasting Admiration [which] is not to be hoped for from Beauty or Dress, or Fashion, but from those inward Ornaments, which are not to be defaced by Time" (*Spectator*, 1711, No. 73), is at the same time the most important medium for promoting fashion. Of the roughly 4500 advertisements that appeared in the first run of the *Spectator* (Nos. 1-555), several hundreds promote the consumption of fashionable clothing. In the *Tatler*, who declared in the dedication to the first bound issue as its "general Purpose [...] to expose the false Arts of Life, to pull off the Disguises of Cunning, Vanity, and Affectation, and to recommend a general Simplicity in our Dress, our Discourse, and our Behaviour", the advertisement that was published by far the most often was promoting:

Men's Morning Gowns, of rich Silks, Stuffs, Callicoes, &c. (being the Goods of a Person that failed) to be disposed of at very low Rates; may be soon bought at the Olive-tree and Still within three doors of Young Man's Coffee House, against the Horse at Charing-Cross. The prizes being set on each Gown. (*Tatler*, 1710, No. 124)

With slight variations – and the addition of 'Women's Morning Gowns' – this advertisement was placed in the *Tatler* more than a hundred times from January 1710 onwards. While before 1710 mainly fabrics were advertised, we can now observe the beginnings of a ready-made trade offering fashionable apparel to be purchased on the spot. The morning-gowns advertised here, worn at home as well as in public, were ideal consumer products: they were loose-fitting, and therefore did not have to be tailor-made, but could be bought easily at a warehouse (cf. Lemire 1991, 7; Ribeiro 2005, 244; 280; 306; 311). But Calicoes were not only lighter, easier to wash, and often cheaper than wool, they were also more fashionable.

Soon, the latest fashions came under debate. In October 1710, a Mrs Attaway advertised "All Sorts of rich Brocaded Silks, Japanned Sattins, Thread Sattins, and a Variety of other Things made into Morning-Gowns" (*Tatler*, 1710, No. 243; also Nos. 244; 246; 248; 250). This made the long running above-cited advertisement for the Olive-Tree and Stills, which appeared on the same page, look rather old-fashioned. It took only a couple of days until the latter had remodelled the original advertisement, now promoting "Morning-Gowns for Men and Women, of all Sorts of rich Brocaded Silks, Japan'd Sattins, and great Variety of other rich Silks, Stuffs, and Callicoe's". But Mrs Attaway, it seems, would not accept defeat so easily. Only three weeks later she advertised "All Sorts of rich Brocaded Silks, Japanned Satins, Thread Satins, and Variety of other Things made into Morning-Gowns, large and well lined, being a fresh clean Parcel, and to be sold very cheap [...]; and for Encouragement of the Undertaking, there will be a Silk Sash given gratis with every Gown" (*Tatler*, 1710, No. 260). Examples of such advertisements are endless. And even though other periodicals and newspapers featured advertisements for clothing – the *Post-Boy* for example, and the *Post-Man*, as well as the *Daily Courant* and the *London Gazette* –, the variety and frequency of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* were never matched. To sum up: The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* were the bestselling magazines of their time, they were among the fiercest in criticising the consumers of fashion, and they were home to the biggest advertising campaigns for fashion – whereas the front page ridiculed the wearers of hoop-petticoats, the back page tried to sell exactly these.

9. Yesteryear's Readers

Where does that leave the reader? Are we to envision two different sets of readers, one half reading the front page, the other staring at the back? The men nodding away to the sentiments in the essays, and the women delighting over the advertised goods? Although research into a readership that is dead for at least 250 years always involves some degree of speculation, I believe such a strict distinction to be fairly unlikely. In such a vision, men as well as women are nothing else but stimulus-response automata reacting according to their inner program: Men, as rational beings, cannot but agree with a reasonable argument; women, born with an unstoppable desire for shiny things, cannot but crave for the latest fashion. The idea that every reader might react differently to what he or she reads seems absent from both the Habermasian model of the public and that of his critics. Neither is the reader 'gently coerced' into an enlightened state of mind, as Habermas seems to think, nor is s/he unable to resist the 'ideological propaganda' of Defoe, Steele, Addison and others, as many post-structuralist cultural critics imply – and neither is the reader a blind follower of any marketing-ploy, as Marxist as well as conservative critics seem to believe. While analysts of contemporary culture are (sometimes too) quick to stress the polysemy of popular culture, and the empowering opportunities of even the most conservative TV-program (see for example Fiske 1992), many analysts of the eighteenth century do not seem to grant such pro-activity to the eighteenth century reader. Whereas Defoe and his contemporaries were very much aware of the fact that their control over the readers' minds was fairly limited, many of today's critics seem to believe that the eighteenth century reader was duped into thinking that fashion effeminates, and that men should refrain from it, and that women's consumption of fashion should be regulated.

This is not to say that the ideology expressed in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* had no influence on readers at all, and that society was not, in many ways, structured along misogynistic, homo- and xenophobic patterns. Neither do I want to reconstruct the autonomy of literary works unhampered by the social, nor do I want to resurrect an autonomous subject, free from ideological constraints and discursive determinations. Rather, I want to reopen the case of the relationship between individuals and writing. Often a reader might have found what he or she thought anyway, at other times they might have just wanted to see what all the fuss was about, they might have just read it for the advertising, or as only one of many opposing views circulating. Contrary to what Defoe, Steele, Addison and others might have wished for (and it is far from self-evident that they had only one motive), women did not stay at home, men kept an interest in apparel, and traders traded whatever the law allowed. Periodicals – now as much as in the eighteenth century – do not speak with one, coherent voice, and there is no one, uniform understanding. Unfortunately, many historically minded cultural studies seem to take their main methodology from a philologist tradition which takes a simplistic understanding of communication as its working hypothesis: 'a producer sends a message to a receiver'. As a consequence, an in-depth analysis of the essays in the periodicals is believed to reveal the attitudes of writers and readers alike – if you know the meaning of the text, you know what people thought. Such studies re-examine

texts and highlight their representative aspects rather than the aesthetics, but they fail to re-evaluate the status of the text itself, its existence as a material thing.

However, the analysis of the *Spectator*, *Tatler*, and other eighteenth century periodicals, as materially situated, mass-media business ventures reveals at least one other, slightly ironic side to the ideology of the essays: The more these periodicals scorned fashion, the more attractive they seem to have become to advertisers of fashion. One might assume that the advertisers knew all too well that the satires on fashion would not make fashion go away. On the contrary: The desire to acquire fashionable clothing, which the advertisements promised to fulfil, must have been kindled by the essays in the *Spectator* and *Tatler* more than by any other editorial work. The reformers could only hope that consumers would not follow the desires, which, in the end, they helped to create – or at least spread. What started as an attempt to mould the forces of modern capitalism inevitably became an important part of it. The need to reach as many as possible in order to reform, and the need to finance this dissemination, finally compromised the attempt – the spread of anti-fashion promotion is as hard to control as the fashion itself.

What I hope to have shown here is the following: The *Spectator*, *Tatler* et al. were more than just essays; they were business ventures in a contested market, distributed and disseminated according to specific medial and material restraints. And my attempt to understand these papers' position regarding fashionable clothing, and calicoes in particular, made it necessary to take these aspects into consideration. Individuals, it becomes clear, are not confronted with discourses: They engage with materials, textual and textile – and it is the form of these materials that frames their understanding. However, this should not be mistaken for an essentialisation of the dichotomy between material and discourse on the one hand, and the individual on the other. The terms in which the individual engages with discourses and materials, and in fact its very individuality itself, are itself a result of this engagement, and the difference between these engagements.

10. Today's Researchers

Finally, where does this leave today's researcher? As it is impossible to recover what (ordinary) eighteenth century readers thought about their reading material, we can, and that would be my suggestion, only try to be more alert to the material and medial contexts of the texts we analyse. My approach is the following: I imagine the reader as practicing some sort of cultural/media studies her – or himself – constantly making sense of the surrounding world, analysing and combining whatever is available to him or her. I see it as my task to lay open the conditions of his or her interpretative work. How did the information come into the hands of a contemporary reader, what were its medial and material conditions? What is its narrative, rhetorical etc. structure? What other information was available? I try to imagine a situated 'sense-maker' who constructs a view of the world he or she lives in from the information he or she can gather, and from what she or he imagines others know about the world. Furthermore, I try to take into account that the 'reader' is not only a cognitive information processing

machine, but first of all a situated bodily individual. Finally, then, this is not an attempt to melt horizons; rather, this is an attempt to reconstruct the material conditions of understanding, not what is understood. It is an attempt to give a material frame to the hermeneutical and phenomenological work of the individual – an individual, which is, paradoxically, created by the discourse it perceives.²

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