

## 'but Satan hindred': Harley, Defoe, and the Impedimenta of Nonconformity

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**SLIDE 2** : In his superlative edition of the *Collected Correspondence of Defoe*, Nick Seager observed that, before Harley cited it in a long-awaited letter to him dated 12<sup>th</sup> June 1707, there are no examples within Defoe's canon of the Biblical phrase 'but Satan hindered', from Book 1 of St Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians, Chapter 2, Verse 18. However, 'shortly after Harley's letter to him, Defoe used it five times [in his *Review*] within six months, as well as subsequently, in his *History of the Union (1709/10)*; the *Review again (1712)*; a letter to Harley in **1713**; in the Preface to the second edition of *The Family Instructor (1715)*; his *Account of the Conduct of Robert Earl of Oxford (also 1715)* and then finally, and less relevant to this investigation, in his *Political History of the Devil (1726)*.

Given Defoe's typically abundant, typically nonconformist, use of Biblical allusion, every evocation of this phrase need not equally concern us, but given also the paucity of Harley's correspondence to Defoe generally, and this - notably lean - period of his communications leading up to the ratification of the Union with Scotland, the contents of Harley's letter of 12<sup>th</sup> June 1707 merits our - as certainly it must also have commanded Defoe's - close attention.

Harley's letter famously makes clear his contempt for those ministers who had blocked the imposition of penalties on Dutch and other merchants who had variously sought to profit via the Anglo-Scots duties differential which, under Articles 4 and 6 of the Treaty, would come to an end on the Union's official start date of 1st May 1707. Harley further objected to Scottish merchants' being denied fair gains from this change:

I cannot let this Letter pass without a few words upon ye point of trade: The true state of the matter is this: Upon the View of the Union, Dutch, Jews, Swedes, Danes &c struck into the notion of bringing in Goods before May 1 [...] However the House of Commons would have rescued us from the scandal & obliged Scotland; they had contrived to make the Cheats do Justice, and at the same time indulged the Scots with an opportunity of getting clear and honestly 150000£ to speak with the least – **but Satan hindred** -- [...] What was the present End you know, what is to come God knows; but this is certain, if our Scots Friends knew what a sweet Morsel these people have taken out of their Mouths, they would turn their rage the right way.

This letter's contents have been described by Furbank and Owens in their *Political Biography of Defoe* as 'self-righteous railing', and while certainly self-righteous, I might suggest 'ebullience, irritation', even 'dismissiveness' here, as opposed to 'railing'. This letter undoubtedly would have resonated with Defoe's shared moral sensibilities, favouring fair and equitable means of gaining profit and – also shared with Harley - the needful importance of mollifying relations *with* the Scots as the Union got underway.

Brian Hill has further considered Harley's tone here, particularly regarding those Whig ministerial colleagues whom Harley refers to elsewhere in the same letter as "the real atheists and pretended patriots" – noting how Harley was not above undermining the authority of those colleagues 'by surreptitious means on every possible occasion.' Hill concludes that 'Such intrigues cannot safely be left out of any account of Harley's methods. Paradoxically they appear to have arisen from the moral inflexibility of his character. His strength as a politician lay in his conviction of his own

integrity.’<sup>i</sup> I would suggest that it is precisely this ‘moral inflexibility’, and the strength of Harley’s conviction in his integrity which leaves its legacy in Defoe’s relatively immediate, and frequent, coining of the same phrase (Defoe was, I think it can safely be said, hardly short of self-conviction in his own integrity himself). Reconsideration of the original Biblical passage and Defoe’s various application of it reveals a specific shared modality – contemptuous dismissiveness founded in strong moral self-conviction – in turn reflecting key aspects of Harley and Defoe’s shared Nonconformist cultural heritage. So, first, to turn to the scriptural passage in question, in which the Apostle Paul expresses his regret that his return to Thessalonica has been unavoidably detained:

**SLIDE 3:** Here, as Matthew Henry’s 1721 *Exposition of the...New Testament* explains, the apostle Paul at least intended his absence should be but for a short time. His desire and endeavour were to return again very soon to Thessalonica. But, Henry goes on, **men of business are not masters of their own time. Paul did his endeavour, and he could do no more, [since] Satan - that is, some enemy or enemies, or the great enemy of mankind - hindered his return.**

**SLIDE 4:** Daniel Whitby’s 1700 *Paraphrase and Commentary upon the Epistles of the New Testament* further observes, regarding our understanding of ‘Satan’ in this context, ‘That **they who obstruct the Progress of the Gospel, and persecute the Promoters of it, are the Ministers of Satan, and therefore bear his Name.**’

**SLIDE 5:** And so in the context of these contemporary Bible commentaries, and the Scottish duties dispute, Harley’s 1707 Scriptural allusion implies a hindrance impossible to prevent or circumvent, certainly, but – importantly - one which does little to undermine the far more fundamental matter – the advent of Christ, of which the Thessalonians are reliably *promised* they shall partake as his ‘glory and joy’, Verse 20. Henry elaborates here as well, that *nothing* shall hinder that greater glory, and the verse coming directly after the reference to Satan’s hindrance confirms this reassuringly, with rhetorical questions dismissive of Satan’s importance - ‘for what *is* our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? *Are not even ye* in the presence of our Lord at his coming?’ – thus Harley’s allusion to ‘Satan’s hindering’ also implies a dismissal of Satan’s *lesser* power – and with it the lesser powers of those ministers working on Satan’s behalf since the Union has, certainly, now come to fruition.

Harley’s entirely conscious deployment of the passage’s full meaning articulates the authority of Scripture as the express revelation of God which nonconformists bring along to their deployment of this intermediary textual source - in all of its interpretative and tropey richness –for their readers’ decoding of meaning, such that anything they wrote (including private correspondence) needs to be scrutinised in tandem with its Scriptural original. And this is what I think needs to be emphasised in the context of Defoe’s subsequent coinings of Harley’s Biblical allusion in the months which followed.

By way of further context, from verse 13 onwards, Chapter 2 emphasises the relatively minor inconvenience of Paul’s inability to come to the Thessalonians again, a hindrance which does not impede the greater project, because his brethren have received the word of God, verse 13, ‘as it is *in truth... not* as the word of men’ – a greater truth Paul shares with his brethren regardless of the Satanic forces which hamper it since his *absence* is merely that, ‘being taken from you for a short time in presence, *not* in heart.’, Verse 17.

Because it is inconveniences and hindrances which shape English nonconformist experience throughout the early modern period. Indeed as defined by Neil Keeble, Sharon Achinstein and

others, the cultural contribution of nonconformity to literary history itself is as ‘the product of a movement accommodating itself to the experience of defeat, repression and ridicule.’ [Keeble, 23] The cultural status and even the political importance of post-Restoration nonconformity relied intrinsically on the long game, and robust self-recognition of a higher moral integrity, forged in the crucible of myriad hindrances and inconveniences, both large and small.

**SLIDE 6 :** Such hindrances serve – for those of robust moral self-conviction - as little more than *impedimenta*, those things which impede or encumber – but do not halt - progress, things which, echoing Henry’s *Biblical Commentary*, for ‘men of business [who] are not masters of their own time’, must serve as an expected irritation rather than a devastating blow.

**SLIDE 7 :** So, how *does* Defoe deploy this phrase after Harley’s letter of June 1707? Similarly to Harley, Defoe’s five earliest evocations of the phrase ‘Satan hindered’ are modally dismissive of the severity of the hindrance under discussion, and always in retrospect – reflecting and commenting on matters past. The five citations in the *Review* between October 1707 and March 1708, relate variously to

- In Number 101, an account of a troupe of theatrical players who, having been expelled from Oxford, have now appeared in Bath, at which event Mr Review expresses a wish that the good people of Bath would do the same and similarly expel the players, ‘*but Satan hinders*, and the Humour of the day is not that way.’
- In Number 103, Mr Review observes that the nation’s affairs are doing quite well, actually, and not in a parlous state – as England’s enemies abroad and some DISMAL ministers at home would have it (the latter being a reference to Daniel Finch, known as Dismal for his rather miserable face, apparently). Mr Review’s tone then moves towards irony with his asseveration that ‘No doubt the QUEEN had met with much better Success [...] if it had been Her Majesty’s good fortune to have made a better Choice of Managers’ – for example Sacheverell as Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Occasional Bill would have been passed with all its tacks,– ‘But Satan hindered!’
- In Number 142, Mr Review argues that the best means to defend the American Colonies – either against them falling into the hands of England’s enemies or their rebelling for independence – would be to ‘make our Collonies rich, great, populous and strong’. If this had been done some time ago, Mr Review concludes, we would have ‘saved the Nation 2 Millions in Expense, and two more in losses, but Sathan hindered.’
- In Number 148, Mr Review revisits a previously-stated intention of writing up ‘a general State of our Trade’, and the importance of such a project, admitting that it was ‘once my design to have made it the principal Subject of one whole Volume, but Sathan hindred; Feuds, Parties, and daily Occurrences which forced me to long digressions, prevented.’
- In Number 172, Mr Review continues the historical reflections began in Number 171 regarding how the Popish ways and debauchery which had first come in with Charles II’s Restoration had been subsequently curtailed by a clear-eyed English rejection of such practices following the Popish Plot, but that those measures had subsequently waned over time and – ‘Sathan hinder’d – A Mist of Darkness then rose up from the bottomless Pit of Popery and Tyranny’ with the advent of King James.

Shared across of all of these citations – even the ironical use of the phrase in Number 103 – is a strong sense of historical relativism: if only events had unfolded *this* way – but Satan hindered, and so they did not. The myriad ‘hindrances’ under discussion are never crucial or pivotal matters – not ‘game changers’ – but underline again the *lesser* relative power of Satan compared to God’s greater purpose. This sense is shared with some of Defoe’s subsequent citations of the phrase, although inevitably the more *closely* shared application of Defoe’s usage and Harley’s 1707 citation of it begin to wane over time.

**SLIDE 8:** In *The History of the Union*, in 1709, the phrase is used in the context of a much earlier stage in Anglo-Scots relations – whereby a previous plan for peaceful union had proposed a marriage between King Henry VIII’s daughter Mary and King James V of Scotland [...] whereby Defoe observes that ‘both Parties were well pleased with it, and look’d upon it as the best Method, to bring both Nations to a state of Prosperous and durable Peace. But Satan hindered.’ In this context, the obstructive Satanic forces constitute those ‘French and Popish Counsels ... [who] wrought the King of Scotland to such a dislike of the Match, That he rejected King Henry’s Proposal with some Indecencies.’ [p15] Given the subject matter of this work is the history of the Anglo-Scottish Union, now successfully achieved, this historical hindrance can serve as little more than a minor delay to the greater project now complete.

In considerably more recent historical terms, in the *Review* for 8<sup>th</sup> November 1712, the phrase appears in the context of Mr Review’s ‘annual custom’ of memorialising King William, whereby he speculates that ‘Had his Majesty liv’d to pursue his own Measures’, he would have sustained the balance of power in Europe [...] But Sathan hindred!” Five years after Harley’s citation of the phrase, I think *this* moment of sombre reflection indicates a more damaging, less dismissive, impact for Satan’s ‘hindrance’, and in his use of it within a letter to Harley himself on 7 Jan 1713, Defoe expresses regret for Harley’s current ‘indisposition’, a cause of misfortune for the nation which Defoe asserts will eventually be acknowledged even by Harley’s enemies, though – rather gloomily – ‘for so long as Heaven permits, Sathan hinders.’ Used within the context of physical frailty and misfortune, and the extent to which the unwinding of history itself is contingent on the all-too mortal bodies of both King William, and Harley himself, the phrase is here tinged with regret, and even trepidation.

**SLIDE 9:** Defoe’s use of the phrase in the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Family Instructor* (1715), appears to evoke again the ‘men of business’ inconveniences of the previous *Review* citations, whereby the Author explains that he had originally intended for his work to remain anonymous ... but Satan hindred.’ I *could* – but won’t – devote an entirely separate conference paper to consider the significance of this response to the unintentional revelation of Defoe’s authorial identity for this highly corrected second edition of this text but suffice to say here that as with the 1712 letter to Harley, the impedimenta raised by Satan here are again immediate or very recent, and personally relevant. And in the same year’s *Account of the Conduct of Robert Earl of Oxford* (1715), in his spirited defence of Harley in the wake of impeachment proceedings, Defoe notes how the self-interested obstructions raised by Harley’s opponents impede what would *otherwise* have been the smooth-running operation of the nation’s ministerial business [...] But Sathan hindered; and, Defoe concludes, ‘the Conduct of the outed Party was very singular on that Occasion.’\* Here, Defoe applies the phrase to Harley’s ministerial opponents – in direct correlation with Harley’s own original use of the phrase in June 1707 – although this time around, there is nothing dismissive about Defoe’s sober – even grave – tone here, regarding the *Satanic* destruction wrought to Harley’s career.

In conclusion, this paper has suggested that the coining of a certain Scriptural phrase in Harley's letter to Defoe on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1707 bears witness not only to the Nonconformist cultural heritage shared by these two individuals, a heritage grounded in the rich semantic textures of Biblical allusion, but that also - for godly men of business who are not masters of their own time – a shared heritage contingent of the writers' capacity to apply a notably steadfast self-conviction in the moral integrity of their faith to both ancient and more recent history, and to the ways of all men.

Thank you for listening

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\*Furbank & Owens' *Critical Bibliography* attribution of this text to Defoe is based partly on this specific reference to 'the conduct of the outed Party' bearing a close relation to the account of the 'outed Party' in the *Review* for 20 September 1712. [p32]

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<sup>i</sup> Brian Hill, *Speaker, Secretary of State and Premier Minister*, pp106-7.