

Defoe Daniel

Atalantis Major



Daniel Defoe
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Atalantis Major:

Содержание

INTRODUCTION

4

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

19

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INTRODUCTION

Atalantis Major is a thinly veiled allegory describing the November 1710 election of the representative Scottish peers. The circumstances which surrounded this election were produced by the outcome of the previous month's General Election – a landslide for the Tories – and, to understand these circumstances, the impact of that Tory victory must be seen within the context of the political events of 1710.

By early in 1710 it had become obvious that the Whig Ministry of Sidney Godolphin was unable or unwilling to negotiate an end to the long, expensive, and consequently, unpopular war with France. The quarrel between Queen Anne and her confidante, the Duchess of Marlborough, smouldered until, on 6 April 1710, the breach between them became final. The Queen's confidence in the Duke of Marlborough began to erode as early as May 1709 when he sought to be appointed "Captain-General for Life." Godolphin's decision to impeach the popular Rev. Dr. Henry Sacheverell for preaching "a sermon which reasserted the doctrine of non-resistance to the will of the monarch" was ill-advised, for not only did it give the

High-Church Tories a martyr, it also gave the Administration the appearance of being against the Church. In securing the impeachment of Sacheverell on 20 March 1710, the Whigs discovered that they had lost the support and the confidence of both the Parliament and the country.

Dissent within and intrigue from without further hastened the fall of the Administration. Godolphin, a moderate, had, after the General Election of 1708, found himself allied with the "Junto" of five powerful Whig Lords – Wharton, Sommers, Halifax, Orford, and Sunderland – but it was, at best, an uneasy alliance. Throughout 1709 and into the early months of 1710, personal jealousies drove the Godolphin-Marlborough interest farther and farther away from the Junto. Robert Harley and the Dukes of Somerset and Shrewsbury, in their determination to overthrow the Administration, exploited every chance to widen the rifts between Anne and her Ministers and between the two ministerial factions. Abigail Hill Masham, who soon became an agent of Harley, replaced the Duchess of Marlborough as Anne's confidante.

When the Ministry fell, it fell like a house of cards. On 14 April 1710 Shrewsbury was made Lord Chamberlain over the unavailing protests of Godolphin. Two months later, at the instigation of Somerset, the Queen replaced Sunderland with the Tory Lord Dartmouth as Secretary of State. Finally, on 8 August, Godolphin was ordered to break the White Staff of his office and Harley was appointed Treasurer. One by one the remaining

Junto Ministers were replaced by Tories. By September the work was complete. The Duke of Marlborough alone remained, in command of the army, but this was only to be until the new Ministry could negotiate a peace and his services would no longer be required.

It had been Harley's intention to govern by means of a "moderate" Administration, a "Queen's Ministry above party," but he had not reckoned on the outcome of the General Election called in October. "On the day Godolphin fell, Harley expounded his 'moderate' programme in a letter to the Duke of Newcastle: 'The Queen is assured you will approve her proceedings, which are directed to the sole aim of making an honourable and safe peace, securing her allies, reserving the liberty and property of the subject, and the indulgence to Dissenters in particular, and to perpetuate this by really securing the succession of the House of Hanover.'"¹

Alone, either the antagonism to the war or the intensity of feeling for the High-Church cause which the Sacheverell affair engendered, would have been sufficient to sweep the Whigs from power. Together, and combined as they were with the prestige of the Queen's public support of Harley and the newly appointed Tory Ministers, these issues were irresistible. Harley found himself with an "immoderate" House of Commons. The Tories held 320 seats, the Whigs only 150, and there were 40 seats

¹ George Macaulay Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), III, 68.

whose votes were "doubtful."² Many of the new Parliamentarians were High-Church zealots, and most were anxious to turn the nation away from the policies of the Whig Administration of Godolphin.

The House of Lords, however, remained a bastion of Whig strength. As an hereditary body the House of Lords was simply not subject to the same opportunity for change as the elected House of Commons. Consequently, in 1710, as a result of the Glorious Revolution, the long reign of William III, and the Godolphin Ministry, the majority of the members of the House of Lords were of Whig or Revolution Settlement policies. Therein lay Harley's problem in late October of 1710: to obtain a Lords to match the Commons he had been given.

Any early eighteenth-century Ministry – Whig or Tory – could count on having the support of those peers whose poverty made them dependent on governmental subsidies, but this number would not have given Harley even a bare majority in the strongly Whig House of Lords. And there Harley needed at least enough strength to ensure success for some of the measures designed to satisfy the demands of the newly Tory House of Commons, particularly if his Ministry was to be able to negotiate a satisfactory treaty of peace with France.

To obtain a Tory majority in the House of Lords

² These are Trevelyan's figures (*op. cit.*, 73). W. A. Speck (*Tory and Whig* [London: Macmillan, 1970], p. 123) gives the Tories 332 seats and 181 seats to the Whigs in this election.

commensurate with the one in Commons, Harley could have seen to the creation of a sufficient number of new peerages; but this would have alienated too many factions and the recently completed Union with Scotland (1707) offered what appeared to be a far simpler expedient. The Act of Union provided for the election of sixteen Scottish peers who would represent all of the Scottish nobility in the House of Lords.³ If he could ensure that all sixteen of these peers were Tory, Harley would be certain of a large block of loyal votes in the upper house, or, at worst, he would have to arrange for the creation of only a few new peers to neutralize the Whigs' strength. To John Campbell, the second Duke of Argyll, Harley assigned the task of orchestrating a Tory sweep in this election.

The Duke of Argyll sat in the House of Lords as the Earl of Greenwich (an English title), not as one of the elected peers, and, as such, he was not eligible to stand as a candidate or to vote in this election. Argyll had supported the Whig Junto and held the rank of Lieutenant General under Marlborough in France, but in 1710 (seeing the direction the political tide was taking) he

³ In point of fact, Harley's concern for the loyalty of the representative peers is unique in the history of these elections. In subsequent Parliaments, the Scottish peers seldom, if ever, voted against the Government – even at the trial of Lord Lovat in 1745-6. For one thing, almost without exception, the representative peers were dependent on governmental subsidies and this dependence increased during the course of the eighteenth century (see J. H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England* [London: Penguin, 1973], p. 180; and Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* [London: Macmillan, 1967], p. 393). The practice of electing a representative peerage for Scotland was discontinued after 1782 (see Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, 235).

abandoned his support of Godolphin's Ministry. So that, "by the time the [Sacheverell] Trial was finished, it was known that the great chief of the Campbells and of the Scottish Whigs had gone into opposition to the Government [of Godolphin] in league with Harley, although he voted for the Doctor's condemnation..."⁴

Argyll and the sixteen representative peers (if they were all Tories), together with the votes of those peers who were dependant upon Government subsidies would give the new Ministry of Harley enough votes in the upper house for almost any eventuality – even the impeachment of Marlborough. It is possible to speculate that this was the plum – command of the British armies in Europe – that induced Argyll's change from Whig to Tory in 1710. Argyll's jealousy and resentment of his commander had been a well known bit of gossip for some time, and it is very possible that Argyll saw a new Government as his chance to steal a march on Marlborough. Although Harley's Ministry did give the Order of the Garter to Argyll on 20 December 1710, he was never promoted over Marlborough, but that was not due to any lack of success in assuring a Tory victory in the election of the peers. Argyll's heavy-handed management of that election is the subject of Defoe's *Atalantis Major*.

By birth and education Daniel Defoe was a member of the mercantile middle class. He was a Dissenter and his political and economic sympathies generally coincided with those of the moderate Whigs. A limited monarchy, the destruction

⁴ Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, 58.

of France's commercial empire, liberty of conscience for Dissenters and Nonconformists, and a Protestant (that is, Hanover) Succession were the imperatives which lay behind much of his political and economic thinking and writing. From as early as 1694 he had served William III as a pamphleteer-propagandist for the vigorous prosecution of the war with France. After his five-month imprisonment in 1703 for writing *The Shortest Way with Dissenters*, Defoe was employed as an agent and pamphleteer of the Government. First, in the service of Robert Harley, Godolphin's Secretary of State during the early moderate years of the Godolphin Administration (1704-08), and thereafter working for Godolphin himself, Defoe's *Review* preached the gospel of national unity above party faction. When Harley replaced Godolphin as Treasurer in 1710, Defoe returned to his service.

Although it may appear from this that Defoe's pen was for hire by whichever party was in power, in point of fact, Defoe's political views were remarkably congruent with those of both Harley and Godolphin. All three were staunch supporters of England's commercial interests, the Hanoverian Succession, liberty of conscience for Dissenters and Nonconformists, and the terms of the Revolution Settlement. It must be remembered that Godolphin and Harley were both moderates, each trying to chart his course between the extremes of the parties. They, like Daniel Defoe, saw their loyalty being to England and to the Queen, not to a party. Like Defoe, they both discovered that politics often make

strange bedfellows. Godolphin, faced with a large Whig majority in the House of Commons after the General Election of 1708, found that his fortunes were bound to those of the Junto. Harley, after the General Election of 1710, discovered the necessity of courting the High-Church Tories far more than he would have liked.

Argyll's slate of Scottish peers for the November election included men who were even more extreme in their Toryism than the majority of High-Church English Tories. Most of the sixteen were High-Church, many had strong Catholic leanings; all of them were against increasing the religious liberties of the Scottish Presbyterians (and thus those of the English Dissenters and Nonconformists). Several of these peers had been openly professed Jacobites and all were, in some degree, sympathetic to France. To have men with such beliefs in Parliament meant, to Defoe, the chance that Marlborough's victories in France would be negotiated away, the loss of what the Toleration Act of 1689 had gained, and finally, the specter of the Pretender on the throne. In short, such men could mean the loss of all that the Revolution and the war with France had won. Yet, in the late autumn of 1710, Defoe found himself in Edinburgh, the agent and propagandist of the man on whose behalf Argyll had engineered the election of men of such politics.

Defoe's mission in Edinburgh that autumn was to allay the fears of the Presbyterian clergy and Whig merchants about the new Tory Ministry. His message to them was, in Professor

Sutherland's words, that

What the country needed ... was steady, moderate men, whether they called themselves Whig or Tory, men who would uphold the Protestant succession and avoid extreme measures; and that on the whole was what it had now got [appearances to the contrary notwithstanding]. The Ministry was not going to give way to the clamours of the High Tory rank and file; and the Queen would certainly not countenance any form of persecution.⁵

In short, Defoe was charged with convincing his Scottish friends and associates (and, by means of the *Review*, the nation at large) the opposite of all that Argyll's actions and words bespoke of Harley's intentions.

Defoe wrote Harley from Edinburgh on 18 November (eight days after the election of the peers) to voice his dismay at the tactics that had been used by Argyll. By them his own mission on Harley's behalf had been impaired:

I hint this Sir to Confirm my Censure of the Conduct aforesaid as Imprudent and as what has rendred [sic] the quieting these people, which was Easy before, Very Difficult now.⁶

Further, he suggests that Harley's heretofore moderate allies, the Squadrone, have been pushed by Argyll into league with the

⁵ James R. Sutherland, *Defoe* (London: Methuen, 1950), p. 179.

⁶ *The Letters of Daniel Defoe*, ed. by George Harris Healey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 296.

old Court Party that had supported the Godolphin Ministry. This letter also contains a brief summary of the main events which were to form the plot of *Atalantis Major*, but it does not attack Argyll with the same bitterness that the longer work does. Defoe writes:

In the late Election, the Conduct of the D of 60 [Argyll], the E of 163 [Islay], and the Earle of 194 [Mar] is Very Peticular... [They] Declared Openly [that] the Quallification of those to be Chosen ... [was] their agreeing to Impeach 140 [Godolphin] and 193 [Marlborough], Nor did the Impudence End there, but On all Occasions to Say in So Many Words They had her Majties Orders to Choose Such and Such and it must be don: This was So abandoning all Reserves, that it has disgusted the Generallity, and has Put them Upon Measures of Uniteing, which may shut the door upon all future Measures, what Ever the Occasion may be...

Now they have Returnd their Number, it were to be Wished they Could have Avoided a few who are Declar'd profest Jacobites, Such as 197 [Marischal], Kilsyth, Blantire, Hume &c. who are known to aim in all they do at the Pretender, and whose being Now Chosen has many ill Effects here What Ever may be as to Over-ruleing them in England, I mean as to Encreasing the Insolence of Jacobitisme in the North, where its Strength is far from being Contemptible.⁷

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 294-295.

What Defoe hoped to obtain from Harley by this and succeeding letters on this subject is not clear. He may have been seeking Harley's public repudiation of the Jacobite peers, or at least some private assurances that what Argyll had told the peers did not represent the new Ministry's policies. Whatever it was he sought, by late December it was obviously not forthcoming from Harley or his Ministry. And on 20 December Argyll was made a Knight of the Garter. It was during this December that the bulk of *Atalantis Major* was written, most probably between 30 November and 26 December. On 26 December 1710 Defoe wrote Harley of the existence of "Two Vile Ill Natur'd Pamphlets ... both of which have fallen into My hands in Manuscript, and I think I have prevented both their Printing. The first Was advertised in the Gazette here and Called the Scots atalantis⁸ ... The Other Pamphlet is called *Atalantis Major*." The letter concludes with a short description of the work, a disavowal of any knowledge of its authorship, and the hope that he can suppress its publication:

The Other Pamphlet is called *Atalantis Major*; and is a Bitter Invective against the D of Argyle, the E of Mar, and

⁸ Healey reports that "in such issues as I have been able to find of the *Scots Postman*, or the *New Edinburgh Gazette*, there is no mention of the *Scots Atalantis*" (*Letters*, p. 306, n. 1). The title of this work and of Defoe's *Atalantis Major* are derived from Mrs. Manley's *New Atalantis or Secret Memoirs and Manners of several Persons of Quality of both Sexes from the New Atalantis, an island in the Mediterranean* (1709). The OED records that the word *atalantis* enjoyed a brief currency in the eighteenth century with the meaning, "a secret or scandalous history."

the Election of the Peers. It is Certainly Written by Some English man, and I have Some Guess at the Man, but dare not be positive. I have hitherto kept this also from the Press, and believe it will be Impossible for them to get it printed here after the Measures I have Taken. The Party I Got it of pretends the Cobby Came from England, But I am of Another Opinion. I shall Trouble you no farther about it because if possible I can get it Cobbyed, I will Transmit the Cobby by Next post, for I have the Originall in My hand. They Expect I shall Encourage and assist them in the Mannaging it, and Till I can Take a Cobby I shall not Undeciev them.⁹

There is no evidence to suggest that Harley doubted Defoe's disclaimer or that Defoe sent the copy to Harley.

Since Defoe was back in London on 13 February 1711, *Atalantis Major* must have been seen through the press sometime between 26 December and the end of January, not, as Moore lists it, "before 26 December 1710."¹⁰ Internal evidence suggests an even narrower range of probable dates of publication. The last four pages of *Atalantis Major* deal with the Duke of Argyll being given command of the English forces in Spain and the singular lack of grace with which he undertook this command. Since Argyll was not given command of the Peninsula campaign until 11 January 1711, it could not be until after this date that

⁹ *Letters*, p. 307.

¹⁰ John Robert Moore, *A Checklist of the Writings of Daniel Defoe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 82.

the manuscript could have been finished and printed.

The work bears few signs of being hastily printed. There are only nine typographical errors,¹¹ and four of these are catchwords. There is no evidence to suggest that there was more than one printing of the pamphlet,¹² and the use of several Scotticisms¹³ seems to offer support for the contention that the pamphlet was intended for a primarily Scottish audience.

William Lee was the first to ascribe the work to Defoe, and this ascription has been accepted by both Dottin and Moore.¹⁴ The evidence for assigning this work to Defoe seems to rest on the two letters to Harley quoted above. Another proof of

¹¹ Page 12, line 5: *do* is omitted before *this*; page 16, line 24: *an* for *on*; page 17, line 6: *Grandfathers* for *Grandfather's*; page 19, the catch-word, *the* for *this*; page 20, line 5: *run* for *ran*; page 22, line 22: *of* for *off*; page 28, the catch-word, *they* for *the*; page 36, the catch-word, *Cha-* for *Courage*; page 37, the catch-word, *Lansd* for *Lands*. In addition, there are several places where the printer uses eighteenth-century variant spellings such as *ballances* (pp. 5, 8), *mannaged* (p. 2), *quallifie* (p. 8), *Soveraign* (p. 41) and *steddy* (p. 15). Eighteenth-century orthographic practice would have permitted such spellings. The word *entitled*, however, appears on page five as both *entituled* and *intituled*.

¹² None of the various copies I have examined contains typographical differences – even in the case of the typographical errors.

¹³ On page 38, line 25, the word *Big* is used where *Large* would have been the English usage; on page 42, line 3, the word *Bann'd* is used for *Swore* and defined in the text as an "Atalantic word"; on page 43, line 4, the word *evite* is used instead of *avoid*.

¹⁴ William Lee, *Daniel Defoe: His Life, and Recently Discovered Writings* (London: Hotten, 1869), I, 177; Paul Dottin, *Daniel Defoe*, trans. Louise Ragan (New York, Macaulay, 1929), p. 155; John Robert Moore, *Daniel Defoe, Citizen of the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 191; and Moore, *A Checklist of the Writings of Daniel Defoe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 82.

Defoe's authorship of *Atalantis Major* is to be found in the remark it contains, "That the Southern Part of the Island [that is, England] was the most remarkable of any, as to the Policy of their Government, and the Character of the People; and excepting *Englishmen* and *Polanders*, there is not such another Nation in the World" (p. 12). In 1704 Defoe had written *The Dyet of Poland*, a poem in which he had made a similar unflattering comparison between England and Poland. A far more substantial case for Defoe's authorship can be made from the existence of the anecdote of John White, Edinburgh's hangman, in both a letter to Harley (18 November 1710) and the *Review* (for 30 November 1710), as well as in *Atalantis Major* (pp. 22-3).

Key to Names and Characters in *Atalantis Major*

In the thinly disguised allegory of *Atalantis Major*, *Atalantis* is, of course, Britain. *Olreeky*, or *Old Reeky*, or simply *Reeky*, is still used as an affectionate local term for the city of Edinburgh, prone as it is to be enshrouded in mists and smoke in the early morning. *Tartary* is France, and the French are referred to as either the *Tartarians* or the *Barbarians*. Jacobites are also indicated by the name *Tartarians*, since the Pretender's cause was actively supported by Louis XIV. *Japan* is Spain and *China* stands for Holland. The characters who appear in *Atalantis Major* are (in the order that they are mentioned):

The Duke de Sanquarius (p. 14) is James Douglas,

second Duke of Queensberry and Duke of Dover (1662-1711);

The Earl of Stairdale (p. 15) is John Dalrymple, second Earl of Stair (1673-1747);

The Earl of Crawlinfordsay (p. 16) is John Lindsay, nineteenth Earl of Crawford (d. 1713);

The Prince of Greeniccio of the ancient Blood of Argyllius (p. 17) is John Campbell, second Duke of Argyll, Baron Chatham and Earl of Greenwich (1678-1742);

The Earl of Marereskine (p. 18) is John Erskine, eleventh Earl of Mar of the Erskine line (1675-1732);

The Prince de Heymuthius (p. 18) is John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough and Baron Churchill of Aymouth (1650-1722);

The Earl of Dolphinus (p. 18) is Sidney Godolphin (1645-1712);

Bellcampo, Lord of the Isles (p. 19) is Archibald Campbell, first and only Earl of Islay (pronounced "Isle-ah") and brother and heir of the second Duke of Argyll (1682-1761);

One of the Ministers (p. 22) is Thomas Miller of Kirkliston;

John –, his Majesty's Hangman (p. 22) is John White;

Bradalbino (p. 24) is John Campbell, first Earl of Breadalbane (1635-1716);

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