**Eighteenth-Century British Periodicals**

In the eighteenth century British periodical literature underwent significant developments in terms of form, content, and audience. Several factors contributed to these changes. Prior to 1700 the English popular press was in its infancy. The first British newspaper, the *Oxford Gazette,* was introduced in 1645. Two years later the Licensing Act of 1647 established government control of the press by granting the *Gazette* a strictly enforced monopoly on printed news. As a result, other late seventeenth-century periodicals, including *The Observer* (1681) and *The Athenian Gazette* (1691), either supplemented the news with varied content, such as political commentary, reviews, and literary works, or provided specialized material targeting a specific readership. During this time, printing press technology was improving. Newer presses were so simple to use that individuals could produce printed material themselves. British society was in transition as well. The burgeoning commercial class created an audience with the means, education, and leisure time to engage in reading. When the Licensing Act expired in 1694, publications sprang up, not just in London, but all across England and its colonies.

Joseph Addison and Richard Steele are generally regarded as the most significant figures in the development of the eighteenth-century periodical. Together they produced three publications: the *Tatler* (1709-11), the *Specator*(1711-12), and the *Guardian* (1713). In addition, Addison published the *Free-Holder* (1715-16), and Steele, who had been the editor of the *London Gazette*(the former *Oxford Gazette*) from 1707 to 1710, produced a number of other periodicals, including the *Englishman* (1713-14), *Town-Talk* (1715-16), and the *Plebeian* (1719). The three periodicals Addison and Steele produced together were great successes; none ceased publication because of poor sales or other financial reasons, but by the choice of their editors. Beginning in the eighteenth century and continuing to the present day, there has been debate among critics and scholars over the contributions of Addison and Steele to their joint enterprises. Addison has been generally seen as the more eloquent writer, while Steele has been regarded as the better editor and organizer.

Periodicals in the eighteenth century included social and moral commentary, and literary and dramatic criticism, as well as short literary works. They also saw the advent of serialized stories, which Charles Dickens, among others, would later perfect. One of the most important outgrowths of the eighteenth-century periodical, however, was the topical, or periodical, essay. Although novelist Daniel Defoe made some contributions to its evolution with his *Review of the Affairs of France* (1704-13), Addison and Steele are credited with bringing the periodical essay to maturity. Appealing to an educated audience, the periodical essay as developed by Addison and Steele was not scholarly, but casual in tone, concise, and adaptable to a number of subjects, including daily life, ethics, religion, science, economics, and social and political issues. Another innovation brought about by the periodical was the publication of letters to the editor, which permitted an unprecedented degree of interaction between author and audience. Initially, correspondence to periodicals was presented in a limited, question-and-answer form of exchange. As used by Steele, letters to the editor brought new points of view into the periodical and created a sense of intimacy with the reader. The feature evolved into a forum for readers to express themselves, engage in a discussion on an important event or question, conduct a political debate, or ask advice on a personal situation. Steele even introduced an advice to the lovelorn column to the *Tatler* and the *Specator.*

Addison and Steele and other editors of the eighteenth century saw their publications as performing an important social function and viewed themselves as moral instructors and arbiters of taste. In part these moralizing and didactic purposes were accomplished through the creation of an editorial voice or persona, such as Isaac Bickerstaff in the *Tatler,* Nestor Ironside in the *Guardian,*and, most importantly, Mr. Spectator in the *Specator.* Through witty, sometimes satirical observations of the contemporary scene, these fictional stand-ins for the editors attempted to castigate vice and promote virtue. They taught lessons to encourage certain behaviors in their readers, especially self-discipline. Morals were a primary concern, especially for men in business. Women, too, formed a part of the readership of periodicals, and they were instructed in what was expected of them, what kind of ideals they should aspire to, and what limits should be on their concerns and interests.

The impact of periodicals was both immediate and ongoing. Throughout the eighteenth century and beyond there were many imitators of Addison and Steele's publications. These successors, which arose not just in England, but in countries throughout Europe and in the United States as well, modeled their style, content, and editorial policies on those of the *Tatler,* the *Specator,* and the *Guardian.* Some imitators, such as the *Female Spectator* (1744), were targeted specifically at women. Addison and Steele's perodicals achieved a broader influence when they were translated and reprinted in collected editions for use throughout the century. The epistolary exchanges, short fiction, and serialized stories included in the periodicals had an important influence on the development of the novel. In addition, celebrated figures from Benjamin Franklin and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Mark Twain have acknowledged the impact of the eighteenth-century periodical, particularly the *Specator,* on their development as writers and thinkers.