

From the 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica:

PAMPHLETS. The earliest appearance of the word is in the *Philobiblon* (1344) of Richard de Bury, who speaks of "panfletos exiguos" (ch. viii.). In English we have "this leud pamflet" (*Test. of Love*, bk. iii.), Occleve's "Though that this pamflet" (*Reg. of Pr.* 2060), Lydgate's "Whiche is a paunflet" (*Minor Poems*, 180) and Caxton's "paunflettis and bookys" (*Book of Eneydos*, 1490, *Prologue*). In all these examples pamphlet is used to indicate the extent of the production, and in contradistinction to book. A short *codicil* in a will of 1495 is called "this pampelet" (*Test. Ebor.* iv. 26). In the 17th century the word was used for single plays, poems, *newspapers* and news letters (Murray's *New English Dict.* vii. 410).

Not till the 18th century did pamphlet begin to assume its modern meaning of *prose* controversial tract. "Pamphlet" and "pamphletaire" are of comparatively recent introduction into French from the English, and generally indicate fugitive criticism of a more severe, not to say libellous, character than with us. The derivation of the word is a subject of contention among etymologists. The supposed origin from the amatory poem of "Pamphilus," and a certain Pamphila, an author of the 1st century, may be dismissed as fanciful. The experts are also undecided as to what is actually understood by a pamphlet. Some bibliographers apply the term to everything, except *periodicals*, of *quarto* size and under, if not more than fifty pages, while others would limit its application to two or three sheets of printed matter which have first appeared in an unbound condition. These are merely physical peculiarities, and include academical dissertations, chap-books and broadsides, which from their special subjects belong to a separate class from the pamphlet proper. As regards its literary characteristics, the chief notes of a pamphlet are brevity and spontaneity. It has a distinct

aim, and relates to some matter of current interest, whether personal, religious, political or literary. Usually intended to support a particular line of argument, it may be descriptive, controversial, didactic or satirical. It is not so much a class, as a form of literature, and from its ephemeral character represents the changeful currents of public opinion more closely than the bulky volume published after the formation of that opinion. The history of pamphlets being the entire record of popular feeling, all that is necessary here is to briefly indicate the chief families of political and religious pamphlets which have exercised marked influence, and more particularly in those countries -

[England](#) and [France](#) - where pamphlets have made so large a figure in influencing thoughts and events. It is difficult to point out much in ancient literature which precisely answers to our modern view of the pamphlet. The *libelli famosi* of the [Romans](#) were simply abusive pasquinades. Some of the small treatises of [Lucian](#), the lost *Anti-Cato* of Caesar, Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* written against [Claudius](#), Julian's *KafvapES vu,u7r6tnov* and *'Av-rc0 X ucos μco-07rwrywv*, from their general application, just escape the charge of being mere satires, and may therefore claim to rank as early specimens of the pamphlet.

At the end of the 14th century the Lollard doctrines were widely circulated by means of the tracts and leaflets of Wyclif and his followers. The *Ploughman's Prayer* and *Lanthorne of Light*, which appeared about the time of Oldcastle's martyrdom, were extremely popular, and similar brief [vernacular](#) pieces became so common that it was thought necessary in 1418 to enact that persons in authority should search out and apprehend all persons owning English books. The printers of the 15th century produced many controversial tractates, and Caxton and Wynkin de Worde printed in the lesser form. It was in France that the [printing](#)-press first began to supply [reading](#) for the common people. During the last twenty years of the 15th century there arose an extensive popular literature of farces, tales in verse and prose, satires,

almanacs, &c., extending to a few leaves apiece, and circulated by the itinerant booksellers still known as colporteurs. These folk-books soon spread from France to Italy and Spain, and were introduced into England at the beginning of the 16th century, doubtless from the same quarter, as most of our early chap-books are translations or adaptations from the French. Another form of literature even more transient was the broadside, or single sheet printed on one side only, which appears to have flourished principally in England, but which had been in use from the first invention of printing for papal indulgences, royal proclamations and similar documents. Throughout western Europe, about the middle of the 16th century, the broadside made a considerable figure in times of political agitation. In England it was chiefly used for ballads, which soon became so extremely popular that during the first ten years of the reign of Elizabeth the names of no less than forty ballad printers appear in the Stationers' registers.

The humanist movement at the beginning of the 16th century produced the famous *Epistolae obscurorum virorum*, and the leading spirits of the Reformation period - Erasmus, Hutten, Luther, Melanchthon, Francowitz, Vergerio, Curio and Calvin - found in tracts a ready method of widely circulating their opinions. The course of ecclesiastical events was precipitated in England by the *Supplicacyon for the Beggars* (1528) of Simon Fish, answered by Sir Thomas More's *Supplycacion of Poor Soulys*. In the time of Edward VI. brief tracts were largely used as a propagandist instrument in favour of the Reformed religion. The licensing of the press by Mary greatly hindered the production of this kind of literature. From about 1570 there came an unceasing flow of Puritan pamphlets, of which more than forty were reprinted under the title of *A parte of a register* (London, Waldegrave, 4to). In 1584 was published a tract entitled *A briefe and plaine Declaration concerning the desires of all those faithful ministers that have and do seeke for the discipline and reformation of the Church of Englande*, believed to have

been written by W. Fulke D.D. Against this John Bridges, dean of Sarum, preached at Paul's Cross, and expanded his sermon into what he called *A defence of the government established in the church of England* (1587), which gave rise to *Oh read over D. John Bridges. ... Printed at the cost and charges of M. Marprelate gentleman* (1588), which first gave the name to the famous Martin Marprelate tracts, whose titles sufficiently indicate their opposition to priestly orders and episcopacy. Bishop Cooper's *Admonition to the People of England* (1589) came next, followed on the other side by *Hay any worke for Cooper. .. by Martin the Metropolitane*, and by others from both parties to the number of about thirty-two. The controversy lasted ten years, and ended in the discomfiture of the Puritans and the seizure of their secret press. The writers on the Marprelate side are generally supposed to have been Penry, Throgmorton, Udal and Fenner, and their opponents Bishop Cooper, John Lilly and Nash.

As early as the middle of the 16th century we find ballads of news; and in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. small pamphlets, translated from the German and French, and known as "newsbooks," were circulated by the so-called "Mercury-women." These were the immediate predecessors of weekly newspapers, and continued to the end of the 17th century. A proclamation was issued by Charles II., on the 12th of May 1680, "for suppressing the printing and publishing of unlicensed news-books and pamphlets of news." In the 17th century pamphlets began to contribute more than ever to the formation of public opinion. Nearly one hundred were written by or about the restless John Lilburne, but still more numerous were those of the undaunted Prynne, who himself published above one hundred and sixty, besides many weighty folios and quartos. Charles I. found energetic supporters in Peter Heylin and Sir Roger L'Estrange, the latter noted for the coarseness of his pen. The most distinguished pamphleteer of the period was John Milton, who began his career in this direction by five anti-episcopal tracts (1641-

1642) during the Smectymnuus quarrel. In 1643 his wife's [desertion](#) caused him to publish anonymously *Doctrine and discipline of divorce*, followed by several others on the same subject. He printed *Of Education; to Mr. Samuel Hartlib* in 1644, and, unlicensed and unregistered, his famous *Areopagitica - a speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing*. He defended the trial and execution of the king in *Tenure of kings and magistrates* (1648). The *Eikon Basilike* dispute was conducted with more ponderous weapons than the kind we are now discussing. When [Monk](#) held supreme power [Milton](#) addressed to him *The present means of a free commonwealth* and *Readie and easie way* (1660), both [pleading](#) for a commonwealth in preference to a monarchy. [John Goodwin](#), the author of *Obstructors of Justice* (1649), [John Phillipps](#), the nephew of Milton, and [Abiezer Coppe](#) were violent and prolific [partisan](#) writers, the last-named specially known for his extreme Presbyterian principles. The tract *Killing no murder* (1657), aimed at Cromwell, and attributed to Colonel [Titus](#) or Colonel Sexby, excited more attention than any other political effusion of the time. The history of the Civil War period is told day by day in the well-known collection made by George Thomason the bookseller, now preserved in the British Museum. It includes pamphlets, books, newspapers and MSS. relating to the Civil War, the Commonwealth and Restoration, and numbers 22,255 pieces ranging from 1640 to 1661, and is bound in 2008 volumes. Each article was dated by Thomason at the time of acquisition. [William Miller](#) was another bookseller famous for his collection of pamphlets (1600-1710), which were catalogued by Tooker. [William Laycock](#) printed a *Proposal for raising a fund* for buying them up for the nation.

The [Catholic](#) controversy during the reign of [James II.](#) gave rise to a multitude of books and pamphlets, which have been described by [Peck](#) (*Catalogue*, 1735) and by [Jones](#) (*Catalogue*, Chetham Society, 2 vols., 1859-1865). Politics were naturally the chief feature of the

floating literature connected with the Revolution of 1688. The political tracts of Lord [Halifax](#) are interesting both in matter and manner. He wrote *The character of a trimmer* (1688), circulated in MS, as early as 1685. About the middle of the reign Defoe was introduced to [William III.](#), and produced the first of his pamphlets on occasional conformity. He issued in 1697 his two defences of standing armies in support of the government, and published sets of tracts on the [partition](#) treaty, the union with [Scotland](#), and many other subjects. His *Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702) placed him in the [pillory](#).

Under Queen Anne pamphlets arrived at a remarkable degree of importance. Never before or since has this method of publication been used by such masters of thought and language. Political writing of any degree of authority was almost entirely confined to pamphlets. If the Whigs were able to command the services of Addison and [Steele](#), the Tories fought with the terrible pen of [Swift](#). Second in power if not in literary ability were Bolingbroke, Somers, Atterbury, Prior and Pulteney. The government viewed with a jealous eye the free use of this powerful instrument, and St John seized upon fourteen booksellers and publishers in one day for "libels" upon the administration (see *Annals of Oct.* 23, 1711). In 1712 a duty was laid upon newspapers and pamphlets, displeasing all parties, and soon falling into disuse. Bishop Hoadly's sermon on the kingdom of [Christ](#) (1717), denying that there was any such thing as a visible Church of Christ, occasioned the [Bangorian controversy](#), which produced nearly two hundred pamphlets. Soon after this period party-writing declined from its comparatively high standard and fell into meaner and venal hands. Under [George III.](#) [Bute](#) took Dr Shebbeare from Newgate in order to employ his pen. The court party received the support of a few able pamphlets, among which may be mentioned *The consideration of the [German War](#)* against the policy of Pitt, and *The [prerogative droitde Roy](#)* (1764) vindicating the prerogative. We must not forget that

although [Samuel Johnson](#) was a pensioned scribe he has for an excuse that his political tracts are his worst performances. [Edmund Burke](#), on the other hand, has produced in this form some of his most valued writings. The troubles in [America](#) and the union between [Ireland](#) and Great [Britain](#) are subjects which are abundantly illustrated in pamphlet literature.

Early in the 19th century the rise of the quarterly reviews threw open a new channel of publicity to those who had previously used pamphlets to spread their opinions, and later on the rapid growth of monthly magazines and weekly reviews afforded controversialists a much more certain and extensive circulation than they could ensure by an isolated publication. Although pamphlets are no longer the sole or most important factor of public opinion, the minor literature of great events is never likely to be entirely confined to periodicals. The following topics, which might be largely increased in number, have each been discussed by a multitude of pamphlets, most of which, however, are likely to have been hopeless aspirants for a more certain means of preservation: the [Bullion Question](#) (1810), the Poor Laws (1828-1834), *Tracts for the Times* and the ensuing controversy (1833-1845), Dr Hampden (1836), the Canadian Revolt (1837-1838), the [Corn Laws](#) (1841-1848), Gorham Controversy (1849-1850), [Crimean War](#) and [Indian Mutiny](#) (1854-1859), [Schleswig-Holstein](#) (1863-1864), Ireland (1868-1869), the FrancoGerman War, with *Dame Europa's School* and its imitators (1870-1871), Vaticanism, occasioned by Mr Gladstone's *Vatican Decrees* (1874), [the Eastern Question](#) (1877-1880), the Irish Land Laws (1880-1882), Ireland and Home Rule (1885-1886), South African War (1899-1902) and [Tariff Reform](#) (1903).

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