

Original Paper

Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*: Puritanism and Its Subversion

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Abstract

The narrative of the adventures of Roxana is described in the preface as a warning against various inappropriate behaviours, but Daniel Defoe's novel as a whole includes a number of contradictory perspectives which undercut many of the Puritan values that its official and prefatory purpose tries to reassert. The heroine herself seems to enjoy rather than regrets the many drawbacks and misdeeds she indulges in by describing them at great length and with great gusto. This article studies the default lines of Roxana's confession beyond the Puritan perspective by exploring the manner in which Roxana's ambiguous re-telling hovers between qualification and pleasure.

Keywords

Daniel Defoe, Roxana, novel, Puritanism, dissenter, confession

1. Introduction

Daniel Defoe is well-known for his *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719—we are celebrating in 2019 the 300th anniversary of its publication—but he was an extremely prolific writer. In addition to a number of novels, which include *Roxana*, he also wrote poems, essays, pamphlets, and journal articles, and he edited a number of newspapers. His total output is so huge that some of the works which are attributed to him are still a matter of debate among scholars today. Defoe, born in 1660, was educated in a school for dissenters. He then embraced the life of a soldier, of a spy, of a businessman, but after some flourishing years, his schemes did not turn out the way he expected, and he became bankrupt. A few years later, he was pilloried for a satirical pamphlet he had written about the dissenters. He always wrote somewhat frantically, desperate to make money out of his various writing enterprises, and he died in 1731 still pursued by Mary Brooks, a very cantankerous creditrix.

As regards Defoe's novels, I would say that three of them particularly stand out: *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724). Defoe has been credited with the invention of the modern novel in England. He is most noted, among other elements, as a realistic writer whose protagonists belong to the middle-classes. Drawing upon a range of literary genres of his time such as

the confessional novel and the picaresque, Defoe lends a voice to two female characters in particular: Moll Flanders, in the eponymous novel, the long title of which reads: “The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders Who was born in Newgate, and during a life of continued Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Years a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her brother) Twelve Years a Thief, Eight Years a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, lived Honest and died a Penitent”, and Roxana, in a novel which also has a longer title: “Roxana, The Fortunate Mistress: Or, A History of the Life and Vast Variety of Fortunes of Mademoiselle de Bealeu, Afterwards Called the Countess de Wintelsheim, in Germany, Being the Person known by the Name of the Lady Roxana, in the Time of King Charles II.” As is clearly shown in both titles, Defoe, although a Puritan himself, flouts the Puritan morality with stories of promiscuous women, redolent of some of the most libertine heroines in the novels of his time. This article aims to explore the tensions between Puritanism and Roxana’s misdemeanours in Defoe’s last novel, *Roxana* (1724). If the preface insists on the general decency of the work, several paradoxes can be discerned from the start. Although the anonymous editorial voice who calls himself the “relator” provides a “justification” for publishing such a lewd narrative in the guise of “profit and delight” for the reader to enjoy, given that “all imaginable care has been taken to keep clear of indecencies and immodest expressions”, the preface titillates the reader, offering to relate a life of “crimes”. The writer also acknowledges that from time to time he felt “obliged to relate a wicked action” and other “scenes of crime”, as they belong to “the history of this beautiful lady”. The same hesitation can be traced in Roxana’s narrative: at the same time as she denounces some of her misdeeds and drawbacks, she appears either to endeavour to qualify them or to indulge in them, without the qualms that would be expected.

2 Method

2.1 Puritanism: *Pride and Its Price*

As is well-known, the Puritans were English Protestants who, in the 16th and 17th centuries, endeavoured to “purify” the Church of England of Roman Catholic practices, claiming that the Church of England had not been fully reformed and needed to become more Protestant. A consequence of Puritan ethics is the condemnation of such daily occurrences as swearing, card-playing, dancing and flirtation, let alone sexual enjoyment. The Puritan views of the Parliament were gradually imposed on the country between 1642 and 1660. As early as September 1642, the Long Parliament ordered the closure of London theatres. The order cited the current “times of humiliation” and their incompatibility with “public stage-plays”, representative of “lascivious Mirth and Levity”. This general condemnation of ordinary pleasures and entertainment lead the nineteenth century American journalist and essayist Henry Mencken to sarcastically define Puritanism as: “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy” (Mencken, p. 624). That the narrative is to be understood as a cautionary tale is also to be seen in the name of the title-character: “Roxana” is “a generic name conjuring up the image of harems and exotic, beautiful women” (Backscheider, 1986, p. 197). Roxana is like a Jezebel, a type

very much like her partner Amy (in French “l’amie”, her friend), the Dutch merchant or the Quakeress, all characters in a tale which can be read as an elaborate allegory in the vein of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim Progress* published in 1678 and immediately famous (see Backscheider, 1986, p. 205).

In this context, Roxana’s behaviour is characterised by pride. Material necessity first extenuates her lapse into wilful prostitution. Indeed, her economic situation after she is abandoned by her husband has been experienced by thousands of unfortunates, so as to give rise to such hoary clichés as Latin tags cropping up in conversation: *necessitas non habet legem* (necessity knows no law); or: *necessitas dat legem, non ipsa accipit* (necessity gives out laws, but does not accept them itself). What is most striking in Roxana’s first affair is the dramatically logical and unavoidable sequence of events. Firstly, Roxana’s desperate situation (“I saw my ruin hastening on without any possible way to prevent it”, p. 11) conveys a feeling of nightmarish paralysis and powerlessness. Roxana, who has left the management of the whole matter to her maid Amy, as a first dire consequence, *must* be rid of her five children, and she duly palms them off to unsuspecting and somewhat reluctant relatives. Roxana herself, as a material symbol of her distress, has a garden “all in disorder, and overrun with weeds” (p. 29).

Secondly, Roxana stands between two evils: the temptation to seize her landlord’s offer, and her resulting qualms. She does not rush into the landlord’s bed, far from it. Her innocence at first is genuine enough. But she is literally stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea, as the proverb goes; in other words, she is between “the devil’s clutches” (p. 37), that is to say poverty, out of which she is providentially rescued by the landlord, and the devil of “unlawful freedoms” (p. 145), that is to say adulterous intercourse. Amy’s role there is decisive, which Roxana sees lucidly enough: “Why, you [Amy] argue for the devil, as if you were one of his privy councillors” (p. 37). Thirdly, what is striking here in Roxana’s first transgression is the assimilation of poverty with necessity. Necessity may be summed up as “the devil of poverty and distress” (p. 38), and Roxana pleads the desperation of her present circumstances (“my circumstances were my temptation”, p. 40). After all, she has not had a good meal “hardly in a twelve month” (p. 30).

In studying Roxana’s behaviour in this first peripeteia, one has to bear in mind two points. First, Roxana’s wholly rational lucidity from the start is to be noticed: “for I sinned with open eyes, and thereby had a double guilt upon me” (p. 43, she acknowledges herself “a double offender”, p. 41). Now, this is no *a posteriori* moralising wisdom in which she indulges, but an immediate disturbing realisation of her guilt as an adulteress. Significantly enough, in spite of her genuine gratitude and fondness for her landlord, Roxana will always refuse to “frame my mouth to call him husband or to say ‘my husband’ when I was speaking of him” (p. 45). But Roxana also indulges in some moralising hindsight, when she assesses Amy’s capital role in the first affair, and calls her, I quote “a viper, an engine of the devil” (p. 38). Secondly the Roxana-Amy relationship is not, from the very start, a one-way devilish influence, far from it, as Roxana duly acknowledges, long after the notorious “bed-putting” scene of Amy by Roxana (p. 46). Indeed, Roxana acknowledges that she “had been the devil’s instrument to make her wicked; that I [Roxana] had stripped her [Amy], and prostituted her to

the very man that I had been naught with myself” (p. 126). Now the end of Roxana’s first affair also spells the end of material necessity as a possible excuse for her whoring or high-class prostitution. After the jeweller’s murder, Roxana finds herself in possession of almost 10 000 pounds sterling in a very few days after the disaster (“I found myself possessed of almost ten thousand pounds sterling in a very few days after the disaster”, p. 55). Henceforth necessity and the devil appear under different guises. Roxana will no longer pull the devil by the tail, but, if one may say so, she will pull the tails of other devils.

Now in the second moment of Roxana’s Bildungsroman, her motivation will no longer be chiefly material, but the incentives of her action, as she candidly acknowledges, are vanity and avarice. Necessity and the devil are no longer external agents, but they are interiorised, so to say, or if you prefer, internalised, as Paula Backscheider put it (Backscheider, 1984, p. 173). This is a psychological and moral process that Daniel Defoe is perfectly aware of: in *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1720), he makes the point that the devil “never fails to prompt all the mischief he can, full of stratagem and art, to ensnare us by the help of our corrupt affections and these are called ‘Satan’s devices’” (p. 80). Yet, in all fairness to the devil, Defoe hastens to add on the same page: “I must do the devil that justice as to own that he is the most slandered, most abused creature alive; thousands of crimes we lay to his charge that he is not guilty of.” Our sins, “thousands” of them, are due to “our own lust” and failing.

Self-love is a failing often denounced in puritanical writings. Vanity, for Roxana, has two aspects: physical, and social. The first point to be made about vanity, is that obviously Roxana is vain of her physical beauty. She provides various self-portraits, from the beginning of the novel (“tall, and very well-made; sharp as a hawk [...], quick and smart in discourse”, p. 6), almost to the end. She smugly insists on the natural clearness of her skin, which is “without paint” (p. 72, also p. 180 and p. 287). As usual, Roxana is perfectly lucid about her foibles, and by the beginning of her affair with the prince, she declares: “I was now become the vainest creature upon earth, and particularly of my beauty; which as other people admired, so I became every day more foolishly in love with myself than before” (p. 62). There is another kind of vanity: societal vanity, the type of vanity that springs and exults from fashionable meetings, also known as socialising. Now Roxana, despite her habitual cool rationality, is drawn like a moth to a flame towards the glitter of the court in London: “Thus blinded by my own vanity, I threw away the only opportunity I then had to have effectually settled my fortunes, and secured them for this world; and I am a memorial to all that shall read my story, a standing monument of the madness and distraction which pride and infatuations from hell run us into, how ill our passions guide us, and how dangerously we act when we follow the dictates of an ambitious mind.

I was rich, beautiful, and agreeable, and not yet old. I had known something of the influence I had had upon the fancies of men even of the highest rank. I never forgot that the Prince de—had said, with an ecstasy, that I was the finest woman in France” (p. 161). A statement confirmed some ten pages later: “[I] was possessed with so vain an opinion of my own beauty, that nothing less than the king himself

was in my eye” (p. 172). At first, Roxana’s vanity is overcome by the glory of being a prince’s mistress. But later on, she confesses that she is overwhelmed by the prospect of becoming this prince’s wife and thus acquiring the official title of princess: “all this [that possibility], in a word, dazzled my eyes, turned my head, and I was as truly crazed and distracted for about a fortnight as most of the people in Bedlam” (p. 234). But Roxana’s princely hopes are dashed and she has to settle for a baronetcy bought by her Dutch husband (p. 243). Her vanity about being called “Ladyship” is quite lucidly analysed: “I was now my Lady—, and I must own I was exceedingly pleased with it; ‘twas so big and so great to hear myself called *her ladyship*, and *your ladyship*, and *the like*, that I was like the *Indian* king at *Virginia*, who, having a house built for him by the *English*, and a lock put upon the door, would sit whole days together with the key in his hand, locking and unlocking, and double-locking, the door, with an unaccountable pleasure at the novelty; so I could have sat a whole day together to hear Amy talk to me, and call me *your ladyship* at every word” (p. 246).

She loves being called so by Amy because of the “unaccountable pleasure at the novelty [...] but after a while the novelty wore off and the pride of it abated” (*ibid.*). What is particularly striking in these examples is the conflicting perspectives of Roxana the younger character and Roxana the older narrator, an effect called “a double voice” by Paula Backscheider (1986, p. 184). Although the narrator lucidly analyses the motives of her younger self, the emotions of the latter seem to contaminate the narrator. The tone of regret that surfaces from the narrative is deeply ambiguous, leaving the reader to decide upon whether regrets stem from the moral perspective on the behaviour of Roxana’s younger self, or they are about a retrospective feeling of loss of such pleasures.

Casistry is another soft spot of Roxana’s. What are the malicious mechanisms of Satan’s devices, or in other words, how does Roxana experience and succumb to temptation? This is made clear at the beginning of the affair with the prince. Roxana is a social climber who is very vain. Vanity is a deliberately assumed sin: “for, though poverty and want is an irresistible temptation to the poor, vanity and great things are as irresistible to others” (p. 64). Now, apart from this irresistible social attraction, Roxana confesses how “the devil had played a new game with me” (p. 68). What Roxana has committed is a sin against the spirit. It is a syllogism with a term missing, a syllogism called an enthymeme in Aristotelian philosophy. Roxana reasons herself out of reason. Here is her kind of reasoning: “as it was all irresistible, so it was all lawful” (p. 69). What is implied here is that what is irresistible must be like the laws of physical attraction. Her use of casistry (she alludes to casuists p. 68) means that Roxana has transgressed the common law and moral law. Her vanity is such that it silences all her qualms or, as Defoe puts it: the “lethargic fumes dozed the soul” (p. 69).

Now, not only is there vanity, but there is also avarice. Money is at the thematic core of the novel: Mammon fighting victoriously for twenty-six years of wickedness and winning Roxana’s heart. Thanks to Mammon and her adoration of him, Roxana ignored God. However, Roxana’s avarice is never of the sordid, Scroodge-like, penny-pinching type. She knows perfectly well how to spend her money in order to reap even more, or, as witness to what she also sees in the aristocratic world—all that waste of easy

money—, incites her to be very retentive of her money. But if she is avaricious, this is in order to reap even more money against her old age. She knows very well how to spend her money when necessary. She lays out her money judiciously in order to appear as a lady of fashion. At the beginning of the London Revels, by sacrificing such money, she is going to make even more. She is extremely rich in clothes, and she is “at the height of every mode and fashion” (p. 165) and “As for jewels, I wanted none” (p. 165). She invests her money shrewdly: “I made provision of about twelve dozen of fine damask napkins, with tablecloths of the same, sufficient to cover all the tables, with three tablecloths upon every table, and sideboards in proportion. Also I bought a handsome quantity of plate, necessary to have served all the sideboards” (p. 177), acquiring all this for the second ball at her Pall-Mall apartments.

Again, it is to be noticed that Roxana is totally lucid about her failing. For instance, her case may be summed up in a perfectly apposite manner as she declares at the end of the affair with the wicked old lord: “as necessity first debauched me, and poverty made me a whore at the beginning, so excess of avarice for getting money and excess of vanity continued me in the crime” (p. 202). But all the same this lucidity is somewhat qualified by Roxana’s all too facile ways of recovering some money or excusing herself because she has succumbed to the devil: “These were my baits, these the chains by which the devil held me bound, and by which I was indeed too fast held for any reasoning that I was then mistress of to deliver me from” (p. 202).

The analysis of irresistible necessity would be incomplete without a few words on intellectual pride—she insists on her “intellectual part” being unduly subdued by “lethargic fumes” (p. 69). “Intellectual pride”, in Roxana’s case, is the devil’s securest aid or surest bait. Let us bear in mind the importance of the Bible for Defoe, and the fact that he was brought up in a dissenting academy (Backscheider, 1989, p. 11). There is indeed a great dramatic relevance of the long and heated argument with the Dutch merchant centring on the “sweetest miss” in life (“The sweetest miss is Liberty”, p. 149). Roxana’s refusal to marry, much more than a feminist stance, is an intellectual rather than sexual issue. Roxana is by no means above making money, and she loves making money, but she also wishes to preserve her liberty, her estate authority, and everything she has acquired from the noble lord. Her subtle reasoning hinges on her refusal to be taken in for a fool (p. 152), and she starts to reason and argue. This strong rejection of matrimony comes after her strong rejection of her brewer husband, with a violent tirade against fool husbands (pp. 7-8). A few pages later, Sir Robert Clayton, in London, aptly calls her words “Amazonian language” (p. 171). Now this rejection of marriage is acknowledged *a posteriori* by Roxana as being prompted by vanity and pride. It is acknowledged in one of her moralising excursions: “I am a memorial to all that shall read my story, a standing monument of the madness and distraction which pride and infatuations from hell run us into, how ill our passions guide us, and how dangerously we act when we follow the dictates of an ambitious mind” (p. 161).

If pride leads Roxana, she is well and truly torn by doubts. When the Dutch merchant is about to leave, she refuses to marry him. Contradictions are human; she writes: “thus I was in a kind of suspense,

irresolute, and doubtful what course to take” (p. 154). The expression of such doubts crops up throughout the novel, the development of the novel being, arguably, more psychical (or cyclical) than linear. Now all these doubts, although they have been of little avail to Roxana, help to push her into a desperately alienated situation, especially when these doubts resurface eleven years later, just before marrying the Dutch merchant in London.

Now all this irresistible necessity spells the devil at work, as well as Roxana’s achievement through lies and hypocrisy. Thus, she has used all kinds of foul play in order to achieve wealth. She has lied, she has given up being frank, and instead she argues that her honesty cannot be suspected, but how do we know? For instance, Roxana lies brazenly at the jeweller’s death, when she claims that she is his lawful wife, which she decidedly is not. She lies again about the jewels that he was supposed to carry to the prince (“I confirm’d this [...] *and added*”, p. 56, my emphasis). She lies to Sir Robert Clayton when he enquires about her children; his query is answered in an ambiguous and mendacious way: “‘Then, madam’, says he, ‘I suppose your honour has no children?’ / ‘None, Sir Robert’, said I, ‘but what are provided for’. So I left him in the dark as much as I found him” (p. 168). There is a pathetic streak of obdurate gullibility in the poor Dutch merchant, Roxana’s second husband. She uses her daughters as a pretext to be given an extra sum of 8000 pounds reserved in money to provide for her two daughters: “I had about eight thousand pounds reserved in money *which I kept back from him*, to provide for my two daughters” (pp. 260-261, my emphasis). At the Quaker’s too, her underhand dealings with her children are but a web of lies in which she finally gets hopelessly entangled with Susan in hot pursuit.

But from the start Roxana can be a gratuitous hypocrite too, as when she gets very angry at the prince’s gentleman for sleeping with Amy (p. 83). But then, after Amy’s plea in favour of her lover, Roxana soon comes to the following conclusion: “why might not they do the same thing below that we did above?” (p. 83), “like mistress, like maid” (p. 83): so much for Roxana’s hypocritical concern for Amy’s morals. Even more gratuitous and damning is Roxana’s specious pleading in favour of the Prince’s wife, and of all things, of “the law and rites of matrimony” (p. 108): “I made a kind of motion once or twice to him to leave me, and keep himself to her, as he ought by the laws and rites of matrimony to do, and argued the generosity of the princess to him, to persuade him; but I was a hypocrite, for had I prevailed with him really to be honest, I had lost him, which I could not bear the thoughts of” (*ibid.*).

But Roxana is honest enough at least to acknowledge that she was far from sincere: “I was a hypocrite” (*ibid.*). Later on, Roxana artfully manipulates her second husband, the Dutch merchant, by a series of lies, into not sailing on the ship he has chosen. She comes to the painful realization in front of so much unsuspecting goodness that she is “the most cursed piece of hypocrisy that ever came into the arms of an honest man”: “And then he took me in his arms and kissed me. How did my blood flush up into my face when I reflected how sincerely, how affectionately, this good-humoured gentleman embraced the most cursed piece of hypocrisy that ever came into the arms of an honest man! His was all tenderness, all kindness, and the utmost sincerity; mine all grimace and deceit;—a piece of mere manage and

framed conduct to conceal a past life of wickedness, and prevent his discovering that he had in his arms a she-devil, whose whole conversation for twenty-five years had been black as hell, a complication of crime, and for which, had he been let into it, he must have abhorred me and the very mention of my name” (pp. 300-301).

She is in her own words: “all grimace and deceit;—a piece of mere manage and framed conduct”, or in one telling phrase, which aptly sums up her wicked life, she is a “she-devil” (p. 301). At this point, in her own eyes, Roxana’s assimilation with the devil is complete, although she has decided to live virtuously for the time to come, “not being able to retrieve what had been in time past” (p. 301). But then, especially from a Puritan perspective, there is the devil to pay.

2.2 *The Puritan Strikes Back*

Warnings are regularly given to her, the main one certainly being the storm that overwhelms her, and Amy, for a short time (pp. 126-128). The description of the episode is clearly written with such Puritan narratives as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), as Roxana calls it “the storm-repentance”, adding: “Death-bed Repentance, or Storm-Repentance, which is much the same, is seldom true” (p. 128). The episode and its vocabulary forecast the final “Blast of Heaven” (p. 330), upon which the novel ends, in an abrupt and open way. Roxana knows her Bible very well, and is absolutely apt in perceiving parallels between her own situation and religious episodes. An instance of that occurs right at the beginning, when she has been abandoned by her husband the brewer, and she considers how she has to abandon her children to her in-laws: “The house, that was before handsomely furnished with pictures and ornaments, cabinets, pier-glasses, and everything suitable, was now stripped and naked, most of the goods having been seized by the landlord for rent, or sold to buy necessities; in a word, all was misery and distress, the face of ruin was everywhere to be seen; we had eaten up almost everything, and little remained, unless, like one of the pitiful women of Jerusalem, I should eat up my very children themselves” (p. 18).

Roxana is wrecked by visions and nightmares very evocative of Puritan speeches at church, made to daunt virtual sinners with vivid descriptions of the horrors awaiting them in the beyond. For instance, Roxana explains how she has an intuition about the death of her lover the jeweller: “Then the manner of his death was terrible and frightful to me, and, above all, the strange notices I had of it. I had never pretended to the second-sight, or anything of that kind, but certainly, if any one ever had such a thing, I had it at this time, for I saw him as plainly in all those terrible shapes as above; first, as a skeleton, not dead only, but rotten and wasted; secondly, as killed, and his face bloody; and, thirdly, his clothes bloody, and all within the space of one minute, or indeed of a very few moments” (p. 55).

Again, later, she has nightmarish visions of her murdered daughter Susan: “As for the poor girl herself, she was ever before my eyes; I saw her by night and by day; she haunted my imagination, if she did not haunt the house; my fancy showed me her in a hundred shapes and postures; sleeping or waking, she was with me. Sometimes I thought I saw her with her throat cut; sometimes with her head cut, and her brains knocked out; other times hanged up upon a beam; another time drowned in the great pond at

Camberwell. And all these appearances were terrifying to the last degree” (p. 325).

2.3 Puritanism Undermined

What is all the more transgressive in a novel that purports “to keep clear of indecencies and immodest expressions”, so that the (male?) reader “will find nothing to prompt a vicious mind, but everywhere much to discourage and expose it”, is the number of allusions to a wide array of sexual practices. Quite early on the course of the novel, there is the notorious bed-putting scene of Amy by Roxana (p. 45), generally considered by critics as, at least, a voyeuristic scene in which Roxana somehow perversely enjoys sexual intercourse by proxy (see Boardman, Lamb, Rasher). A few pages later, she describes herself half-naked engaged in a pillow-talk with the Prince (“he kissed my cheeks and breasts a thousand times”, p. 70), for whom she catwalks for an extemporized private fashion show (“I told him, if he pleased, I would rather dress me in that suit which I knew he liked best”, p. 70). This scene is echoed later on, both in dramatization and in the vocabulary, where the term “freedoms” is a euphemism for sex, with the Dutch merchant: “One morning in the middle of our unlawful freedoms, that is to say, when we were in bed together, he sighed and told me he desired my leave to ask me one question, and that I would give him an answer to it with the same ingenuous freedom and honesty that I had used to treat him with. I told him I would. Why, then, his question was, why I would not marry him seeing I allowed him all the freedoms of a husband” (p. 145).

Roxana, who defines herself as “the Queen of Whores” (p. 82) advocates in matters of sex a very generous sense of equality between masters and servants. As she explains, “like mistress, like maid... Why might not they do the same thing below, that we did above?” (p. 83). Moreover, as remarked by Paula Backscheider, Roxana “pays men in sex sometimes because she had rather part with her body than her money” (1986, p. 202). Defoe masterfully manages a crescendo in sexual practices over the second phase of Roxana’s adventures, the climax of which being her affair with the wicked old lord. The latter is allowed to come into her house by the back door (p. 185), which is a common enough metaphor for anal intercourse, a practice Defoe was to describe in his essay *Conjugal Lewdness or; Marital Whoredom* (1727). Amy and Roxana are suspected by the wicked old lord of lesbian love, which he seems rather fond of, but he insists on watching Amy’s genitalia to ascertain her gender and make sure she is no hidden rival to him in Roxana’s bed. Roxana unashamedly watches the whole perusal, in an embedded voyeuristic act.

As a Puritan, Defoe held drama in deep suspicion. But in *Roxana*, theatrical signs are constantly displayed around the protagonist in order to underline the transgressive nature of her behaviour. David Blewett has shown to what extent Roxana, while being “a condemnation of the licentiousness of the time of Charles II”, was also an “attack upon the contemporary masquerades” in Defoe’s time, as allowed by the double time-scheme of the novel (Blewett, p. 499). In the famous Turkish dress episode, Roxana is well aware that masquerades stand for social flirting: “I let them see I understood very well what such things meant” (p. 173). She sports her Turkish dress “with the folding-doors wide open” and “in full view” of the spectators (p. 174). Like a consummate actress, she provides a show which might

be taken as the equivalent of a strip-tease.

Another point of consternation for the Puritans might be the autonomy, both financial and intellectual, that Roxana claims throughout the novel. First, in discussing marital matters with the Dutch merchant: “I told him I had perhaps differing notions of matrimony from what the received custom had given us of it; that I thought a woman was a free agent as well as a man, and was born free, and, could she manage herself suitably, might enjoy that liberty to as much purpose as the men do; that the laws of matrimony were indeed otherwise, and mankind at this time acted quite upon other principles; and those such, that a woman gave herself entirely away from herself in marriage, and capitulated only to be at best but an upper servant[.] That the very nature of the marriage contract was, in short, nothing but giving up liberty, estate, authority, and everything to the man, and the woman was indeed a mere woman ever after, that is to say, a slave” (p. 145).

Later on, as she is deeply engaged in a financial discussion with Sir Robert Clayton, she makes her position quite explicit again: “my heart was bent upon an independency of fortune, and I told him I knew no state of matrimony but what was at best a state of inferiority, if not of bondage; that I had no notion of it; that I lived a life of absolute liberty now, was free as I was born, and having a plentiful fortune, I did not understand what coherence the words ‘honour and obey’ had with the liberty of a free woman; that I knew no reason the men had to engross the whole liberty of the race, and make the woman, notwithstanding any disparity of fortune, be subject to the laws of marriage, of their own making; that it was my misfortune to be a woman, but I was resolved it should not be made worse by the sex; and, seeing liberty seemed to be the men’s property, I would be a man-woman, for, as I was born free, I would die so” (p. 171).

Robert Clayton’s response is open-minded enough: “Sir Robert smiled, and told me I talked a kind of Amazonian language” (*ibid.*), but it is certain, just by considering the exact arguments put forward by Mary Wollstonecraft at the end of the eighteenth-century, and the subsequent furore around them, that Clayton’s response was not common practice (Note 1). Paula Backscheider is right in underlining the originality of Roxana’s choice “to be a single woman through a long part of her life” (1986, p. 189).

3. Result

What is therefore striking in this last novel by Daniel Defoe—he was to live seven more years and he wrote several essays but no more novels—is this tension between the general project of the novel as set in the preface (the cautionary tale), and the main character’s misdemeanours. Roxana clearly enjoys most of her life of prostitution, especially the period when she was a high-class prostitute. Despite the final “Blast of Heaven” (p. 330), it seems that Roxana lived on the whole the life of a “fortunate mistress”, as the subtitle indicates. What is even more interesting is that the feminist overtones of Roxana’s ambiguous confession appealed not only to Mary Wollstonecraft but also to Virginia Woolf who called the novel, alongside *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, “indisputably great” (p. 97).

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Note

Note 1. In the dedication-letter to Talleyrand of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asserts: "Independence I have long considered as the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue" (p. 65).