

## DEFOE'S ROXANA AND 18TH-CENTURY WOMEN'S NOVELS

Mary Anne Schofield states that the education of women (presumably among the upper classes) between 1713-1799 was a much debated topic among male writers. Defoe, among others, advocated the education of women. The general opinion was, as Steele writes, that most parents make a mistake "that in our daughters we take care of their persons and neglect their minds.... and from this general Folly of Parents we owe our present numerous Race of Coquets." Schofield uses this debate to explore the many ways women writers used the romance novel form "to articulate female concerns and concepts," subverting the genre of masculine quest to their needs. For Schofield, "[r]eading the romance in the eighteenth century means learning to hear the feminine voice inscribed in the masculine, romance narrative, and thus reading the female text of the feminine quest in place of the male story." The romance, "with its attendant romantic love and disguise," becomes the earliest form for novels written, and perhaps read, mostly by and about women. Women appropriated this prose fiction form in order to "study the pervasive ideology of female powerlessness by allowing the 'other side' of women, their aggressive natures to be displayed in the disguise." Minor women writers use the romance "to speak to each other of their fate."

This newly-refashioned romance novel tends to engage in revelations about women's interests and perceptions, often transforming women's actual experience into the stuff of fiction, as was the case with Behn, Manly, and Haywood. As many feminist critics, like Lillian Robinson in "Treason Our Text" and Paul Lauter, point out, Restoration women writers' "gestures" toward representing women's problems and concerns often led women writers to write about topics unpopular with the dominant male culture, i. e., male impotency and/or premature ejaculation (a frequent "failing" of Aphra Behn both in novels and poetry) rather than topics which focus on women's frailties and failings—a much more "popular" topic. This liberality of the female pen would come under harsh censure during the ensuing centuries, as middle-class morality increased with the middle classes.

During the 1720s and 1730s, during the time when Defoe wrote Roxane, women's romance novels, according to Janet Todd, took a more moral turn, perhaps in response to the increasing presence of more religious writers like Daniel Defoe or Penelope Aubin, both inclined to push their audiences toward religion and God's grace. It would be interesting to discover if this period of renewed morality also marks the shift in women's writings from Behn and Manley's humor over the frailty of man to what Paula Backscheider argues is women writers use of the novel form to express their own fears about, and alienation within, society. In any case, though Roxana often breaks away from the conventions of women's novels, this novel also transforms women's experience into fiction. In this case, rewriting the herstory of Mary Carleton, a woman resembling Roxane who was hanged in 1673.

According to Backscheider, women writers during this early period began to abandon "scandalous memoirs, imaginary voyages, political allegories, and romantic novellas" in favor of "more tightly plotted love stories with emphatic psychological emphases." This form of the romance, by 1724 when Defoe published Roxana, was already "well established"; indeed, "women novelists outnumbered men." The features of this type of novel (see chart) were well known by most readers. It is Backschieder's contention that Defoe, aware of the "formulaic signals of these fictions," violates these conventions in Roxana in order to encode not the fears of women but the "most basic, archetypal fears men have of women." The dominant fear in women's novels is a fear of themselves, their own ability to write, what Gilbert and Gubar have called the "anxiety of authorship." Roxana, as a character, "exhibits the major male fear: about performance." If Backscheider is correct, Defoe is not really doing anything new in Roxana; he is merely using his own brand of realism to refocus women's concerns back toward men and their concerns. However, Backscheider sees Defoe's depiction in the novel of the four primary fears men have about women (earth mother, temptress, manipulator, myterious other) as "a spiritual quest gone awry." In the final analysis, Backsheider sees in Roxana the early roots of the Gothic.

## BACKSCHEIDER, "THE GENESIS OF ROXANA"

Features of Typical Women's Novels	Defoe's <u>Roxana</u>
1) Sketch of family situation, usually orphaned and penniless	1) "What characteristics she has that are not vain are masculine, commonsensical..."
2) "assumed bond between reader and narrative voice"	2) a male narrator acts as interlocutor for Roxana's story (Preface)
3) pre-1700, women heroines "more foolish than evil, and were punished by disgrace and death."	3) "Roxana is one of the newly fascinating evil women." Like others, she refuses "to accept the roles" available in her society. Defoe places her, though, in role of male rapist (37-42)
4) heroine "learns something unpleasant about men in her first experience with opposite sex"	4) Roxane's husband is a fool who abandons her and their five (or six?) children
5) usually have successful, loving fathers and so are surprised by male's "perfidy"	5) Roxane has a good dowry which her foolish first husband wastes

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