

# The Benefits and Detriments Involved in Dancing with the Devil: Defoe's *Roxana* in the 1720s.

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"It must be confess'd, Trade is almost universally founded upon Crime; [...] But what must be done? [...] 'tis little better than the *Devil* driving the Trade, and The Tradesmen's being the *Devils* Journey-men; they certainly carry on the Trade for him, and he pays them board Wages; thus the Tradesmen get the Money, and the Devil gets the Tradesmen."<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I want to focus on a number of elements in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* that reflect the novel's involvement in the 1720s, when it was written, rather than in the Restoration, especially the time of Charles II, which appears on the title page and which represented to Defoe the period of libertine excess in England.<sup>2</sup> Of course aspects of Roxana's character represents the mélange of Charles's mistresses, from Nell Gwynn (the "Protestant Whore" to whom Roxana compares herself<sup>3</sup>) to Louise K roualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, and Maria Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin.<sup>4</sup> The name, Roxana or Roxellana, reverberated from Knolles' *History of the Turks*, and through Restoration Drama, along with

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1. Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, 2 vols. (London, 1727; reprint New York: Augustus Kelley, 1969), 2: 108, 160.
  2. See Daniel Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman*, in *Poems on Affairs of State*, ed. Frank Ellis, et al., 7 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963-1975), 6: 273-4 (ll. 285-307). It is also notable that Defoe referred to the 1720s as a "Libertine Age." See *Conjugal Lewdness* (1727), Maximillian Novak ed. (Gainesville: Scholars Facsimiles, 1967) 329.
  3. See Alison Conway, *The Protestant Whore: Courtesan Narrative and Religious Controversy in England 1680-1750* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), especially 110-141.
  4. For the many allusions to the Restoration, see my *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe's Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 112-120. See also Rodney Baines, "Roxana's Georgian Setting," *Studies in English Literature* 15 (1975): 459-72. He presents a strong, but hardly conclusive, case for ignoring the title page, with its reference to the court of Charles II.

the story of how Hester Davenport, who played a “Roxolana” in Davenant’s *Siege of Rhodes*, had been tricked into a fake marriage by one of her admirers.<sup>1</sup> But as David Blewett argued, *Roxana*, as a name and concept, flows through both the Restoration and 1720s in a manner that defies any realistic use of time, but which is nevertheless perfectly satisfying to the reader.<sup>2</sup> In some sense, then, this is a partial concession piece on my part. Although I still believe that in writing *Roxana* Defoe drew mainly upon both his personal and historical knowledge of the Restoration, I want to examine how he tried to involve the reader in events of the 1720s. The issues I want to discuss involving Defoe’s engagement with the 1720s in *Roxana* are: 1. Masquerade; 2. Luxury; 3. Crime; 4. Trade and Vice; 5. The Richard Savage theme; and 6. Contemporary Fictional Form.

## Masquerade

There had been significant masquerades during the Restoration; indeed there was a masquerade mock-marriage between Louise K roualle, later Duchess of Portsmouth, and Charles II at the beginning of their relationship. In addition to enumerating the various ways in which the name *Roxana* and *Roxellana* became synonymous with both a courtesan and a strong woman, I have traced the ways in which disguise itself was central to that period.<sup>3</sup> But of course John James Heidegger was to turn masquerades into an ongoing commercial venture in 1722. Eventually he was to be recognized by the monarchy, when he was partly in charge of the coronation celebration in 1727. William Hogarth had brought Heidegger together with Rich’s *Harlequin Dr Faustus*, opera’s excesses and Fawk’s magic in a print of 1724, which, as I suggested elsewhere, Defoe seems to have known.<sup>4</sup>

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1. John Mullan argues for a literary source involving this incident to be found in Anthony Hamilton’s *Memoirs of the Count of Grammont*. See Mullan, ed., *Roxana* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 349-350.
  2. In addition to the clear reference on the title page to the court of Charles II, the frame of reference for the ambience of Charles’s court is much clearer than for the court of George I, and the figure of Sir Robert Clayton, who died in 1707, makes no sense in the context of the court of George I. His role as an active financial adviser and womanizer belongs entirely in the seventeenth century. For a general discussion of the double time scheme, see David Blewett, *Defoe’s Art of Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) 121-127. For a not very convincing objection to this argument, see F.N. Furbank, “Introduction”, *The Fortunate Mistress* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005) 10.
  3. See Maximillian Novak, *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe’s Fiction*, 115-116.
  4. Maximillian Novak, “Hogarth and Defoe’s *Political History of the Devil*”, *N&Q*, 247 (2004): 202-4.

Hogarth depicted the elements of surface display and the lack of seriousness in the culture of the 1720s as symbols of moral, cultural and intellectual decline. A seller of books with Volumes of Shakespeare and other excellent writers in a wheel barrow goes ignored as mobs of people line up to attend events which to Hogarth's mind lacked any true depth. Defoe was to view these shows less as signs of cultural decline than as indications of levity, immorality, and luxury.

Like these shows, Roxana's sexy, "Turkish" dance along with her Turkish costume, attract an audience and give her the name, Roxana, by which thenceforth she becomes known. It was a name that would have resonated as much during the 1720s as it had in the Restoration. During the end of the decade from 1718 to 1719, Mary Wortley Montagu's famous letters on Turkish customs in relation to women caused a mild sensation that lingered into the 1720s.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to think that Defoe was not familiar with the sensation created in the early 1720s by Mary Wortley Montagu with her tales of the seraglio in Istanbul. It is also doubtful that any knowledgeable reader, especially any woman reader living in London and encountering Defoe's novel when it was published in 1724 would not have experienced some flash of knowledge involving Montagu's letters. In Defoe's novel, the dress represents Eastern luxury revealed to a court which appears to revel in the luxurious and the exotic. Like Roxana, Mary Wortley Montagu brought back a dress from the East. She had herself painted by Godfrey Kneller, wearing it, and apparently, according to Isobel Grundy, went to masquerades wearing it.<sup>2</sup> She certainly viewed wearing that costume as a form of masquerade from the very start. In the East, she also witnessed a dance that she found sexually suggestive.<sup>3</sup> How much Lady Mary's picture of the independence of Turkish women might have influenced Defoe's creation of Roxana as the financially independent adventuress, who rejects marriage with

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1. For example, Roxana appears as the heroic slave girl in *Persian Letters*, by Charles Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu. It was translated in two volumes (London, 1722) by John Ozell.
  2. Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*. (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 147-202.
  3. Grundy, p. 202. Grundy remarks on Lady Mary's recognition of how voluptuous the dance was. A further relationship with Lady Mary, in the character of Roxane, created by her for the first of her *Eclogues* is unlikely to have been a connection with Defoe's character.

the Dutch Merchant and invests her wealth with Sir Robert Clayton, is difficult to say, but Defoe had already joined what Grundy called the “rage for the orient,” in 1718 with his *Continuation of the Letters of a Turkish Spy*.<sup>1</sup>

Roxana obtains her Turkish dress in Naples, when she is living the life of perfect delight as the mistress of the German Prince. She sometimes entertains him by dancing while wearing it. Depending on how we read *Roxana*, her dance before members of the English court is a wonderful spectacle that leads to her three-year affair with the King—something which continues to feed her sense of greatness. Her dress, then, may be viewed as symbolic of her rise in the world, as a woman of great wealth as well as status in the sphere surrounding the court, and/or the symbol of the evil which has been eating at her soul and which may lead to her destruction.

Roxana loves to dance and marries her fool of a first husband because he dances well. She cannot help but feel pride in that moment of display, when her dancing (actually French but so much more acceptable to the audience than the genuine folk dancing of the women from the Caucasus area who have been brought to her party) brings her the applause of everyone in the party. Later in the narrative, when Roxana shows the dress to her friend, the Quaker woman, with whom she lodges, and to her Dutch Husband, she opens herself up to dangers she never expects, as her daughter, Susan, who knows about the dress and the dance, comes to seek either her mother’s affection or some share in her mother’s wealth or both. It might seem that Roxana could have taken Susan into her confidence and solved her problems, but Roxana, who has lived a life of various disguises, feels that, with the exception of her companion Amy, she cannot trust anyone. The Turkish dress, the symbol of her worldly success, represents the masquerade that will undo her. From an artistic standpoint Defoe took a symbol of Restoration sexual fantasy and made it into a complicated contemporary theme of guilt and anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

1. Grundy, p. 202.

2. I long ago pointed out a scene in *The English Rogue* (1666-71), by Richard Head and Francis Kirkman, in which a roguish character assumes the costume of Roxolana from *The Siege of Rhodes* to please a lover. The connection with *Roxana* is too close to be accidental; even the psychology of disguise and imagination is much the same. Defoe had read *The English Rogue* and must have recalled this scene. See my *Realism, Myth, and History in Defoe’s Fiction*, 114.

## Luxury

Roxana's sexual licentiousness points immediately to the original meaning of luxury, and her focus on a Turkish costume would, among other things, be an example of the kind of luxury goods that were being imported into Britain to the destruction of the British wool trade. But the key connection between Roxana and luxury has a great deal to do with the 1723 edition of Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. Indeed, the debate over luxury at the time was in some ways similar to that created by John Brown with his famous *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (2 vols, 1757-1758) over three decades later.<sup>1</sup> But whereas Brown bemoaned the corruption that luxury had created in Britain, Mandeville had argued that luxury was part of the punch-bowl mix that made up contemporary society and caused it to function properly.

If John Brown's *Estimate* was to make luxury into a term that summed up all that was wrong with mid-century Britain, debates over luxury had been heating up throughout the early part of the eighteenth century and broke into flame during the 1720s with the spectacle of Regency extravagance in France, the South Sea Bubble, and the publication of the 1723 edition of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. Mandeville might well protest that the edition of 1714, with its prose explanations of the poem of 1704, had made his positions clear. But the events of the past few years had given an entirely different context for his work when it was reissued in 1723. As I maintained many years ago, Defoe's *Roxana*, published in 1724, was part of that debate. What I want to do here is to clarify a few points which appear to have been lost in the discussion.

Much of Defoe's fiction is a theater of moral struggle in which the protagonist, yielding to the demands of necessity to lead what she/he considers an immoral life, attempts to find an accommodation between that imperative of self-preservation and his or her struggle toward leading a life in keeping with Christian morality. As George Starr suggested years ago, the conflict belongs to the realm

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1. For a good overview of this later debate over luxury, see John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

of casuistry with its dramatized conflicts between conscience, religious law, conventional law, and natural law.<sup>1</sup> This is the moral and psychological stage on which Roxana and a number of Defoe's other characters acted.

By 1723, when Mandeville's expanded edition of *The Fable of the Bees*, was published, few of his detractors, at least those writing on the economic well-being of Britain were ready to argue with him on the need for some degree of luxury. The new, consumer oriented nature of English society had been furiously defended by Nicholas Barbon throughout the 1690s, and Defoe was one of the strongest proponents of projects that would enrich the society through circulation and consumption.<sup>2</sup> If he borrowed unashamedly from writers such as Barbon, Charles Davenant, and John Carey, he was not behind them in enthusiasm. Almost all of Defoe's own business dealings were essentially luxury based, from manufacturing perfumes extracted from civet cats to importing wines and spirits from Spain.<sup>3</sup>

If, like George Blewitt, one of Mandeville's antagonists, during the 1720s, Defoe believed in the necessity for the government to limit aspects of consumption that were harmful to the economic health of the state, he was content enough with an England that imported goods that did not interfere with the well-being of the English worker. On the other hand, like those approaching the problem of luxury mainly from a moral standpoint—Richard Fiddes, William Law, John Dennis and others, Defoe did not accept Mandeville's eagerness to use laborers, prostitutes, and poor children as so much waste material for maintaining an orderly state.<sup>4</sup>

Although this debate may have been less dramatic than some of the religious controversies of the decade, as suggested, it drew in contributions from some of the period's well-known controversialists such as John Dennis, George Blewitt, William Law, and Francis Hutcheson. They all had their points to make, all

1. G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Casuistry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

2. See Maximillian E. Novak, *Economics and the Fiction of Daniel Defoe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) 128-139.

3. See Maximillian Novak, *Daniel Defoe Master of Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 94-100.

4. Part of the uproar about Mandeville's work focused on his attack upon Charity Schools. For this, see Jonathan Kramnick, "Unwilling to be Short, or Plain, in Any Thing Concerning Gain": Bernard Mandeville and the Dialectic of Charity," *The Eighteenth Century*, 33 (1992): 148-174.

objecting on moral grounds to Mandeville's seeming indifference to matters of religion and ethics. In 1724, John Dennis viewed the success of Mandeville's work as caused by the growth of luxury throughout Britain:

Vice and Luxury have spread, [and] the Work which this Champion has publish'd in their Defence, has found great Success, tho' a very wretched Rhapsody, weak, and false, and absurd in its Reasoning; awkward, and crabbed, and low in its Wit; in its Humour contemptibly low, and in its Language often Barbarous.<sup>1</sup>

He also objected to Mandeville on Whig principles, finding Mandeville's attitude toward the poor abominable and viewing the political implications of Mandeville's ideas destructive of the British Commonwealth. Luxury, Dennis argued, can never be good for a nation. In the same year, Richard Fiddes, in his *A General Treatise of Morality Form'd upon the Principles of Natural Reason Only*, threw doubt on Mandeville's concept of self-interest as governing society and defended Shaftesbury's notion of virtue. George Blewitt defended frugality and attacked Mandeville's argument that "Honesty is a *mean, starving Quality*," while the author of *The True Meaning of the Fable of the Bees* complained that Mandeville's idea of luxury was directed toward the few; at the same time those at the bottom of the social ladder lived in a form of slavery.<sup>2</sup> Hutcheson, a staunch defender of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, found Mandeville's notion of self-interest to be a limited idea of human nature and his idea of luxury to be materialistic and vulgar.

Defoe was far more ambivalent. In his economic treatises, he extolled the growth of trade in Britain and the luxury goods that were an important part of that growth, while lamenting the essential immorality of those trades. In his fiction, he could be even more explorative. Though filled with economic and sociological information about contemporary Britain, Defoe's novels were

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1. John Dennis, *Vice and Luxury: Publick Mischiefs: or, Remarks on a Book Intituled, the Fable of the Bees* (London, 1724) xvii.
  2. Richard Fiddes, *A General Treatise of Morality* (London, 1724) xxxvi-lxiv; and Blewitt, *An Enquiry Whether A General Practice of Virtue Tends to the Wealth or Poverty, Benefit or Disadvantages of a People* (London, 1725).

essentially aesthetic and moral texts. And accepting as he was of the sinful nature of humanity, Defoe was not going to applaud all those aspects of what he called “this luxuriant age we live in.”<sup>1</sup>

Of Defoe’s fictional characters, only Roxana finds herself involved in a world of luxury and corruption. Despite the Restoration roots for Roxana’s wallowing in luxury, Defoe appears to have taken some aspects of Roxana’s character from the notorious Duchesse de Berry, the daughter of Philippe II, Duc de Chartres et d’Orléans, and Regent of France. Indeed The Duchesse de Berry participated in the nightly debaucheries of the court and among her sexual excesses, was even rumored to have had incestuous sexual relations with her father. Her pride of place and vanity were notorious, almost approaching madness. As if to underscore the connection, Defoe has Roxana pay a visit to the palace of Meudon (pp. 84-5), which had been given to the Duchesse around 1717.

Defoe, who acted as a translator of the foreign news for Nathaniel Mist’s *Weekly Journal*, appears to have been deeply involved with the issue of 8 March 1718, which contained an account of the actions of the Duchesse de Berry. That issue reported a reception and dinner given by the Duchesse de Berry, a dinner whose menu was so lavish that it was published by the *Mercurie galant* in ten pages of the February 1718 issue with apologies that there was not more space to describe the incredible variety of rare dishes. This “magnifique” feast, prepared by M. de Pesie, along with other activities in honor of the Duchesse de Lorraine were described as “une des plus brillantes Festes” ever seen. Although Defoe introduced his description of this occasion as “diverting,” he could hardly have been pleased by the extravagance of the feast and the masquerade that followed:

...there were at the Table...three Course 270 Dishes, all of Plate, Covers and all, five beaufaits, which were filled with three several Services of Plate of different Fashion and Workmanship, the others with an infinite Variety and number of Glass Works for all Occasions necessary to the Day. For their Repast there was first as above, 270 Dishes of meat, 200 several sorts of Soop, all differing from one another, 215 several Dishes of Pastry, 70 Stands of Rings upon every Stand eleven Rings, and every Ring holding Sweetmeats, Preserves,

1. See *A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. G.D.H. Cole and D.C. Browning (London: Dent, 1974) 168.