

More Wars of Attribution?

Manushag N. Powell

[ORCID: 0000-0002-9981-2740](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9981-2740)

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JOHN RICHETTI isn't with us today, but I want to honor his long service to the Defoe Society by keeping my roundtable remarks brief and casual, as he would prefer.

My general topic comes from two places. One is the short piece I wrote on Defoe's twentieth-century critical reception for the Cambridge *Defoe in Context* volume (to which, unsurprisingly, many other people in this room have contributed, generally in more productive ways than I). In it, I suggest that the overall robust good health of Defoe studies is in part the result of scholarly interest shifting away from the tension between biography and bibliography. Much energy, perhaps too much, in the last century of Defoe criticism has been taken up by wars of attribution as we try and fail to settle the boundaries of the Defoe Canon. And yet, while we're not quite finished with the question of what Defoe wrote, and with whom, and why, we are vibing somewhat differently about it now.

In 1974, as I noted in the Cambridge essay, Rodney Baine complained that the Defoe canon was "a widening gyre whose center will not hold" (484). Or as John Robert Moore memorably put it, "The bibliographer of Defoe would have to begin at the age of the infant Samuel, work as urgently as Noah building the ark, and live as long as Methuselah" (155). In other words, there was something almost apocalyptic, almost religious, hovering around the ever-expanding and ever-disputed list of Defoe attributions and the scholars who ventured near it.

Lately, though, we not only embrace Defoe the novelist (perhaps too fervently, about which more in a moment), we have mostly stopped fussing over his authorship

of *Moll Flanders*, *Roxana*, and *Captain Singleton*. This is not to say that we no longer consider questions of authorship—in particular, the list of pamphlets attributed to Defoe continues to waver at the margins, and probably always shall—but the temperature has come down considerably on matters like the stylometric wars.¹

One exception is the oft-referenced work of Ashley Marshall between about 2010-2015. In a series of articles beginning with in her “Did Defoe Write Moll Flanders and Roxana?” Marshall sought to unsettle even the revised canon of Furbank and Owens, particularly with respect to some of his currently most popular novels. Marshall’s conclusion to that essay was this: “If we can supply more than faith or wishful thinking to justify the attribution of Moll, Roxana, and other ‘Defoe’ fiction, then I very much hope we will do so. If we cannot, then we would do well to resign ourselves to studying the poet and journalist we know existed, rather than trying to illuminate the novelist who only might have” (209). As the years go on, she argues with increasing urgency that, “We need to learn to live with a much-reduced canon” (149). Marshall is resistant to the idea of Defoe as a famous novelist in particular, pointing out with some justification that this framing overshadows the majority of work done across his long and prolific career. To classify Defoe with “a canonical writer of fiction like Fielding” is to “do him a great disservice” (28).

To which I respond: why? Defoe wrote *Crusoe*. I’ll grant that he also wrote a couple hundred other things, but his reputation in educational endeavors has pivoted on *Crusoe* for better than 300 years, and it is not difficult to make a case for *Crusoe* as among the most common and formative of Anglophone cultural touchstones. Marshall is right, of course, that Defoe may not have known that his reputation would one day rest on it. Few authors have the gift of such foresight. Richardson probably did, and I don’t like him much the better for it.

I apologize for my apparent hypocrisy here: I have been arguing against conceiving of Defoe’s contemporary, Eliza Haywood, primarily as a novelist rather than a periodicalist for years now; moreover, I am on record as believing (as I do believe) that the term “novel” itself is of very limited utility in eighteenth-century studies, and we would be better off as a scholarly field if we were to try harder to think in terms of prose fictions and multigeneric valances.² I am also no large-canon zealot; I am an absolute crank about attempts to re-attribute the *General History of the Pyrates* to Defoe. And I even agree with Marshall insofar as I think Defoe wrote a great deal of interesting material and we should embrace as much of it as we can. But I make these arguments because I think they contribute to a better understanding of eighteenth-century print culture, but I do not think we need, as a field, to be more cautious, or to take an attitude of resignation anywhere, or back away from what makes our authors popular. We should be level-headed about fiction, not frightened that it will somehow be our reputational undoing.

Furbank and Owens responded to Marshall’s critiques, of course—they always do respond—first by claiming Marshall misunderstood their use of external evidence

and then by supplying what they considered additional internal evidence (“On the Attribution”. To show that this is not an invective against Marshall, I’ll add here that their approach to internal evidence among Defoe’s novels has always struck me as a little bit weird. They have, sometimes, a tendency to over-emphasize seemingly random details and descriptions—such as the use of poles to mark Malagasy trading areas in both *Singleton* and *Crusoe*—but to avoid larger resonances, such as the thematic longings for human contact expressed repeatedly among Defoe’s protagonists. (Of course, the group here knows all of this better than I do. Max Novak has also written a number of follow-ups to their de-attribution work, objecting to Furbank and Owens’ uses of external evidence, though from a different angle to Marshall’s—while Nicholas Seager is fast becoming our foremost expert on Defoe provenance.)³

This brings me to another recent event that made me think about Defoe attribution, which comes from another small but mighty conference. A few weeks ago, at Indiana University Bloomington’s Annual Workshop at the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Abigail Zitin (who sits with us today) presented a fascinating essay inspired by Eve Sedgwick’s “Epidemics of the Will” that read Roxana through the lens of addiction. Zitin suggested that we should weigh Roxana as an independence junkie, and performed an extended reading of her famous soliloquy that begins, “What was I a whore for now?” (200-201). Roxana blames the devil for her initial temptation, but is at a loss to explain why she continues to engage in fiscally advantageous sexual relationships now that she is quite rich, since she does not especially crave sex. A large factor in Roxana’s decision-making, of course, is that the mercenary-minded Amy is both her confidant and her enabler. Roxana is, as emerged during the workshop’s discussion, what would have become of Bob Singleton if William hadn’t come along to talk him into retirement. She is Moll Flanders without the steadying hand of Mother Midnight.

In other words, this is a trope Defoe wrestles with repeatedly: a protagonist gripped by compulsions who can be urged in different directions by different kinds of friendship. Instead of trying to convince people not to read *Moll Flanders* with *Crusoe* (because are we really absolutely, positively certain Defoe wrote *Moll*?), why aren’t we telling them to read *Roxana* with *Singleton*? The bottom line is that with all caveats in place, it is very difficult for me to conceive of *Crusoe*, *Singleton*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana* as having been composed by a series of different hands. To paraphrase Voltaire, if Defoe didn’t exist, it would have been necessary to invent him.

To wrap up, I want to cite the work of someone else who happened to be present at the IU workshop. In his *Everywhere and Nowhere*, Mark Vareschi approaches Defoe attribution differently, neither urging caution nor wild expansion. Going a step past Foucault, who formulated the author as a function of discourse, Vareschi argues that “Defoe” the novelist and author is really a network effect, and not the same thing as the historical person Daniel Defoe: “authorial attribution is less a

fact that may be verified or disproved and more of a network effect: not necessarily a binary process but one of contingency” a result of which is that “books, through their circulation, make authors” and not the other way around (111, 123).

In other words, Defoe wrote *Moll Flanders* because we say he did; *Moll Flanders* makes Defoe Defoe. (And ditto *Roxana*.) By all means, embrace Defoe as a journalist as well as a fiction writer, but I am disturbed when I hear colleagues telling their undergraduates that the author of *Moll Flanders* is indeterminate. We in English are an injured group. We need to stop giving our beautiful things away.

Purdue University

Notes

¹ Stylometry is a controversial subject with many literary scholars: Shakespeare and the Brontës have come in for their own statistical-linguistic analysis controversies, but Defoe studies can hold its own in this area. See the lengthy exchange touched off by Furbank and Owens’s *Defoe De-attributions*, which was attacked by Irving Rothman in “Defoe De-Attributions Scrutinized.” Rothman felt Furbank and Owens ought to have paid more deference to the stylometric method proposed by Stieg Hargevik in *The Disputed Assignment of Memoirs of an English Officer to Daniel Defoe*, which Rothman had used to dispute fifty-four of Furbank and Owens’s decisions. Furbank and Owens responded in the same journal issue to Rothman, calling him “rather ungenerous to us,” and Hargevik’s corpus data “contaminated” (464-5). Rothman was permitted to respond to their response and characterized it as “the most irrational circularity of reasoning” (467).

² See Powell, “Eliza Haywood, Periodicalist(?)”

³ For example, see Novak’s review of *The Canonisation of Daniel Defoe in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, as well as his review of their *The Defoe Canon*. More recently see “Some Problems in De-Ascribing Works Previously Ascribed to Daniel Defoe.” For some of Seager’s recent work, see “Defoe, the Sacheverell Affair, and *A Letter to Mr. Bisset* (1709); “Defoe’s Authorship of *A Hymn to the Mob* (1715); and “Literary Evaluation and Authorship Attribution, or Defoe’s Politics at the Hanoverian Succession.”

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