Women’s False Agency in Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana* and Aphra Behn’s *The Lucky Mistake*

This paper examines the complications of women’s agency in two eighteenth-century British novels. In *Roxana* (1724) and *The Lucky Mistake* (1689), Daniel Defoe and Aphra Behn portray the struggles of women to enact their own will against the authoritative discourses of romance, marriage, sexuality, and virtue imposed upon them. While Defoe’s heroine Roxana is driven to prostitution for the sake of economic survival, her ability to capitalize upon this position for social advancement satirizes the same moral authorities that condemn her. Behn’s Atlante enacts a similar revolt against authority as she attempts to create a space of freedom for herself against the will of her father, whose arrangement of her marriage to a nobleman promises the family a higher social class. Through a close reading informed by genre theorists, including Michael McKeon, Toni Bowers, and Mikhail Bakhtin, this paper observes the loss of narrative control, and therefore the loss of agency that occurs as Roxana and Atlante navigate their restricted social spaces by using other women as proxies for themselves -- a strategy that backfires as the voices and wills of those others override their own. As Behn and Defoe satirize the impossibility of their heroines’ situations, both authors instead seek resolution in their readers, whose ability to see, hear, and trace the source of every novelistic voice enables them to recognize the truth, where Roxana and Atlante are unable. While these heroines find themselves further confined at their stories’ ends, the two novels demonstrate the unique power of the genre to expose the array of authoritative contradictory voices that threaten freedom, while placing their readers in the position of knowledge, power, and agency that eludes their characters.

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