

“She Never Had Been a Bride in Her Life”: The Marriage of Roxana and Amy

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THIS ARTICLE is not about gay marriage—except to the extent that it is. Rather, it is about two fictional women who probably never have sex with each other. One of them marries two men during the novel, and the other, as the quotation in my title notes, is never a bride in her life. In spite of this, the two women—the eponymous narrator of Daniel Defoe’s 1724 novel, *Roxana, or the Fortunate Mistress*, and her faithful maid, Amy—act very much like a married couple. As Everett Zimmerman writes, “The relationship of Amy to Roxana goes beyond ordinary categories of common interests, legal responsibilities, or normal affections” (167). For over thirty years, the two women are more emotionally intimate with and dependent on one another than they are with anyone else. They manage a household together and share finances; when they have children, they make mutual decisions about how those children will be raised. Indeed, their relationship disintegrates over a disagreement about how to resolve a conflict with one of Roxana’s children. In other words, these two women assume many of the responsibilities of marriage without enjoying its benefits of status and security.¹

In this way, *Roxana* brings to mind twenty-first-century conversations about marriage equality. It does so because the novel reflects Defoe’s own conflicted and evolving philosophy of marriage. What Defoe represents fictionally and analogically in *Roxana*, he explores didactically and directly in a book-length essay, *Conjugal Lewdness*, which was first published in 1727, three years after *Roxana*’s publication. Both works—the novel and the philosophical essay—reveal Defoe to have been conflicted about the religious, emotional, and legal purposes of marriage.² I am not the first to note that Defoe’s explorations of marriage and family life in his nonfiction mirror those in his fiction; Katharine Rogers, for example, has observed that *The Complete English Tradesman* calls for wives to be knowledgeable and involved in their husbands’ businesses, a stance that she sees reflected in the successful, if illicit,

business endeavors of women in *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders* (8). John Richetti and Laura Rosenthal have noted, but not expanded upon, the congruity between *Conjugal Lewdness* and *Roxana*; Richetti writes that “what is implicit and contained” in Defoe’s nonfiction is “liberated” in his fiction (23). Nonetheless, Defoe’s straightforward prescriptiveness in *Conjugal Lewdness* provides a clarity that *Roxana* does not. Exploring the moral and spiritual problems of marriage in both formats allowed Defoe to approach the same questions from multiple angles. Both works depict and discuss a variety of failed marriages, illustrating a society in which the practice of marriage has deviated disastrously from its purpose of an emotional and spiritual, as well as economic, bond. In *Roxana*, Defoe represents the devastating effects of the failed marriage system on an individual’s psyche and soul, whereas in *Conjugal Lewdness*, he can propose a solution that will prevent the production of future generations of Roxanas. Defoe’s fiction and nonfiction therefore provide complementary insights into his moral attitudes.

Defoe’s views placed him on the progressive end of a spectrum of evolving cultural attitudes toward marriage. In England in the early eighteenth century, many people perceived a tension between the traditional view of marriage as transactional—a way of joining families or increasing a man’s financial stability—and an everyday, practical view of marriage as companionate—a way of joining like-minded, mutually affectionate men and women. Some historians have interpreted this perception of conflict as a reflection of a cultural shift. In his seminal study of domestic life, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, Lawrence Stone argues that by the end of the seventeenth century, most people defined themselves in terms of a nuclear family rather than in terms of an extended network of kinship (103). Stone identifies *Roxana* as forcefully critical of a wife’s financial and psychological subordination to her husband and as representative of the tension that arose from the paradoxical ideas about marriage that predominated in Defoe’s time (136).

It is likely that this tension between transactional and companionate models of marriage was perceived—both in the eighteenth century and by historians like Stone—as a larger problem than it actually was for most couples. As Keith Wrightson establishes in *English Society 1580–1680*, most poor and middle-class people in England had always been free to choose companionate spouses (112). Even among the upper classes, arranged marriages were not the norm: John R. Gillis observes that at least a third of brides had lost their fathers by the time they married, and that in most cases, obtaining permission from a bride’s father or guardian was a sentimental custom rather than a cultural mandate by the eighteenth century (21–22). There was also a significant chasm between marriage law and sexual practice. Rebecca Probert finds, in *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century*, that marriage laws prohibited sex during betrothal on the grounds that premarital sex was analogous to taking possession of property before a sale was completed (37). However, according to Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, one out of five women was pregnant on her

wedding day (48). Laws and traditions were conservative and restrictive, but flexible and companionate unions were the reality for most people in Defoe's time. More precisely, to use Naomi Tadmor's words, most decisions to marry operated in "a broad gray area in which both sentiment and prudence interplayed" (193). In the eighteenth century, as now, most people married for both emotional and practical reasons.

Still, writers like Defoe demonstrate that the cultural shift from transactional to companionate marriage is not purely the invention of overgeneralizing historians. Rather, it was a topic of social debate. Defoe, like most Protestant social critics of his time, based his views on his interpretation of the Bible, which helped him justify the coexistence of a progressive stance toward women's minds with a more traditional stance toward marriage's purpose. *Conjugal Lewdness* is Defoe's most thorough and didactic statement about the ethics of marriage, but Defoe wrote about the subject throughout his career. In a 1715 work, *The Family Instructor*, Defoe presents a series of dialogues between various members of a household; the husband and wife consistently speak as affectionate equals and appeal to their love for one another in times of strife. The decadent, playful wife in *The Family Instructor* capitulates to her husband's insistence that she behave more moderately, but she does so after reflecting on the validity of his concerns; she is not blindly obedient. This depiction of a wife as intelligent and introspective, responding more readily to a rational conversation than to commands, reflects Defoe's consistent investment in depicting women as intellectually and spiritually equal to men. In *The Complete English Tradesman*, a series of letters advising young middle-class men, Defoe continues his representation of marriage as a union between two equal minds. The tenth letter, which cautions against extravagant spending, also cautions against the stereotype that women are more likely than men to make frivolous purchases. Rather, husbands frequently mislead their wives about household finances. Defoe writes that "any prudent woman" will budget according to family income, and he urges the reader to make his wife "mistress of her own circumstances" (*Tradesman* 146). A wife is a business partner, reasonable and adaptable, and a husband should value her involvement.

The Family Instructor and *The Complete English Tradesman* touch upon aspects of marriage that relate to their larger points, so their advice about marriage is mostly pragmatic. In *Conjugal Lewdness*, Defoe considers the theological and moral aspects of marriage far more deeply. He addresses the question of marriage's purpose, arguing that procreation and child-rearing are the primary reasons for marriage. He repeats this position frequently in *Conjugal Lewdness*, citing the Biblical exhortation to "be fruitful and multiply" as evidence that the purpose of marriage is to produce and raise children. He devotes a full chapter to the excoriation of intentionally childless marriages, calling them "one of the most unwarrantable and preposterous Things in all the Articles of Matrimony" (128), and he has similarly harsh words for couples who have sex while the wife is pregnant. Defoe balances this conservative attitude toward the bodies of married people with a progressive attitude toward their souls: he

believes marriage should be founded in mutual affection, complementary personalities, and naked honesty. He writes,

The great Duty between the Man and his Wife, I take to consist in that of Love, in the Government of Affection, and the Obedience of a complaisant, kind, obliging Temper; the Obligation is reciprocal, 'tis drawing in an equal Yoke; Love knows no superior or inferior, no imperious Command on one hand, no reluctant subjection on the other; the End of both should be the well-ordering their Family, the good-guiding their Household and Children. (26)

Harmony and equality in a marriage are not only advisable but required of married couples. Moreover, a couple that fulfills these emotional and spiritual duties will be more effective in the physical and practical duties of maintaining a household and children.

To Defoe, marriage was not only a virtuous and desirable state of being but an institution designed by God to promote the spiritual completeness of both men and women. He writes, “Matrimony is, according to the Words in the Office appointed in our Liturgy, *GOD’s Ordinance*” (21). This perception of marriage as a holy ordinance, created for the benefit of humanity, explains Defoe’s constant return to the subject; it is his duty as a Christian writer to combat distortions of God’s plan for marriage. In the same passage, he continues,

the married Life has a Sanction too, and ought to be preserved sacred, not be debauched with criminal Excesses of any kind; much less should it be made a cover and skreen for those matrimonial Intemperances which I now speak of, and which I shall prove to be not only scandalous to, but unworthy of Matrimony, as a sacred state of life. (21)

Marital misbehavior—the “conjugal lewdness” of the essay’s title—is offensive and sinful because it misuses and exploits the word “marriage” without fulfilling marriage’s godly purpose. Defoe’s primary goal is the spiritual well being of his readers, with a mind to the emotional and intellectual factors that contribute to the spirit.

Nonetheless, contentment is essential to Defoe’s understanding of marriage, and he describes happiness as a reflection of a couple’s success in conducting their marriage wisely. People indulge in marital “intemperances” because they seek pleasure as a path to happiness, but Defoe contends that true and virtuous marriage is far more likely to lead to true enjoyment of life: “[A]ll that can be called happy in the Life of Man, is summed up in the state of Marriage; that it is the Center to which all the lesser Delights of Life tend, as a Point in the Circle; that, in short, all the extraordinary Enjoyments of Life are temporary and trifling” (96). Marriage does not only lead to happiness—it pulls together and concentrates all possible joys, resulting in a more lasting and stable happiness than temporary pleasures can provide.

Moreover, Defoe implies that the relationship between marriage and happiness is symmetric. Not only does virtuous marriage lead to happiness, but striving toward true happiness will lead a person to marriage. “Lesser delights” draw people toward the “center” of marital bliss.

Conjugal Lewdness is a practical text as well as a philosophical one, and the majority of the essay addresses specific physical and social acts that defy the rules of virtuous marriage: arranged unions that lack affection; inequality and disrespect; non-procreative sexual behavior. Nonetheless, all of these sections remind the reader that Defoe’s practical advice serves the abstract goals of spiritual well being and emotional contentment. As a result of Defoe’s investment in the intangible and ideal, many of the parameters that Defoe sets out for marriage in *Conjugal Lewdness* do not depend on gender. While he does not state that two women or two men could complete the spiritual and emotional tasks of marriage together, he also does not establish that one man and one woman are uniquely equipped to perform those tasks.

Much of *Conjugal Lewdness* is devoted to the illustration of failed, miserable, and sinful marriages, and the same is true of *Roxana*. The novel presents a variety of examples of bad marriages, the long-term results of unions based on status, money, convenience, or lust. The most prominent of these is Roxana’s own first marriage, to a “fool” who fathers five children with her, mismanages and bankrupts his father’s business, and abandons Roxana and their children when he has spent all of the family’s money. While Roxana describes her husband’s transgressions as an extreme case of marital perfidy, her marriage to the Fool is actually typical within Roxana’s world. Roxana’s first benefactor and lover, her landlord, is in a similar marital limbo to Roxana’s, separated from his wife for reasons that Roxana declines to describe. He explains only that Roxana “was the Wife of his Affection, the other, the Wife of his Aversion” (47). Later in the novel, Roxana becomes the mistress of a German Prince whose Princess was chosen for him to engineer a political alliance; he ignores this princess in favor of mistresses like Roxana. After Roxana’s career as a courtesan has waned, she befriends a Quaker woman whose irresponsible husband has gone to America and left her with no means of support. The only happy marriage in the novel is an unconventional one: when she is in her fifties, Roxana reconnects with a former lover, the Dutch Merchant.³ Roxana is past childbearing age when she marries the Dutch Merchant, challenging even Defoe’s own view that marriage is tied to procreation.

With the novel’s extensive and cynical focus on varieties and consequences of bad marriages, it is surprising that critics have resisted or overlooked the possibility that Defoe has constructed Roxana and Amy’s relationship as marriage-like. It is more common to read them as mother and child, either with Roxana as the mother, as Terry Castle has suggested, or with Amy as the mother, as Madeleine Kahn has suggested. Nonetheless, when critics propose a parent-child dynamic between the two women, they usually acknowledge that such a construction does not fully represent

their relationship: the analogy is limited and imprecise. Castle sees Roxana as Amy's parent in the sense that Roxana generates Amy's personality and motivations; Roxana uses her to shape an "ideal self" that Roxana cannot achieve (83). Kahn sees the parent-child dynamic as an extension of Roxana's inaction and lack of self-sufficiency relative to Amy; Amy is the "effective man to Roxana's passive woman" (86) and a rational adult when Roxana behaves like "a helpless infant" (95).⁴ However, Kahn concludes her chapter on the novel with an observation that severely complicates her characterization of Amy as the nurturing and protective mother to an incompetent Roxana. Kahn argues that Roxana and Amy's psyches become increasingly intertwined as the novel progresses, and that "once [Susan] is murdered, Amy and Roxana return to their former relationship in which the two women combine to make one effective being" (100). The image that Kahn evokes, of two people functioning as a single social unit, resembles marriage far more than a parent-child relationship. Children generally grow away from and exceed their parents, but Amy and Roxana blend to become greater than the sum of their parts.

Kahn's observation that Amy and Roxana grow together draws attention to another problem with the construction of Roxana and Amy as parent and child. With the exception of the episode that culminates in Susan's murder—which, although haunting, is a small portion of the novel—*Roxana* is relatively unconcerned with the parent-child bond. This is not to say that Roxana is a bad mother by eighteenth-century standards. Roxana's decision to provide for her children's care at a distance is a prudent one, as she herself notes when she writes to the Fool's relatives for help after he abandons her:

I told them, that if I had had but one Child, or two Children, I would have done my Endeavour to have work'd for them with my Needle, and should only have come to them to beg them to help me to some Work, that I might get our Bread by my Labour; but to think of one single Woman not bred to Work, and at a Loss where to get Employment, to get the Bread of five Children, that was not possible. (15)

Roxana perceives the decision to send away her children as necessary, virtuous, and loving. The Fool's relatives, who reject the children, are portrayed as selfish and cruel for refusing to help.

After sending her children to be raised by others, Roxana seldom expresses regret for her lack of involvement in their lives. When, later in life, she searches for them, her goal is not to reunite with them, but to become an anonymous financial benefactor. William E. Hummel suggests that Roxana treats her money like we expect a woman to treat her children (139), and indeed, Roxana's limited maternal instinct resides in her purse. Prior to her disastrous reunion with Susan, Roxana locates one of her sons, who was raised by a kind but poor uncle and is now a laborer. Roxana sends Amy to give the young man £120 to continue his education and become an apprentice

to a merchant. Roxana never expresses any desire to meet her son, only to “make him live without such hard Labour” (191). Roxana does not regret her failures of motherly affection, only her failure to support them financially and secure them a comfortable place in society. While Roxana’s treatment of her children is certainly problematic, Roxana does not extensively interrogate the problem in her narrative, and when she does, she describes her distant and disengaged parenting as a byproduct of her immoral sexual choices.

When critics do not read Roxana’s relationship with Amy as a mirror of her relationships with her children, they often propose that Amy is a symbolic figure or a projection of Roxana’s troubled mind. Indeed, Amy’s erratic behavior and overwhelming devotion to Roxana are so extreme that Amy sometimes does not seem to possess a coherent human mind. Several critics have therefore argued that the only way to make sense of Amy’s behavior is to interpret her as an aspect of Roxana’s psyche. This line of reasoning descends from Homer O. Brown’s 1971 article, “The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe.” Brown contends that Roxana constantly forces Amy to repeat and emulate her own sins, until “Amy has become like an element of Roxana’s personality capable of acting autonomously” (582). Peter New perceives the same result but believes there is less intentional corruption on Roxana’s part: Amy has a “general tendency to act out what Roxana only thinks of doing” (323), and her role as the malevolent enforcer of Roxana’s will makes her “a projection of aspects of Roxana’s self she would prefer to disown (though ultimately cannot)” (325). Even critics who see Amy as a character in her own right tend to interpret her in terms of what she symbolizes in relation to Roxana: Helene Moglen, for example, sees both Amy and Susan as representations of the impossibility of reconciling femininity and autonomy (48), part of the novel’s larger project of questioning the viability of female individuality (20). However, such readings are at odds with Defoe’s framing of *Roxana* as an autobiography. The novel continually reminds the reader that it claims to be a true story: Roxana makes a point of redacting the names of people whose reputations might be harmed and of including the name of a prominent historical figure, Sir Robert Clayton. Acknowledging the generic constraints upon Amy’s characterization in the novel, Kirsten T. Saxton notes that the close first-person narrative prevents us from seeing Amy through any lens but Roxana’s own biased eyes (Saxton 90). Roxana sometimes sees Amy as an extension of her own will, and if we trust Roxana’s delusions, we come to misinterpret Amy as an aspect of Roxana’s psyche.

Roxana cannot provide details of Amy’s background and character that she herself does not know, leaving Amy a somewhat mysterious figure. It is not clear how Amy comes to be Roxana’s maid, and the novel tells us nothing of Amy’s life before she enters Roxana’s household. As a result, it seems that Amy initiates her attachment to Roxana without provocation or invitation. Not only does Amy refuse to leave Roxana’s service when Roxana is unable to pay her, but she offers to pay Roxana for

the privilege of remaining in her family: “as long as she had any Money, when I had none, she would help me out of her own” (16). Soon afterward, Amy establishes that her love for Roxana has no limits: “Dear Madam, says *Amy*, if I will starve for your sake, I will be a Whore, or any thing, for your sake; why I would die for you, if I were put to it. Why that’s an Excess of Affection, *Amy*, said I, I never met with before” (28). Amy’s “excess of affection” persists through the two women’s lives, and Roxana frequently remarks upon it. Even when she is furious at Amy for proposing to kill Susan, Roxana contextualizes Amy’s criminal thoughts as a symptom of her devotion: “tho’ she was a devilish Jade in having such a Thought, yet it was all of it the Effect of her Excess of Affection and Fidelity to me” (271). Amy’s love is so ardent and so singularly focused that it blinds her to all other considerations.

In the murderous context of the end of *Roxana*, such powerful and unconditional devotion becomes a destructive flaw. Nonetheless, in more moderate circumstances, Defoe describes such affection and fidelity as the key to marital success. In *Conjugal Lewdness*, Defoe writes, “the Matrimonial Duty... [is] founded in Love; ’tis performed in the heighth of Affection; its most perfect Accomplishment consists not in the Union of the Sexes, but in the Union of the Souls” (27). Defoe presents love not only as a necessary condition for a happy marriage but as its animating and uniting force. He cautions, “Matrimony without Love is the Cart before the Horse, and Love without Matrimony is the Horse without any Cart at all” (32). A couple must love one another in order to enjoy a happy marriage, but without marriage to structure it, love has no purpose or direction. Accordingly, Amy’s love retains both purpose and direction for most of the novel: it drives her loyalty to Roxana and ensures that their relationship outlasts all of Roxana’s alliances with men.

Indeed, Amy’s loss of control over her love for Roxana coincides exactly with Roxana’s marriage to the Dutch Merchant—that is to say, after Amy has ceased to be the primary object of Roxana’s affection. Shortly after Roxana has rekindled her romance with the Dutch Merchant, she sends Amy to discover what has become of the German Prince. Amy travels to Paris to speak with the Prince, but the Prince suffers a hunting injury, and Amy must wait two weeks for him to return to the city. Amy’s behavior becomes cold and distant: “But that which mortified me most, was, that *Amy* did not write, tho’ the fourteen Days was expir’d” (236–37). Finally, Amy returns to deliver the information in person, but when she does, “She spoke coldly, and slightly” (237). When Roxana sends Amy for news about her old lovers, she reinforces that Amy, like them, is a figure from her past. It is no surprise that Amy responds by becoming cold and uncommunicative. If we read Amy as a scorned wife, abandoned for the Dutch Merchant, her disloyalty and disobedience make sense; she murders Susan because she is angry with Roxana, and Roxana’s love is no longer keeping her in check.

Defoe sees love as a path toward equilibrium, and in *Conjugal Lewdness*, he makes it clear that a man who loves his wife will not treat her as a servant. He writes,

“Love knows no superior or inferior” (26) and “a Man can never pretend to love his Wife and have no Respect for her at the same time” (75). Throughout *Conjugal Lewdness*, Defoe reinforces early-feminist sentiments that especially within the household, a husband and wife are equals. This presents a problem if we wish to read Roxana and Amy’s relationship as a marriage, because Amy *is* a servant. Ironically, and fittingly within Defoe’s own schema of companionate marriage, Amy becomes more and more like a wife, and less and less like a servant, as the novel progresses. At the beginning, when Roxana is penniless, she notes that she is unable to pay Amy, but she does not clearly establish a point at which Amy begins to receive wages again. She does, however, make it clear that when Roxana’s wealth is substantial enough to require management, Amy is responsible for keeping track of financial matters. In one of the few critical acknowledgments of the marriage-like qualities of Roxana and Amy’s relationship, D. Christopher Gabbard notes that financial management was generally a husband’s responsibility within an eighteenth-century household—not a wife’s or a servant’s—and that Amy’s control of Roxana’s financial affairs makes her a “female husband” in this regard (238). By placing Amy in charge of her finances, Roxana promotes Amy from servant to spouse and makes Amy the head of their economic household.

Amy’s dramatic demonstrations of devotion lead Roxana to trust her with money and to consider her a partner in most life decisions, gradually erasing the class distinction between mistress and maid. Roxana seeks Amy’s advice and opinions throughout the novel; she acknowledges that Amy is more cunning and fearless than herself and, therefore, capable of suggesting courses of action that Roxana might overlook. Roxana sees Amy as possessing an equal mind to hers and, in some ways, a superior one. By the time Roxana marries the Dutch Merchant, Amy is not even notionally a servant, a change that Roxana states outright: “*Amy* was now a Woman of Business, not a Servant, and eat always with us” (245). As a function of Roxana and Amy’s unique intimacy and mutual dependence, Amy becomes less and less servant-like, and Roxana’s treatment of Amy evolves accordingly. The novel demonstrates Defoe’s contention that, in a long-term relationship of mutual affection, servitude and inequality are not just detrimental but unnatural.

The idea of inequality as an unnatural relation in marriage correlates with Defoe’s belief that marriage is a discrete state of human existence and that true marriage permanently alters those who enter into it. He writes in *Conjugal Lewdness*, “Matrimony is not a single Act, but it is a Condition of Life, and therefore when people are new-married, they are said to have altered their Condition” (44). Defoe discusses a number of characteristics of the condition of marriage, but he states that the most important aspect of matrimony is that married couples “must have an Affection greater to each other than they have to any Person in the World, but not greater than they have to GOD” (54). While Roxana has warm feelings toward her lovers, she makes it clear that her affection for Amy surpasses her attachment to any

of them. When the Prince invites Roxana on a trip to Italy, she cannot bring Amy with her, because Amy is pregnant; Roxana's concern for Amy's well being almost leads her to decline the Prince's offer: "I had no-body but *Amy*, in the World, and to travel without *Amy*, was very uncomfortable; or to leave all I had in the World with her, and if she miscarried, be ruined at once, was still a frightful Thought; for *Amy* might die, and whose Hands things might fall into, I knew not" (100). Roxana resolves her distress by providing for Amy much as a traveling businessman of her time would provide for his pregnant wife: by hiring a full household to care for Amy, with Amy charged as the lady of the house. Still, Roxana's thoughts are with Amy even as she enjoys her exotic adventure, and when she returns, "*Amy* cried for Joy, when she saw me, and I almost did the same" (105). This sequence of events is touching, and it keeps Roxana from seeming mercenary or heartless at the height of her career as a courtesan.

Roxana's care for the pregnant Amy correlates with Defoe's nonfiction assertions that a wife's well being during pregnancy and childbirth must be placed ahead of both work and religion. In *The Complete English Tradesman*, Defoe tells the story of a man who, having been sent by his wife to fetch a midwife, chooses to hear a sermon on the way, placing his wife's life in danger and missing the birth of his child (*Tradesman* 65–66). The tale is intended to demonstrate that too much piety can lead to callousness and lack of perspective. Unlike the tradesman in Defoe's anecdote, Roxana is a dutiful spouse, balancing her professional need to travel with her personal need to care for Amy.

Defoe's tradesman is so pious that his love for God eclipses all else, but Defoe condemns his excesses, not piety itself. Indeed, Roxana's sinful lifestyle seems to contradict Defoe's mandate that love for God should surpass love for one's spouse. However, one of Roxana's main internal conflicts is the extent to which she has had to place worldly concerns ahead of eternal ones, and her worry for Amy's soul inspires a major spiritual crisis. Returning to England after many years living in France and the Netherlands, Roxana and Amy encounter a storm at sea, and they fear for their lives. Roxana's repentance is not for her own sins but for the degree to which she has led Amy to sin:

Then it came to my Remembrance, that I had not only been the same with *Amy*, but that I had been the Devil's Instrument, to make her wicked... every one of *Amy's* Cries sounded thus in my Ears: I am the wicked Cause of it all; I have been thy Ruin, *Amy*; I have brought thee to this, and now thou art to suffer for the Sin I have entic'd thee to; and if thou art lost for ever, *what must I be?* (126)

Roxana's concern for Amy's soul leads her to concern for her own relationship with God. To position this within the rhetoric of *Conjugal Lewdness*, Roxana realizes during her terrifying voyage that she has not placed her love for God above her love

for Amy, and that her negligence has placed them both in peril. Roxana's spiritual crisis does not last—when she arrives safely in England, her lifestyle becomes more decadent than before—but she retains a feeling of responsibility for Amy's spiritual well being and eventual degeneration. When Amy is well into her forties, Roxana expresses concern that "*Amy* was just where she us'd to be, *now*, a wild, gay, loose Wretch, and not the much graver for her Age" (265). Roxana has become wiser and more penitent with age, but she fears that Amy's lack of maturity will prevent her salvation. Like the concerned husband in *The Family Instructor*, who guides his wife toward God and away from the theater and ballroom, Roxana sees Amy's spiritual health as her responsibility, and she worries that it is too late to help Amy redeem herself.

Roxana and Amy's relationship is founded upon an intense spiritual and emotional bond that fulfills many of Defoe's prescriptions for marriage. This alone is probably sufficient for many twenty-first-century readers to treat their intimacy as equivalent to marriage. Nonetheless, Defoe concedes that the principal function of marriage is to produce children, even if he sees marriage's spiritual and emotional benefits as more worthy of discussion. Since Roxana and Amy cannot have children together, it appears that their relationship cannot fit meaningfully into Defoe's schema of marriage, even if it can fit into our own. However, their relationship is both sexual and procreative by Defoe's own standards, regardless of whether they do anything more than talk and sleep when they share a bed. Peter Christian Marbais is correct that women in the early eighteenth century frequently shared beds without erotic implications, but he is incorrect in his assertion that to infer an erotic bond between Roxana and Amy is to impose an anachronistic reading (Marbais 136). Within the novel, one of Roxana's male companions, the English Lord, mistakes Amy for Roxana's lover. The Lord surprises Roxana and Amy at three o'clock in the morning; drunk and jealous, he rails, "[B]ut hark-ye... now I think on't, how shall I be satisfied it is not a Man-Bedfellow? O, *says I*, I dare say your Lordship is satisfy'd 'tis poor *Amy*; yes, *says he*, 'tis Mrs. *Amy*, but how do I know what *Amy* is? It may be Mr. *Amy*, for ought I know; I hope you'll give me Leave to be satisfy'd" (186-87). Although the Lord cannot conceive of sexual intimacy between two female bedfellows, he cannot eradicate the possibility that Amy is a man disguised as a woman. The Lord's jealousy is the product of drunken foolishness, but it reveals the legitimacy of misreading Roxana and Amy's friendship as erotic.

The Lord is proven humorously wrong in his suspicions that Roxana and Amy are having sex with each other, but nonetheless, the two women are erotically intimate by proxy. In *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explores literary representations of men who desire the same woman, in such a way that the woman becomes a mediator for the men's desire for one another. Similar exchanges take place repeatedly in *Roxana*, albeit with the genders reversed. Michael Boardman sees Roxana's insistence that Amy have sex with the Jeweler as an erotically charged act of voyeurism. When

Roxana undresses Amy, he interprets her reaction as a “voyeuristic orgasm” originating in her humiliation and rape-by-proxy of Amy (57). Jonathan Lamb justifies Roxana’s voyeurism in this troubling scene by contending that Roxana sees a reflection of herself when she watches Amy have sex; Lamb argues that Roxana can only make sense of her own sexual behavior when she watches Amy reenact her transgressions (280). While both critics perceive the erotic connection between Roxana and Amy as violent and perverse, they acknowledge that the eroticism is both genuine and narratively important.

But not all of Roxana and Amy’s sex-by-proxy is cruel or perverse; later in the novel, when the terms of their companionship are more equal and solid, their parallel sex acts are not only consensual but mutually joyful and satisfying. During Roxana’s affair with the German Prince, Amy engages in a sexual relationship with the Prince’s most trusted servant. The two liaisons are so alike that they lead Roxana to remark, “*like Mistress, like Maid*; as they had many leisure Hours together below, while they waited respectively, when his Lord and I were together above; I say, they could hardly avoid the usual Question to one another, namely, Why might not they do the same thing below, that we did above?” (83) Roxana’s description of these parallel affairs implies an intrinsic voyeurism to their structure: Amy and her gentleman have sex while hearing and visualizing Roxana and the Prince having sex, and vice versa. The sexual adventures of one couple encourage the other couple to have sex, and Roxana implies that these sex acts often occur simultaneously. Despite the lack of physical contact, and the presence of male partners, Roxana and Amy are engaging in mutual sexual acts.

The results of this sex-by-proxy are often children-by-proxy. Roxana and Amy procreate numerous times during their relationship: Roxana has at least nine children, and Amy has at least two. In most cases, the men who father these children are less instrumental to their lives than Roxana and Amy are to each other, and the two women share responsibility for their parenting. Amy is especially involved in the births of Roxana’s children with the German Prince, to the point where she overrules the Prince’s decisions about Roxana’s care. The Prince provides an old woman to tend to the pregnant Roxana, but Roxana distrusts her. Amy solves the problem with her business skills, traveling to England to hire a midwife and nurse: “The Midwife, *Amy* had agreed to pay a hundred Guineas to, and bear her Charges to *Paris*, and back again to *Dover*; the poor Woman that was to be my Nurse, had twenty Pounds, and the same Terms for Charges, as the other” (77). When Roxana is pregnant, and therefore inescapably female, Amy temporarily takes on the responsibilities of a husband. By this point in the novel, the women no longer organize their household according to the technicalities of class and employment; they assign themselves roles and tasks that suit the situation at hand. Of course, Roxana is also the husband in the relationship when it suits her and their mutual situation: when taking command of her finances, she declares herself a “Man-Woman,” a statement that acknowledges her

feminine identity and appearance as well as her masculine social role as a businesswoman. In a marriage of two women, there is no set paradigm for the assignment of responsibility, so Roxana and Amy must make such determinations on an *ad hoc* basis.

This is strikingly consistent with Defoe's vision of marriage in *Conjugal Lewdness*, in which he portrays the ideal marriage as one in which spouses complement each other's strengths and compensate for each other's weaknesses, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. He cautions against excessively gendered marital roles in household life that lead men to treat their wives as servants; rather, a marriage unites two people who are equal in their love for each other and in their love for God. Defoe tells us that the most important thing to remember is that marriage is "but a Partnership; though 'tis not a Partnership in Trade, 'tis what is ten thousand times more solemn, a Partnership in Life; a Partnership of Souls, they are embarked in the same Ship, they go to the same Voyage" (215). It is fitting, and surely not accidental, that Roxana and Amy most exemplify this description of marriage when they are in the most marriage-like of situations: when Roxana is about to give birth to a child who is theirs much more than he is the Prince's.

As a result, in the course of satirizing and problematizing all that he saw as deficient in conventions of and assumptions about marriage, Defoe comes to depict a relationship between two women that, in what he would have considered most relevant respects, is not only a marriage but a successful and virtuous one. Nonetheless, this does not suggest that Defoe was an early advocate for legal or religious recognition of same-sex marriages. Rather, through Roxana and Amy, he shows that in a society where many marriages are disastrous almost by design, a long-term, committed partnership between a career prostitute and her maid is ironically more like a virtuous marriage than many legal and consecrated unions. Instead of condemning Roxana for her sinful lifestyle—a condemnation in which Roxana herself encourages her readers to participate—Defoe uses his novel to explore the social factors that lock a woman like Roxana into an existence in which sex is commodified and men have no stake in reliably providing for their wives. He also suggests that while other relationships—between sexual partners, between legally married people, between parents and children—are socially constructed and somewhat expendable, the emotional and spiritual support of true marriage is essential to well-being and identity. Deprived of or rejecting traditional, heteronormative marriage, Roxana instinctively seeks a partner to fulfill the gaps in her self-sufficiency, and she looks to Amy. When Roxana says it is better to marry *anyone* than a fool, she means it—and demonstrates it by effectively marrying her devoted maid.

NOTES

- ¹ Defoe would not have been unique in depicting a marriage-like relationship between a mistress and maid. Betty Rizzo, in *Companions Without Vows*, has examined a pattern of quasi-marriages between women in the eighteenth century. However, Rizzo's study focuses on the later eighteenth century, and the intense emotional and spiritual bond between Roxana and Amy distinguishes them from real-world analogues.
- ² Both *Roxana* and *Conjugal Lewdness* were published anonymously during Defoe's lifetime. As Ashley Marshall has explored in a provocative recent article, "Did Defoe Write *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*?" it is impossible to be certain that Defoe wrote either novel, and it is indeed possible that Defoe's success led authors, publishers, and readers to misattribute others' works to him, either by accident or with the intention to mislead. Nonetheless, there is sufficient stylistic and ideological similarity between *Roxana* and *Conjugal Lewdness* to conclude that they most likely arose from the same mind and the same pen. Additionally, as Marshall has not identified a specific alternative contender for *Roxana*'s authorship, Defoe remains the most probable author of both novels as well as of late nonfiction works like *Conjugal Lewdness*. The philosophical continuity between Defoe's earlier writings and later texts like *Roxana* and *Conjugal Lewdness* strengthens the case for Defoe's authorship.
- ³ Earlier in the novel, Roxana rejects the Dutch Merchant, claiming that she does not believe in marriage. While her argument is occasionally read as an expression of the author's stance against marriage, Roxana herself admits that when the Merchant assures her that his motives are not avaricious, he has removed her principal objection, and from that point forward she is arguing on principle (147). Additionally, her argument echoes a poem attributed to Defoe, "Good Advice to the Ladies," which satirically advises young women to remain single because all men are terrible.
- ⁴ See also Peter Christian Marbais, who extends Kahn's reading; he sees Roxana as a "tyrannical child" to Amy's "permissive mother" (118). According to Marbais, Amy spoils Roxana so badly that Roxana becomes incapable of finding an equal partner (135).

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