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## **Defoe's Fiction: When Exclusion Leads to Inclusion**

**Fatma SAÏD-KAABIA<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The Protestant doctrine considers social and economic success as a sign of divine election. The Puritan ideal of hard work that leads to salvation and divine election is also omnipresent in eighteenth-century thinking. Nevertheless, the Protestant England of the Enlightenment that adopted a mercantile system inexorably leading to capitalism chose, in a way, to marginalize a part of its society. In such a changing environment, realizing social and economic success was at the expense of ethics, notably at one major value, that of hard work. Some individuals were reintegrated once economic success was realized no matter what means had been employed. One may wonder whether the portrayal of such cases is an ironic way of criticizing religious and Puritan hypocrisy or just a truthful representation of a major dilemma between two main forces; Protestant ethics and capitalism (to borrow the famous expression from Max Weber).*

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<sup>1</sup> University of Sousse, Tunisia, [fatma\\_said2002@yahoo.fr](mailto:fatma_said2002@yahoo.fr). 0000-0001-7352-8381.

The Protestant doctrine considers social and economic success as a sign of divine election. The Puritan ideal of hard work that leads to salvation and divine election is also omnipresent in eighteenth-century thinking. Nevertheless, the Protestant England of the Enlightenment that adopted a mercantile system inexorably leading to capitalism chose, in a way, to marginalize a part of its society. In such a changing environment, realizing social and economic success was at the expense of ethics, notably at one major value, that of hard work. Some individuals were reintegrated once economic success was realized no matter what means had been employed. One may wonder whether the portrayal of such cases is an ironic way of criticizing religious and Puritan hypocrisy or just a truthful representation of a major dilemma between two main forces: Protestant ethics and capitalism (to borrow the famous expression from Max Weber).

The economic system that was leading to individualism and to *laissez faire* nonetheless was coexisting with a need to reconcile religion and new social values. Hence, the existence of emblematic structures like charity schools, for instance, which were one of the main features of eighteenth-century Britain many writers and thinkers prided themselves on. Charity schools used, in fact, to teach religion and social conduct to orphans and poor children. Nevertheless, some different observers reveal another truth completely different maintaining the idea that the economic and social system of the period was not providing the best supervision through charity schools. The objective of such “promoters of charity schools was not to rescue their charges from the necessitous condition in which they had been born, but to give them a religious upbringing which would reconcile them with their continued poverty.” (Philip Harth. *The Fable of the Bees*. Introd.)

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), pushes further his criticism of the social system and dramatizes it through his characters; namely through Moll Flanders and Roxana who would be forced to prostitute themselves because of a selfish social system in Britain. Roxana’s symptomatic fear from charity schools was strong enough to persuade her not to enroll her children in and to prostitute herself instead in order to provide them with subsidies. “a hundred terrible things came into my Thoughts; viz. of Parish-Children being Starv’d at Nurse; of their being ruin’d, let grow crooked, lam’d, and the like, for want of being taken care of” (Roxana 52). And Moll’s grievance at the absence of a fair charity system is also significant:

Had this been the Custom in our Country, I had not been left a poor desolate Girl without Friends, without Clothes, without Help or Helper in the World, as was my Fate, and by which I was not only expos’d to very great Distresses, even before I was capable, either of Understanding my Case, or how to Amend it, nor brought into a Course of Life, which was not only scandalous in itself, but which in its ordinary Course, tended to the swift Destruction both of Soul and Body. (MF 8)

When one takes Defoe’s novel under study, it is striking to notice that almost all his characters are prostitutes, thieves or pirates. At the margin, they could be depicted as a perfect illustration of moral and social exclusion. Nor do they take any part in the economic

system; they are, in fact, marginal<sup>2</sup> that strive to survive. Yet, ironically enough, Roxana, Moll Flanders, Captain Singleton and even Colonel Jack will prove that by prostituting themselves and by stealing, they manage to regain the center, to be included. As Jeremy Wear puts it in his “Indentured Servitude, Material Identities, and Daniel Defoe in the Chesapeake Colonies”, those who were marginalized and then granted indentured servitude in the New World were granted a second chance out of their punishment and hence got integrated. “Although indentured servitude had long existed as a means for the socially and economically marginalized to secure passage to the New World in search of better opportunities, Todd recounts how it functioned as a doubled narrative of upward mobility and moral regeneration” (Wear 435) In this context, economy and morality can never coexist but the natural need to survive seems to go beyond all consideration and to triumph one way or another. One of the main objectives of this paper would be to show how all the characters of Defoe struggle against moral, social and economic exclusion and how, through an eccentric behavior, they actually undertake their “inclusion” in society.

Moreover, another aspect of exclusion related to Defoe’s own way of writing is to be scrutinized. In fact, in such a Puritan era vacillating between two major powers that of modernism and traditional Puritan values, the very process of writing and reading novels was prejudiced against by a majority still belonging and believing in scholastic virtues. Defoe’s writing in that context was thus challenging. On the one hand, it was promoting the rise of a new genre based on a new kind of fiction. On the other one, it was dealing with a sort of hero no longer epic but actually holding all the characteristics of an anti-hero.

In this respect, Defoe was limiting the frame of his work to anti-heroes; a minority excluded from the general reading taste, the usual horizon of expectation. He was also focusing his attention on a specific social class so far marginalized from the literary scene; the middle-class audience which is, nowadays, considered as one of the participants that had led to the shaping of the novel as a new genre. Yet, prolific writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift who were mortified at a vulgar language used by the mass and faithfully reported by a writer supposed to represent sophisticated intellectual elite, disregarded Defoe’s literature.

It is in this context that the present paper will construct its major axis. In fact, Defoe not only dramatizes the long time excluded middle-class issues but also the major problems resulting from a social and economic system that marginalizes individuals causing their ultimate failure. Defoe’s characters that actually belong to the lower class and long to join the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that some critics make a clear distinction between the notion of marginality and exclusion: “Exclusion always infers a conviction: the excluded is rejected out of society after an official sentence. Marginality though takes place within the same society. The margin being far from the center is not completely separated [ . . . ] Exclusion on the contrary is a lasting state and sometimes final. Marginality is a temporary and ephemeral state: either the marginal falls over exclusion (if s/he transgresses the law for example) or he is recovered and reintegrated” (My translation) (Sarah Peyroux “Marginals and Marginality in the English Poetry (1780-1812) Unpublished Dissertation University Sorbonne- Nouvelle Paris III, 2005).

“L’exclusion implique toujours une condamnation : l’exclu est rejeté, à la suite d’un jugement prononcé par une instance officielle, hors de la société. La marginalité, en revanche, se situe à l’intérieur même de la société ; la marge, bien qu’elle soit éloignée du centre, n’en est pas absolument séparée [ . . . ]

Contrairement à l’exclusion, état durable et parfois définitif, la marginalité est une condition passagère et éphémère : soit le marginal bascule dans l’exclusion (s’il transgresse la loi par exemple), soit il est récupéré et réintégré » (Sarah Peyroux. « Marginaux et marginalité dans la poésie anglaise (1770-1812) Thèse (nouveau régime) Université de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris III, 2005).

middle-class with urgent bourgeois aspirations depict a case of exclusion from the social, economic and moral order, for they are either prostitutes or thieves. Some of them were driven towards such a destiny by necessity and some others rather chose it willfully. In fact, some of them were just trapped in a sort of maze where they got lost because they had lost their sense of inner-self as much as the sense of belonging to any community.

Moll Flanders, for instance, at the very beginning of her story, lists the number of communities she was led to live with, and no sense of belonging would satisfy her until she was treated like a gentlewoman:

My old Tutress began to understand me, about what I meant by being a Gentlewoman; and that I understood by it no more, than to be able to get my Bread by my own Work, [ . ] and insisted on it, that to do so was to be a gentlewoman; for says I, there is such a one, naming a Woman that mended Lace, and wash'd the Ladies Lac'd-heads, she, says I, is a Gentlewoman, and they call her Madam [ . . . ] and she does not go to service, nor do House-Work, and therefore I insisted that she was a gentlewoman, and I would be such a gentlewoman as that. (MF 13-14)

The structural irony here resides in the fact that this lady that Moll is taking as a model is a prostitute, but young Moll did not understand her amoral way of “getting her bread”. As a naïve hero and narrator, Moll was unable to perceive what the author and the reader readily recognize<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the definition that Moll gives to gentlewomen establishes an obvious contrast with her initial situation: as a rogue, Moll would incarnate the “picaresque” genre par excellence. A category underestimated and utterly marginalized by all refined societies that European literature has dealt with ever since the 16th century when the picaresque novel emerged and started to flourish. In all cases, Moll’s firm belief in money as the most reliable source of security and her feverish ambition to be a gentlewoman will keep her ensnared in an interminable swirl of misadventures. In that swirly trajectory, she will lose ground and the center at the same time. Nevertheless, as a marginal she will dwell in wealth and realize all her dreams. Some critics have made an onomastic study of Moll’s name and they have come to demonstrate the existence of a real Moll famous in London for being a thief. Besides, they have attached her family name “Flanders” to the city in Holland famous for lace, which Moll had always loved to steal and to wear. Lace, which allowed her to borrow the prestige of a gentlewoman, ironically excludes her as a protestant who should shun all signs of luxury and as an upstart person who just acts like belonging to a specific class. That mere acting and pretending pushes her away from the center again and reinforces her position as an occasional conformist or a marginal.

Here again, if one goes back to the historical background Defoe is probably stemming his ideas from, one might trace back some factual events that should have inspired the author either for realistic purposes or for allegorical and ironic ones. In fact, Nell Gwynn, an important historical figure comes to mind while dealing with prostitution. She is a Restoration actress and mistress of King Charles II who reigned from 1661-1685. This particular period, i-e, from the Restoration of the monarchy onward, dissenters (like Defoe) had witnessed tremendous obstacles and successive persecution. Charles II, in fact, enacted anti-Puritan laws known as the Clarendon code which was held to reinforce the establishment

<sup>3</sup> According to the Bedford Glossary’s definition of “naïve hero” (2nd edition)

of the Church of England against nonconformists or dissenters. One might stop at the very words “nonconformists” and “dissenters” related to Defoe himself in an attempt to widen up the analysis of such notions and certainly not to make a biographical replica on his fictional work<sup>4</sup>. It is true that the author himself had gone through the exclusion experience for he was even rejected from prestigious universities such as Cambridge and Oxford, besides the fact that he belonged to a community prevented from leading an ordinary public life either in exercising its religious services or even in expressing its moral and political thoughts. Nevertheless, dissenting in Defoe’s fictional work takes another dimension more allegorical in order to criticize both the monarch and the economic and social order that follows. If one considers the case of Roxana, the protagonist of Defoe’s last novel (1724), some critics advance the idea that she (i-e Roxana) stands for Mel Gwynn the mistress of Charles II and for the whole period, that is, the Restoration era characterized by lust and all sorts of excess. Expressions like “the Queen of Whores” and “the Protestant Whore” were recurrent among some critics who commented lengthily on a historic episode that Defoe would have liked to explore in his own way and for his own objectives. In fact, Mel Gwynn who was publically known to be the king’s mistress was once booed by the mob while she was crossing the street on her carriage. Mistaking her for the other Catholic mistress of the same king, Mel Gwynn stops and talks to the mob, explaining that she is not the Catholic whore but the Protestant one. The scene is very famous but its ideological and political implications are worth studying. Accepting Mel Gwynn by the mob as a Protestant whore at the expense of the Catholic one could be interpreted as a way of integrating a symbolic figure so far marginalized at least morally and legally. For even though Charles II showed a clear long-time affection for Mell Gwynn and he recognized his both illegitimate sons from her, he could not allow them to inherit the crown, nor could he officially marry her. Mell and her sons, thus remained excluded from the court sphere but largely benefitting from it. If one goes on in studying the implications of such historical events, it could be noticed that in such a tumultuous era, the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion are intertwined and seem to be continuous. Defoe might have chosen the allegory of the “Protestant whore” in order to draw a critical portrait of the British court and of the whole era. Integrating Mel Gwynn by the mob and accepting her as the most popular figure of the Restoration, partly because of her skill as an actress and partly because of the latter declaration under study, could be also an ironic way of depicting religious hypocrisy and at the same time as a way of divulging the loosening of religious ties. It could be also perceived as a dissenter’s criticism of the Church of England; Protestant yet not quite purified from Catholic prints<sup>5</sup>. Roxana’s depiction of Mel Gwynn’s profile could stand for a silent statement that Defoe makes public and eloquent when Roxana qualifies herself as the “Protestant whore” in a very ironic episode<sup>6</sup>. She actually refuses, at a certain moment of the narrative, to confess herself to a Catholic priest under the pretense that even though she is a whore she remains protestant. Belonging to a whoring category which normally should exclude all claim to any moral belonging, is ignored here in order to promote certain conformity to Protestant community. The inducement sounds to be more like a national pride than any other thing and at the same time, the singularity of such an attitude

<sup>4</sup> For a biographical parallel “Defoe, Dissent, and Early Whig Ideology” by K. R. P. Clark can be considered.

<sup>5</sup> The expression “Catholic whore” had first been associated to Rome.

<sup>6</sup> « and tho’ it was strange that I, who had thus prostituted my Chastity, and given up all Sense of Virtue, [. . .] should scruple any thing; yet so it was [ ] nor could I go to Confession, who knew nothing of the Manner of it, and should betray myself to the Priest, to be a hugonot, and then might come into Trouble; but, in short, tho’ I was a Whore, yet I was a Protestant Whore, and could not act as if I was Popish, upon any account whatsoever.” (Roxana 104-5)

highlights Defoe's disapproval of the Anglican Church allowing such behavior. If Defoe recurses to allegory and to irony in his fiction, he would be more straightforward in his political and religious pamphlets:

You must bear with my freedom a little, in reprov'ing one epidemick Mistchief which I See so growing upon you all [among] the Soberest, the Gravest, the Modestest, the most Virtuous, the most Religious among us [...] I observe you are all strangely addicted to the modish, tho' abominable Vice of MODERN WHORING (Review Vol. IX 213).

Moreover, virtuous women are excluded from Defoe's narrative. Hence Robinson Crusoe's wife, for instance, who appears towards the end of the book and dies three lines later. Her death will just technically serve as an alibi for the narrator to start on a series of new voyages that would constitute the second volume of Robinson Crusoe, i-e *The Farther Adventures*. Captain Singleton's wife is also just a protector of his fortune but is otherwise expelled from the text and from the dramatic construction of the plot. Paradoxically, only eccentric elements, or amoral women are at the center of Defoe's narrative. This is so not only for Moll Flanders and Roxana but also for the four wives of Colonel Jack another protagonist of Daniel Defoe. All these women enjoy wealth and success while deviating from the norm; they have from time to time some instances of moral awakening that vanish very quickly under the weight of devilish pressure. One critic further notes that Defoe's female characters remain young and beautiful during the whole period of their moral, social and judicial deviation or demarcation. They start withering and getting old once they reintegrate the center and join respectable environment:

Curieusement, le silence se fait sur [la beauté] lorsque les héroïnes prennent le chemin de la respectabilité. Moll séduit pour la dernière fois vers soixante-quatre ans et Roxana "se range" vers cinquante-quatre ans [. . .] Lorsqu'elles réintègrent le monde des contingences [. . . et] les rangs des 'femmes de bonnes mœurs' alors elles vieillissent comme les autres. (Françoise du Sorbier 127)<sup>7</sup>

Piracy in Defoe's fiction, as well, occupies an important part of his writing. First because it used to be a common practice among seamen not only in England but in many other countries and second because it depicts efficiently what Defoe and other observers would like to highlight in terms of economic and political shortcomings of their time. In fact, Captain Singleton outcries his demarcation from civilization as a way of stressing the unfairness of such an organized and refined yet hypocrite world. Singleton as his name could suggest, is singled out of the mainstream. He shows the same sequels of ill-treated orphans abandoned by both their families and the charity schools as almost all the protagonists of Defoe. Robbing the properties of his own flourishing country is somehow ironic for he will reintegrate social and political order once he reaches a certain financial stability. As Timothy Blackburn synthesizes,

Singleton's method is unjust and morally wrong, but as a result of his acquisition of wealth he progresses beyond his piratical state of reason. Defoe is not justifying the means by the end, rather he is stressing the power of wealth once it is acquired. Thus even an immoral pirate

<sup>7</sup> Curiously enough, no word is uttered about [beauty] when the protagonists start a process of respectability. Moll seduces for the last time at the age of sixty four and Roxana "steps aside" around fifty four [. . .] When they reintegrate the world of contingencies [. . .] and the rank of "women with good morals" they get old like the others" (Françoise du Sorbier 127)

waging war on civilization can become, through the political society he needs in order to use and to protect his wealth, a repentant and mature citizen. (129)

The paradoxes of such an era as the eighteenth-century England once again highlight the continuous flux of exclusion and inclusion. Piracy which is an evident recourse to survive for some and for corruption to some others becomes a way of reintegrating a social and political status worth living. In addition, even though as a moralist Defoe should denounce such acts, he sympathizes and makes his reader identify with the criminal: “there is no doubt that Defoe sympathized with the success of any poor seaman who might be able to achieve wealth through his native abilities.” (Novak Economics and the Fiction of Daniel Defoe 112)

Such paradoxes were differently represented by another prolific thinker of the enlightenment; Bernard Mandeville, who wrote *The Fable of the Bees* in (1714). Mandeville startled his reading audience by thinking in terms of private vices leading to public benefit. In that respect, he states that the prostitution of a minority, for instance, is beneficial for the rest of women. It is even necessary for the preservation of the honor of virtuous women. He, thus, includes prostitutes in his allegorical bee-hive as a beneficial element of society. (The idea behind is that prostitution has always been the eldest job in the world). Here again, the word “job” is significant since it holds the same economic implication I am trying to debate in this paper. Therefore, the individual’s economic self-reliance determines his /her admission into a given social group (at least in this context). As a defense of his theory, Mandeville advances the following argument:

The impossibility of enjoying all the most elegant comforts of life that are to be met with an industrious, wealthy and powerful nation, and at the same time be bless’d with all the virtue and innocence that can be wish’d for in a Golden Age [ . ] I demonstrate that if mankind could be cured of the failings they are naturally guilty of, they could cease to be capable of being rais’d into such vast, potent and polite societies, as they have been under the several great common-wealths and monarchies that have flourished since the creation. (Preface)

Whether Mandeville’s argument could be taken or rejected remains a topic of continuous study, but what is going on in his bee-hive with its entire allegorical and symbolic dimension could be considered as a further illustration of the almost obligatory equation between national grandeur and the scarifying of some moral values. This same idea is depicted somehow by Defoe’s characters that keep getting away from their conscience while dwelling in wealth and piling up admirers and lovers. The same feverish attitude is depicted with Colonel Jack and Captain Singleton when they start adding up money and stolen acquisitions putting aside all moral considerations. The cardinal virtue of moderation lengthily cherished by Puritans has no way to their mind and they ironically make the best of their achievements during that particular phase of their lives. Many times did Moll and Roxana consider the idea of putting an end to their luxurious lives, but then all wise reflections disappear and the same old inclinations to evil take hold of them. “So possible is it for us to roll ourselves up in Wickedness, till we grow invulnerable by Conscience, and that Centinel once doz’d, sleeps fast, not to be awakened while the Tide of Pleasure continues to flow, or till something dark and dreadful brings us to ourselves again.” (Roxana 105)

While Bernard Mandeville is suggesting moderate economic and political alternatives in order to put an end to all sorts of vice and temptation, Defoe remains versatile and even contradicting himself from time to time. In fact, in an attempt to soothe the public opinion,

Mandeville states that he “would prefer a small peaceable society, in which men [. . .] should be contented to live up the natural product of the spot, they inhabit, to a vast multitude abounding in wealth and power that should always be conquering others by their arms abroad and debauching themselves by foreign luxury at home.” Defoe, in his own way, opposes to this utopian vision of the world a more practical one. In fact, as a famous economist very much influenced by Hobbes, Mandeville himself hardly believes in such a utopia drawn in his hypothesis. So does Defoe who draws an ideal, egalitarian fictional world in his *General History of the Pirates* only to show its limits. As Novak Maximilian states: “These are humane sentiments and *Libertalia* is a noble political and economic experiment; it is really too noble to survive, for Defoe believed that egalitarianism and communism, although morally excellent, ignored the realities of human nature” (110). His writing is an eternal illustration of such paradoxes and of such fluxes of ambivalent and contradictory notions such as inclusion and exclusion. Daniel Defoe’s diplomatic and complaisant conformity to the Anglican Church at a certain moment<sup>8</sup> denotes, despite his zealous earlier dissenting from it, his admission of a new reality that was imposing itself: practical prudence instead of the longtime valued Aristotelian moral one. Including criminals and excluding honest heroes remains, thus, very significant and reflects at the same time a general tendency that characterizes the whole era:

The criminal, it must be insisted, is both a hero and anti-hero to his eighteenth-century audience. His career evokes the desire for secular freedom and economic self-determination which is a real part of the outlook of the age [. . .] The criminal, as a type-figure, is a necessary social myth whose triumphs and abasements mirror the ideological tension between the new secular world of action and freedom and the old religious values of passivity and submission. (Richetti 34-35)

Yet, despite the economic and social reintegration of the majority of Defoe’s characters, the repentance of both *Moll Flanders* and *Captain Singleton*, in view of moral conformity, remains definitely questionable. And, therefore, even as a picaresque genre, the text of *Moll Flanders* is being dismissed/excluded especially by Spanish critics and specialists of the picaresque genre, who impose moral integrity as an unquestionable condition for the determination of the picaresque hero-figure. Defoe’s society exemplified through his own characters in more realistic tones, offers a second chance for the temporary excluded individual to be included.

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<sup>8</sup> The Occasional Conformity Act of 1711 also known as the Toleration Act, was an Act of Parliament issued in order to prevent nonconformists and Roman Catholics from taking occasional communion in the Church of England, for only members of the Church of England were allowed to hold public office.



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