

## On the Secondary Novels of Defoe

It has happened not seldom, that one work of some Author has so transcendently surpassed in execution the rest of his compositions, that the world has agreed to pass a sentence of dismissal upon the latter and to consign them to total neglect and oblivion. It has done wisely in this, not to suffer the contemplation of excellencies of a lower standard to abate, or stand in the way of, the pleasure it has agreed to receive from the Master Piece.

Again it has happened, that from no inferior merit of execution in the rest, but from superior good fortune in the choice of its subject, some single work shall have been suffered to eclipse, and cast into shade the deserts of its less fortunate brethren. — This has been done with more or less injustice. With some injustice in the case of the popular Allegory of Bunyan; in which, the beautiful and scriptural image of a Pilgrim or wayfarer (we are all such upon earth) addressing itself intelligibly and feelingly to the bosoms of all, has silenced, and made almost to be forgotten, the more awful, and scarcely less tender, beauties of the "Holy War made by Shaddai upon Diabolus" of the same Author; a Romance less happy in its subject, but surely well worthy of a secondary immortality.

But in no instance has this excluding partiality been exerted with more unfairness, than against what may be termed the Secondary Novels, or Romances, of Defoe.

While all ages and descriptions of people hang delighted over the "Adventures of Robinson Crusoe" — and shall continue to do so, we trust, while the world lasts —

how few comparatively will bear to be told, that there exists other Fictitious Narratives by the same writer — four of them, at least, of no inferior interest, except what results from a less felicitous choice of situations — Roxana — Singleton — Moll Flanders — Colonel Jack — are all genuine offspring of the same father. They bear the veritable impress of Defoe. An unpractised Indivisi- that would not swear to the nose, lip, forehead, and eye of every one of them! They are in their way as full of incident, and some of them every bit as romantic; only they want the Uninhabited Island, and the charm that has bewitched the world — of the striking Solitary Situation.

But are there no solitudes out of the cave and the Desert? or cannot the heart in the midst of crowds feel frightfully alone? — Singleton on the world prowling about with pirates less merciful than the creatures of any howling wilderness — is he not alone with the faces of men about him, but without a guide that can conduct him through the mists of educational and habitual ignorance, or a fellow heart that can interpret to him the new-born yearnings and aspirations of an unpractised penitence? Or when the Boy Colonel Jack in the loneliness of the heart (the worst solitude) goes to hide his ill-purchased treasure in the hollow tree by night — and miraculously loses, and miraculously finds it again — whom hath he there to sympathize with him? or of what sort are his associates?

The Narrative manner of Defoe has a naturalness about it beyond that of any other Novel or Romance writer. His Fictions have all the air of true stories. It is impossible to believe while <sup>you are</sup> reading them, that a real person is not narrating to you every where nothing but

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what really happened to himself. To this the extreme homeliness of their style mainly contributes. We use the word in its best and heartiest sense — that which comes home to the reader. The Narrators everywhere are chosen from low life, or have had their origin in it. Therefore they tell their own tales (Mr Coleridge has anticipated us in this remark) as persons in their degree are observed to do, with infinite repetition, and an over-acted exactness, lest the hearer should not have minded, or have forgotten, some things that had been told before. Hence the emphatic sentences, marked in the good old (but deserted) Italic type; and hence too the frequent interposition of the reminding old colloquial parentheses "I say" — "mind" — and the like, when the Story Teller repeats what to a practised reader might appear to have been sufficiently insisted upon before. Which made an ingenious Britic observe, that his works in <sup>this</sup> kind were excellent reading for the Kitchen. And in truth the Heroes and Heroines of Defoe can never again hope to be popular with a much higher class of readers, than that of the Servant Maid or the Sailor. — Crusoe keeps its rank only by tough prescription. Singleton, the Pirate — Colonel Jack, the Thief — Moll Flanders, both Thief and Harlot — Roxana, Harlot and something worse — would be <sup>t</sup>startling ingredients in the bill of fare of modern literary delicacies. But then what Pirates, what Thieves, and what Harlots, is the Thief — the Harlot and the Pirate — of Defoe. We would not hesitate to say, that in no other work of Fiction, where the lives of such characters are described, is guilt and delinquency, made less seductive, or the suffering made more closely to follow the commission, or the penitence more earnest or more bleeding, or the intervening flashes of religious visitation upon the rude and un instructed soul more meltingly and fearfully painted. They in this come near to the tenderness of Bunyan — while the levelier