

Romance and the Didactic in the Eighteenth-Century Novel: An Elaboration upon Andrew Varney*

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What I have to offer on Andrew Varney's stimulating piece is a widow's mite rather than a more thrilling Titanic struggle—a matter of emphasis and nuance. On page 135, Varney makes an arrestingly obvious, but so far as I know unnoticed, point when he argues that the French wars of the early century contributed to a decline in the fashionability of the Frenchified term 'romance.' As he rightly says, however, the outmoding of the term did not betoken any decline in the narrative appetites that French romances were supposed to satisfy. He adumbrates Michael McKeon's model of the development of the early novel constructed in *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987)—romance narrative, giving place to "naive empiricism" (Defoe), resolving into "extreme scepticism" (Fielding)—though Varney sees these as co-present (even consciously played off against each other) rather than as temporally distinct phases. Possibly he is a little unfair to McKeon, whose model is more flexible than Varney's gloss suggests. McKeon argues that the Fieldingesque narrative mode recalls earlier romance (though it is driven by entirely different ideological determinants) because it forces us to attend to the artificiality of all writing that romance also makes no attempt to conceal.

On the substantial point, however, of romance's longevity, I agree wholeheartedly with Varney that the romantic mode remained vital in English literature for longer than is often supposed. He gives some intriguing examples of romance metaphors cropping up even in places where one would think they were least welcome. My examples are perhaps more obvious ones from imaginative fiction. Sarah Fielding's

*Reference: Andrew Varney, "Brightness and Beauty, Taste and Relish: Advertising and Vindicating Eighteenth-Century Novels," *Connotations* 3.2 (1993/94): 133-46.

novel *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) has inset into it a long digressive narrative called "The History of Isabelle" written entirely in the style of French romance and not ironised to any extent. Here is a typical paragraph which neatly encapsulates the standard romance predicament and exemplifies a stylistic treatment of it as far away from Defovian "naive empiricism" as it is possible to be:

But imagine the horrible Situation she left the Chevalier in. Ten thousand various Thoughts at once possessed him, Confusion reigned within his Breast, and whichever way he turned himself, the dismal Prospect almost distracted him. Good God, what was his Condition! with a Heart bursting with Gratitude towards his Friend, filled with the softest and faithfulest Passion for the Woman he but an Hour before flattered himself he was just upon the point of receiving from the Hands of the Man, who made *his* Happiness necessary to his own, with a Mind which startled at the least thought of acting against the strictest Rules of Honour. He suddenly found that the Passion his Friend's Wife was possessed of for him, was too violent to be restrained, and too dangerous to be dallied with; he could not perceive any Method to extricate himself out of the Dilemma he was thus unexpectedly, unfortunately involved in.¹

A decade or so later, when Charlotte Lennox writes *The Female Quixote* (1752), it is becoming necessary to distinguish romances from novels, as part of a project to establish the novel's respectability. Arabella, the novel's heroine, has been raised on a diet of seventeenth-century French romances in such a way that she takes the manners and conduct promulgated in these fictions to be normative over her own behaviour. For much of the time, she is an endearing figure of fun whose unworldly high-mindedness and absolutist attitudes are objects of satire. In the time-honoured Quixotic manner, however, her romance-derived codes of conduct serve to satirise the rapaciousness, social conformism and petty-mindedness of those who surround her. At times, though, the stakes are higher than this. Romance attitudes are not just easily guyable forms of ludicrous social solecism. They are dangerous. This is apparent in Arabella's constant misprision of others' motives—she even suspects her father-in-law-to-be of harbouring lustful thoughts about her. Her assumption that every man is a potential rapist is one of the most unsettling aspects of her character. Even more serious is her substituting of romance chronology for real history. She takes a pagan, fictionalised

version of history for a true record, her belief so convincingly expressed that it seeps out and contaminates the minds even of characters who fancy themselves as knowledgeable about the past. In Book VII chapter V, Arabella is in company with one Selvin, a chatterer who prides himself on his knowledge of ancient Greece. Arabella makes reference to the “fine Springs at the Foot of the Mountain *Thermopylae* in Greece” and proceeds to an account of the doings of Pisistratus the Athenian, who has had an “Adventure” at those baths. Selvin is unwilling to confess that he has never heard of Pisistratus, in fact a character out of Mme de Scudéry’s *Artamenes; or, The Grand Cyrus: That Excellent Romance* (1690-91):

I protest, Madam, said Mr. *Selvin*, casting down his Eyes in great Confusion at her superior Knowledge in History, these Particulars have all escaped my Notice; and this is the first time I ever understood, that *Pisistratus* was violently in Love; and that it was not Ambition, which made him aspire to Sovereignty.

I do not remember any Mention of this in *Plutarch*, continued he, rubbing his Forehead, or any of the Authors who have treated on the Affairs of Greece.

Very likely, Sir, replied *Arabella*; but you will see the whole story of *Pisistratus*’s love for *Cleorante*, with the Effects it produced, related at large in *Scudery*.

Scudery, Madam! said the sage Mr. *Selvin*, I never read that Historian.

No, Sir! replied *Arabella*, then your Reading has been very confined.

I know, Madam, said he, that *Herodotus*, *Thucydides*, and *Plutarch*, have indeed quoted him frequently.

I am surpris’d, Sir, said Mr. *Glanville*, who was excessively diverted at this Discovery of his great Ignorance and Affectation, that you have not read that famous Historian; especially, as the Writers you have mentioned quote him so often.

Why, to tell you the Truth, Sir, said he; though he was a *Roman*; yet it is objected to him, that he wrote but indifferent *Latin*; with no Purity or Elegance; and—

You are quite mistaken, Sir, interrupted *Arabella*; the great *Scudery* was a *Frenchman*; and both his *Clelia* and *Artamenes* were written in *French*.

A *Frenchman* was he? said Mr. *Selvin*, with a lofty Air: Oh! then, ’tis not surprising, that I have not read him: I read no Authors, but the Antients, Madam, added he, with a Look of Self-applause; I cannot relish the Moderns at all: I have no Taste for their Way of Writing.

But *Scudery* must needs be more ancient than *Thucydides*, and the rest of those *Greek* Historians you mentioned, said Mr. *Glanville*: How else could they quote him?

Mr. *Selvin* was here so utterly at a Loss, that he could not conceal his Confusion: He held down his Head, and continued silent.²

On one level, the exchange is about the discomfiting of an intellectual snob. Selvin's risible pose as a true-blue Englishman who despises French culture and as an "Antient" is, even in its orthography, outdated and transparent. But where does it leave the protagonist Arabella, who actually believes in romance as true history? The normative character in this episode is clearly Glanville, a man of sense who considers Selvin a joke and Arabella a sad case.

What is at stake, then, is epistemology—the very factual basis upon which we build all our knowledge of the present. Implicitly, *The Female Quixote* argues that fictionality *per se* is not the problem: it is irresponsible fiction, like romance, that is the problem. Already by 1750, Fielding had usurped the honorific title "historian" to describe his activity in writing *Tom Jones*, implying thereby not that his writing was not fiction, but that it was a form of fiction that performed the classical function of being more philosophical (because wider in possibility and scope) than history, confined as it is to real occurrences. While Arabella inhabits a portion of the world given over to *romance*, the characters in the framing narrative are part of the *novel*. Arabella must be dehumoured. She needs to be brought into the world of responsible fictions, from which it is possible for her and for the reader to *learn*. Doubtless, this can only be done at a cost: but contemporary feminist readings tend, in my view, to exaggerate that cost in arguing that romance attitudes confer power and independence upon Arabella.³ They do so, but at the price of solipsism and virtual insanity. Later still, Clara Reeve in her well-known preface to *The Old English Baron* (1777) is still trying to negotiate the territory of responsible fiction. She considers solutions less draconian than banishing romance altogether. *The Castle of Otranto*, she thinks, has combined the narrative entertainment of romance with the ethical direction of these satisfactions to be undertaken by the novel; and her "gothic story" will attempt to follow in Walpole's footsteps. It is for the responsibility of most fiction that Jane Austen eloquently argues in the fifth chapter of *Northanger Abbey* (1818) when she satirises the attitudes of those who continue to think that novel reading is evidence of depravity:

Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which

the press now groans Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much decried . . . there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.⁴

Co-eval with the development of the eighteenth-century novel, then, is a debate about the means by which fiction can make itself responsible and respectable. Where I might wish to disagree with Andrew Varney, rather than merely elaborate on him, is on the terms in which this debate was conducted in its earliest (Defovian) phase. The crux of Varney's argument is that the didactic mode of early British fiction "exists in a sophisticated self-conscious negotiation with the less deliberately improving aspects of narrative writing" (137). Emphasis on the sophistication of Defoe's writing brings Varney into line with, for example, Lincoln Faller, who, in his *Crime and Defoe*, has stressed the dialogism, copiousness and flexibility of Defoe's narratives which enables an unprecedentedly complex reader-response.⁵ In Varney's model, Defoe has to combine exciting narrative with pious moralising that the novelist in him discovers to be operating against the interests of the excitement. An aesthetic vocabulary of "taste" operates as a swing-bridge mediating between the incompatible imperatives of story-telling and didacticism. This is an ingenious and elegant idea, by which I want to be persuaded. I don't find myself fully persuaded by it, however, because it seems just a shade too contemporary in its assumption that "there is clearly a tension between novelistic and moral values" (139) in the period's writing. Complexity and sophistication being commodities more prized by literary critics than naiveté and simplicity, I can see why those who appreciate Defoe would wish to take that line. Does it not result in the final analysis, however, in rejecting an important aspect of what early eighteenth-century writing has to offer? In *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction* (1990), J. Paul Hunter urges us to come to terms with the fact that much period writing is—just is—didactic. Because we ourselves find it impossible to take pleasure in moralistic forms of expression, because "didactic" is one of the most negative adjectives in contemporary usage, we tend to think that the

moralising function is some collective dementia from which the century and its writers inexplicably suffered. Those who are to be singled out for praise as the enduring and the best writers must be found to escape this quicksand in which so many others drowned.

I contend, however, that although we might wish to do so, we cannot read into invisibility the didactic aspects of this period's fiction. *David Simple*, referred to above, is replete with passages of straightforward ethical reflection that the reader must be expected at some level to enjoy, not merely to skip over as an impediment to an otherwise rattling good yarn. Some years ago I wrote an article on *Moll Flanders* arguing that however the modern reader wishes to write off devices like Moll's conversion in Newgate, however the modern reader looks at the outcome of that conversion and is driven to the conclusion that crime *does* pay—so that the Preface, in which the morally improving tendency of the narrative is stressed, comes to seem malfeasant or ironic—nevertheless the modern reader must try to enter more sympathetically into an early eighteenth-century perspective.⁶ My argument was that in a world in which characters are constantly being faced by sin-or-starve predicaments, they had little opportunity to avoid sin and consequent damnation. For Defoe, conversion offered an opportunity to start again, to wipe the slate clean and gain a second chance: and if the result of that was economic success, so much the better. Of course, the argument depends on imagining a world in which damnation is felt along the pulses and in which moral condemnation and legal judgement are routinely visited upon those who could legitimately claim to have no choice: not, in short, the world we live in here and now. Perhaps the point can be brought into sharper focus by looking again at the example from *Roxana* that Varney discusses on pp. 142-43. There has been a storm and Roxana has vowed to reform if she weathers it. She does, and in Varney's words, "she reports what then happened to her state of mind:

The Danger being over, the Fears of Death vanish'd with it; ay, and our Fear of what was beyond Death also; our Sense of the Life we had liv'd, went off, and with our return to Life, our wicked Taste of Life return'd, and we were both the same as before, if not worse.

Good news for the reader. Roxana's brilliant phrase 'our wicked Taste of Life' pins down precisely what imaginative narrative ministered to."

My uptake on this would be that the narrative interest is *not* merely in getting on with the story about Roxana's wicked life. The reader is also interested in a psychological process that he or she has perhaps experienced, whereby when mortal danger recedes, so does fear of damnation. That is the *didactic* point. The reader should be aware of the spiritual danger in foul-weather Christianity. If you can keep the fear of damnation in mind when you are not in any particular proximity to your Maker, you will be a healthier individual spiritually. To Defoe and his readers, this is quite as interesting as any account given of Roxana's fornications—which, in point of fact, recent generations of readers always discover to be disappointingly tame by contemporary standards. Maybe the lesson is: value eighteenth-century writing for what is actually there in it.

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NOTES

¹Sarah Fielding, *The Adventures of David Simple*, ed. Malcolm Kelsall (Oxford: OUP, 1969), bk. IV, ch. II, p. 237.

²Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote; or The Adventures of Arabella*, ed. Margaret Dalziel (Oxford: OUP, 1970; rpt. 1989) 266-67.

³See, for example, Margaret Anne Doody's introduction to the 1989 reprint of Margaret Dalziel's World's Classics edition (above, n2); and Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: OUP, 1986; rpt. 1989) 187-92.

⁴Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis (Oxford: OUP, 1972; rpt. 1975) 58.

⁵Lincoln B. Faller, *Crime and Defoe: A New Kind of Writing* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

⁶Brean S. Hammond, "Repentance: Solution to the Clash of Moralities in *Moll Flanders*," *English Studies* 61 (1980): 329-37.