Book Reviews


Stephen H. Gregg has written a timely and much-needed study of Daniel Defoe. It is remarkable to think that a writer of Defoe’s stature, who is as concerned as he is with the proper attributes of manliness, has not been the subject of a study like this before now. But in Gregg he has found the right person to explore this topic and to contextualize it in a way that makes it as valuable for gender and sexuality studies as it is for Defoe studies themselves. The book is organized simply and revealingly. After an introduction that discusses how deeply Defoe was concerned with the question of manliness, which he placed in opposition to effeminacy, Gregg organizes the material into six chapters. The first two concern polemical works, like *The True-Born Englishman* as well as *The Complete English Tradesman*. Then there are chapters on *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Journal of the Plague Year*, *Captain Singleton*, and *Colonel Jack*. In the midst of these chapters, he discusses a great deal of minor works as well as Defoe’s poetry, and by the end of the study a reader feels that he or she has been in the company of a scholar steeped in the work of Daniel Defoe.

Gregg is steeped as well in a wealth of critical and theoretical material that puts him in touch with cultural, gender, and sexuality studies and makes this work far richer as a result. Gregg has read all the Defoe critics carefully, that is, but he has also read scholars like Srinivas Aravamudan, Alan Bray, Terry Castle, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Hans Turley, and Robyn Wiegman, all of whom expand his perspective and lead him to richer and more thoughtful observations about Defoe than would otherwise be possible.

In addition to manliness per se, Gregg is interested in the question of contrariness in Defoe. As he says in the Introduction, “manliness is shaped by the intermittent tensions and fitful syntheses between a variety of contrary forces in Defoe’s writings: between, for example, commerce and civic humanism; Christian and Classical virtue; patriarchy and companionate marriage; gentility and gentlemanliness;
or between private friendship and public spirit” (14). This notion of contrariness gives shape to this study as a whole and explains some of the more intriguing features of Defoe’s writing on the topic of manliness.

Gregg’s first chapter, “‘Complete’ men, trade and history” begins with a basic contradiction that creates a lot of the energy in Defoe’s writing. “Success in trade was the foundation of national pride,” Gregg says, “and yet was also perceived as the cause of luxurious corruption, and Defoe’s attitudes . . . were deeply bound to this essential problem” (15). In other words, Defoe finds himself at the center of a conundrum about trade: trade is necessary for economic growth and security, but the consumption of luxury goods is also seen as the source of a kind of social corruption that unseats virtue. That leads Defoe, as Gregg explains, in works like his Review (1706) or The Complete English Tradesman (1726-27), to argue that although a tradesman has to court credit in order to be successful, he has also to be able to control himself and not give in to the lewd temptations of luxury. In a way, he is saying that the tradesman must avoid the foppish effeminacy of luxury in favor of the more controlled and more stoic pleasures of manliness.

In Chapter 2, “Born gentlemen and godly manliness,” Gregg talks about the difficulty Defoe sees in gentlemen finding a civic purpose that can save them from the indulgences of luxury. Among other cogent examples, Gregg discusses Moll Flanders’s lover Jemy, who, he says, “will never be anything other than a charming -- if manly and gallant -- layabout” (441). Because Jemy seems allergic to real work, he represents an earlier model of gentility, one that Defoe clearly holds in contempt. In The Compleat English Gentleman, Defoe articulates an ideal of civic virtue, of honesty and integrity; but he also makes it clear at various points in all his works that learning and improvement can lead men of a lower station to an even more complete manly virtue.

“Crusoe, toil and temptation,” Gregg’s third chapter, builds from these observations to a discussion of Defoe’s most well-known character. While one might imagine that manliness is obvious in this account of survival on an isolated island, Gregg argues that “many of Defoe’s choices and situations are, in fact, unmanly or at least potentially so” (59). Gregg then shows how Crusoe is torn between potentially luxurious and utilitarian choices throughout the novel, from early on when Crusoe discusses the temptation to move to the lush interior of the island till later when he is tempted to take pleasure in his bower just when he should be working for his own continued survival. Gregg makes it clear that these sorts of tensions animate the novel in ways that have not been fully examined. He also shows that some of the alternatives that have been outlined by historians like J. G. A. Pocock and others, which are useful in describing some features of early eighteenth-century culture, simply do not work with Defoe. His obsessions are in that way a bit eccentric.

Gregg’s discussion of The Journal of the Plague Year (Chapter 4) makes this point even more forcefully. After looking at the hero H. F.’s own attitudes about what
is happening in London and talking about some of the characters in this perplexing work, Gregg says that in *The Journal of the Plague Year* “the distinction of ideal masculinity – manliness – depends upon the exclusion and demonising of other masculinities, ones associated with Restoration irreligion, irrationality and effeminized superstition. Indeed,” he says, “the *Journal* is explicit that these men not only fail, they are both symptom and cause of the nation’s backsliding towards disorder and plague” (111).

In “Singleton, friendship and secrecy” (Chapter 5), Gregg writes a wonderful account of the friendship between Captain Singleton and his Quaker friend William Walters. Gregg digs into early-eighteenth-century accounts of friendship to give a context for what Defoe represents here; and although he stops short of calling this a homoerotic friendship, he does explain its complexity in terms of friendship, interest, which of course was a concern of Defoe’s, and secrecy. What makes a friendship like this one and others of the time questionable or even lurid is their secrecy. For secrecy, as critics like Eve Sedgwick and others have argued, is almost always a sexual secret in modern Western culture, and we can see the beginnings of this configuration in the early eighteenth century itself. As Gregg argues, “Under ideal conditions, friendship is the catalyst for a spreading network of bonds that encompass the civil and national fabric. However, while emphasising public duty, discussions of male friendship also emphasised private exclusion. This imperative to exchange secrets is at once an ideal, but also a source of suspicion” (129). This insight offers a key to other vexed friendships of the period, and I know that I will be able to use this in some work of my own. I am sure that others will find it as useful to discussions of friendship in the eighteenth century as it is to the full understanding of Daniel Defoe.

Gregg’s final chapter concerns *Colonel Jack*, an antithesis to manliness if ever there was one. As Gregg explains, manliness is about securing agency, and Colonel Jack is about an almost shocking lack of agency. The novel works through some of these issues, as Jack moves from a rebel to a patriot, but it raises other questions along the way. These involve both the status of women, as Jack marries one woman after another, and the status of hierarchy in the conceptions of manliness that Defoe articulates. As Gregg argues, “At the margins of *Colonel Jack* are the ideological aporias of Defoe’s time: the hierarchies between men and women; female sexuality and male agency; hierarchies between subject and ruler; gentility and the meanings of honour; men’s pursuit of wealth. The analogies between and across these elements, and the conflicts that these analogies give rise to, make visible the diverse and contrary ideological forces that shape early-eighteenth-century attitudes to men” (160).

Gregg ends with a Conclusion that returns us to the question of contrariness in Defoe. In this helpful final piece, he looks back and reminds us what has been implicit all along: “these complex and sometimes ambivalent constructions are in effect Defoe’s breath-taking and comprehensive grasp of his culture” (164). I think Stephen H. Gregg has offered us a breath-taking and comprehensive grasp of Defoe on this
crucial question, and the very complexity of his argument means that it will be able to shape our thinking about Defoe for some time to come.

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