
In Leon Guilhamet’s view, recent trends in revisionist history have offered an over-corrective to the previously traditional Whig version of history. Regarding the eighteenth century, he acknowledges that Jonathan Clark has provided a “more balanced view of Tory survival in a Whig age,” but he believes that critics now suffer from a fear that discussing Whig culture might seem “hopelessly old fashioned or even immoral” (12). In response, he proposes “a balanced understanding of Whig achievement, particularly in relation to the novel and Defoe” (12). Guilhamet then asserts that “the ascendency of the Whigs was an important factor in the rise of the novel” (13), thus implicitly returning to part of Ian Watt’s triple-rise theory of the novel’s development. However, in doing so, Guilhamet largely ignores five decades of responses to Watt’s argument.

Guilhamet locates the origins of Whig hegemony in the Civil Wars, the Exclusion Crises, and the Revolution of 1688–89. He rehearses, with rich citations from period texts, the Whig ideals of “liberty,” “private property,” “trade,” “education,” and “sincerity,” and he describes the “Whig heroes,” particularly William III, whom Defoe found so inspiring. He also explains how the “Whig myth of success” united “private enrichment” to “public benefits” (44). Guilhamet next demonstrates how Defoe’s novels indicate that he was “an exponent of Whig culture” (45). In referring throughout the study to “Whig culture,” rather than “Whig ideology,” Guilhamet appears to suggest, in response to revisionist historians, that there definitely was a Whig-dominated culture during this period, rather than merely many strong expressions of Whig ideology. To support this response to revisionist historians would require more historical evidence than Guilhamet offers. However, if we understand Guilhamet’s use of the term “Whig culture” to refer to expressions of “Whig
ideology,” then he does successfully demonstrate how Defoe’s novels are steeped in this ideological discourse.

In his chapter on *Robinson Crusoe*, Guilhamet offers a cogent description of how captivity and deliverance narratives informed the discourses of Whig ideology and how Defoe deploys these in *Robinson Crusoe*. He concludes that the hero’s decision to disobey his father may have resulted in exile and captivity, but that this “fall was fortunate” and that “an adventurous spirit can lead one finally to success” (93). In his analysis of *Captain Singleton*, Guilhamet points out that Defoe follows a similar “Biblical pattern of creation, trial, disobedience, repentance, reconciliation, exile, and covenant” (95), but with a different overall structure. For Guilhamet, “Bob Singleton is the first of Defoe’s protagonists whose captivity is forced on him by his economic circumstances”; moreover, since Singleton’s adventures occur during Stuart rule, we may conclude that “Stuart politics had no answer to Bob’s predicament. But Whig policy did” (110).

As Guilhamet explains in his analysis of *Moll Flanders*, Defoe was “more likely a Court Whig than a Country Whig” (112). He also proposes that in writing this novel, Defoe may have been influenced by the Whig split of 1717–20. Having been attracted to the solid management skills of Stanhope and Sunderland (which resembled those of Godolphin and Harley), Defoe was distressed in 1717 to find Walpole moving against them. As Guilhamet explains, Defoe prized good management: “Behind Defoe’s major novels is a vision of the success that awaits those who can manage their affairs adequately,” although Defoe also recognizes that “[n]o individual can succeed without social assistance” (132). Guilhamet refers to Defoe’s support of the Transportation Act of 1718 in order to rebut critics who might read Moll as a hypocritical or unreliable narrator. However, he does not entirely explain why we should assume that the brilliantly satirical author of *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* was not likely to have been mocking some aspects of Moll’s narrative. Nor does his suggestion that Moll’s love for her husband James as the truest love of her life fully explain why we should not be more skeptical of James’s Catholicism and his gentleman-like indolence. It is certainly possible, for example, to accept a Whig reading of Moll’s diligence and strong management even while viewing James (or “Jemmy,” as she sometimes calls him) as a warning against the Jacobitism to which his name and his religion gesture.

For Guilhamet, “*A Journal of the Plague Year* rationally and calmly presents a map of hell” and “Defoe’s solutions are dependent on Whig culture to implement them” (153). When reading *Colonel Jack*, the reader should ask with respect to the eponymous hero: “How beneficial would his life have been to England had he been instructed in Whig values during his childhood?” (154). Part of Jack’s problem is that knowing his father was a gentleman gives him ambitions to become one himself, “although his concept of what constitutes a gentleman is murky” (155). Guilhamet links this difficulty to Defoe’s exploration in *The Compleat English Gentleman* of the
question of whether or not “a true greatness of soul, a broad heart, noble and generous principles all flow in the veins from the pure fountain of an unmixed race” (qtd. in Guilhamet 155). Only when Jack gives up his life of crime and his allegiance to the Pretender, pledging himself to George I, does he demonstrate “a Whig ideal of gentlemanly behavior, which he also believes is sanctioned by natural law,” following “Defoe’s belief that the virtuous and honorable actions that distinguish the true gentleman must always be in accord with natural law” (171). His return to England at the end of the novel, “with the blessings of a family and sufficient wealth to continue the job of repentance, is as close to the Whig ideal of success as Colonel Jack can hope for” (173).

In *Roxana*, Guilhamet traces Defoe’s belief in the “Whig principles” that “supported traditional marriage.” In particular, the “hard edge of [Roxana's] feminism makes her blind to women’s requirement for the married state.” Thus, “even after her belated marriage, Roxana is unable to reconcile her needs as a caring mother with the immorality of her career as a courtesan.” Because she does not “act as mother and embrace her daughter Susan’s needs,” Roxana is prevented from “accepting a course of action that could lead to deliverance and repentance” (195). Guilhamet largely ignores important feminist-influenced analyses of Defoe’s work. For example, he does not mention Toni Bowers’s groundbreaking study *The Politics of Motherhood* (1996), in which she discusses, with great historical nuance, the political and social critique implicit in Defoe’s representations of motherhood. In his concluding chapter, Guilhamet sums up his argument by asserting that “Defoe discovered in the autobiographies of his protagonists a new life pattern that combined scriptural verities with economic realities and ideals to form a Whig paradigm” (199–200).

As this summary suggests, Guilhamet offers appreciative readings of each of Defoe’s major novels, contextualized against the backdrop of Defoe’s own moral and political writings as well as contemporary discourses of Whig ideology. The background material he provides will be useful for those teaching Defoe’s novels in undergraduate courses, in which students require a basic introduction to the period in which Defoe was writing. Nevertheless, Guilhamet’s primary argument is misleading, and the title of his book exemplifies the problem. Given that the title refers to “the Whig novel,” many contemporary readers will expect some response to the numerous revisions to Watt’s history of the British novel that have appeared in the last few decades. Nevertheless, Guilhamet is oddly silent in response to the many book-length reconsiderations of Watt’s *Rise of the Novel* that have been written since 1986, even though some of these titles appear in his bibliography.

To claim that Defoe was writing “the Whig novel” implies that others were writing Tory, or even Jacobite novels, yet Guilhamet only briefly mentions “Aphra Behn, Delarivière [sic] Manley, and Eliza Haywood.” He follows this abbreviated reference with an observation by Maximillian Novak that suggests “Defoe looked down on these Tory novelists for doing no more than ‘diverting the public’” (11).
Novak’s comment, which appeared in an article published in 1964, represents a mid-twentieth-century tendency to dismiss Tory women political writers as merely diverting rather than as offering a competing novelistic paradigm that scholars, since the mid-1980s, have understood as at least as important as the paradigm of Whig prescriptive realism (to borrow Margaret Anne Doody’s term). Furthermore, the source for Novak’s point about Defoe’s view of Tory novelists (the fourth volume of *A Collection of Miscellany Letters out of Mist’s Weekly Journal* [1727]) has since been de-attributed by Furbank and Owens (Novak 657; Furbank and Owens 144). Guilhamet also fails to acknowledge that these three writers, Behn, Manley, and Haywood, were frequently publishing in the genre of the political secret history; the Whiggish Defoe would certainly have been aware of the political implications of these Tory secret histories and proto-novelistic texts. Moreover, to distinguish what Defoe is doing in the “subgenre” of the Whig novel (Guilhamet’s term) without carefully comparing his work to the parallel and competing “subgenre” of the Tory novel offers us an unexpectedly one-sided version of the partisan development of the British novel and Defoe’s role in it.

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