Daniel Defoe’s works drip blood. Ruined corpses smear the pages of *Robinson Crusoe*; murder and the gallows drive the narrative engines of *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*; the cries of slaves reverberate throughout *Captain Singleton* and *Colonel Jack*. It is perhaps odd, as Oliver Lindner notes, that there has been no scholarly monograph that exhaustively treats the importance of violence to Defoe’s fiction. Lindner’s “*Matters of Blood*” seeks to bridge this gap, and succeeds, up to a point. But Lindner’s volume also highlights the problems presented by such an approach: the term “violence” is notoriously difficult to define and to limit, and Lindner’s broad-based perspective may not provide a narrow enough lens for examining Defoe’s fictional corpus. Lindner’s study appears to assume that gendered violence, military force, crime, and colonialism are linked in ways that Defoe himself did not necessarily see. This assumption also risks bewildering readers with a cascade of adjectival constructions: violence here may be “instrumental,” “expressive,” “interpersonal,” “intra-group,” “colonial,” “absolute,” and “total,” among other things. Thus Lindner’s book, though based on persuasive readings of individual texts, scatters its attention across too many varieties and conceptions of violence to make the contribution it might otherwise have made.

“*Matters of Blood*” is a version of Lindner’s 2009 doctoral dissertation, and while it is valuable to have his research more readily available in this published format, one wishes that additional revisions had been made; the text is encumbered by, for example, a lengthy literature review at the outset, one that many readers will wish to pass over. Lindner would have done well to cut, condense, and redistribute this material. There are significant analyses here, however, particularly when Lindner turns his attention to two crucial questions: the role of violence in the political sphere and the relationship between violence and gender. Lindner concludes, on the one
hand, that violence plays a key role in constructing and imagining difference: the Other is always more violent than the self. On the other hand, Lindner reminds us that masculinity depends to some degree on fantasies of violence and of a longing for invulnerability. Unfortunately these insights are somewhat obscured by a parade of theories of violence drawn from thinkers ranging from Thomas Hobbes to Joan Copjec. The chapter also explores medical and political discussions of violence, technological enhancements of imperial conquest, dismemberment, piracy, cannibalism, criminality, dueling, and military demobilization. All of these topics are, of course, important, but this carnival of descriptive terms becomes exhausting, and one looks in vain for a clear unifying thread.

Lindner is on surer footing when he turns to Defoe’s novels themselves; his discussions of Defoe’s less-popular fictions are particularly noteworthy. He begins, however, with a lengthy chapter on the first two novels in the Robinson Crusoe series. This chapter, “Confronting the Savage Other,” discusses a wide range of issues, but most of the ideas about The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures presented here have been ably handled elsewhere. The chapter also considers the Farther Adventures, and here it is more compelling, particularly the handling of the sequences in Madagascar that Lindner convincingly reads as an emblem of the failure of reason to control passion—a claim that echoes Dennis Todd’s recent reading of the first Crusoe novel (37—40). Lindner’s most compelling argument is to suggest that, for Defoe, violence is what erupts when passion overtakes reason; reason governs passion, and state violence, presumably, steps in where reason fails. On the whole, the chapter’s claims that there are forms of rationalized and regulatory violence that are contrasted in these novels with the threatening and chaotic violence of cannibals are persuasive but unsurprising and not very original. It was disappointing to see no mention of the final Crusoe volume, the Serious Reflections, which explicitly handles questions about violence and conversion in ways Lindner might have found helpful and which have not yet received wide critical attention.

Lindner is able to stake out more distinctive positions in the three middle chapters in the volume, which treat several Defoe novels that have only recently received sustained critical attention: Captain Singleton, Memoirs of a Cavalier, and Colonel Jack. “Conquest and Piracy,” discussing Singleton, would seem to offer ripe grounds for Lindner’s theses: the eponymous protagonist engages in mutiny, enslaves Africans, slaughters savages, and undertakes various sorts of piracy, often in the surprising company of the Quaker pirate, William Walters. Lindner’s commentary here is sometimes illuminating and builds helpfully on recent scholarship on piracy. However, his short discussion of Quaker William is rather disappointing. William, famously, directs and partakes in piratical adventures while eschewing personal violence—he is one of the more suggestive and enigmatic characters in Defoe’s oeuvre. Lindner’s analysis acknowledges the authority that William wields without exploring his peculiar willingness to profit from violence in which he will not partake;
neither does it examine William’s Janus-faced approach to slavery. Surely if there is a site where we might attempt to map out Defoe’s complex attitude towards violence, it would be here?

Or perhaps it ought to be in Defoe’s most direct and extended novelistic treatment of military affairs, *Memoirs of a Cavalier*. Lindner’s chapter on this novel, “The Glories of Warfare,” offers his most focused and original insights, featuring a useful discussion of “military masculinity” that supplements recent attention to Defoe’s conception of manliness in the work of Stephen Gregg and others. While Lindner does cover some familiar ground in his discussion of Gustavus Adolphus and his modernized army, there are also intriguing reflections on the culture of dueling and the role of violence in imagining an ideal British manhood. He also offers in passing interesting ruminations on the depiction of wounds in this novel, as well as reflections on popular politics and mobs as disruptive political forms. This discussion might have been helpfully contrasted with Defoe’s praise of mobs in his political poetry, and some of Lindner’s claims are dubious due to this neglect. But the distinction between disciplined and valorous forms of military manhood is useful, and Lindner’s discussion of the distinction is nuanced and compelling. Much might have been done to foreground the strongest elements of this chapter, but it is this book’s most significant contribution to Defoe scholarship.

Lindner then turns his attention to *Colonel Jack* in “The Merits of Legitimised Violence.” While his treatment of slavery covers ground already conceptualized more powerfully by, among others, George Boulukos, this chapter also begins to develop an interesting line of argumentation about gender, noting the way that violence against women props up masculine authority. Lindner develops this idea in his final chapter, “Female Victims, Female Agents,” where he offers an intriguing discussion of Defoe’s female protagonists as both victims and perpetrators of violence.

I wish the book had opted to pare back discussion of Defoe’s fiction to clear more space for his nonfiction and poetry; those less-discussed texts would have provided a rich and less-trammelled field of inquiry. Lindner might have considered the ambivalence toward the mob in Defoe’s poetry, for example. A full revision of the dissertation might also have encouraged Lindner to reorganize the book around concepts rather than individual texts. The current organization forces a certain amount of repetition while also lumping together in a single chapter miscellaneous observations about texts. Lindner’s theoretical treatment of violence at the outset gives him a rich vocabulary with which to work, and some of these concepts might have enabled a different approach to the material; military masculinity, for instance, might have been traced through multiple novels or even across different genres. Here the critical frameworks are not well integrated; an effort to connect his arguments about wounding and abjection
While Defoe’s bloody canon is well worth examining in light of the categories and concepts Lindner raises, I cannot say that this book will be essential reading for everyone with an interest in Defoe or in violence; it is neither polished nor focused enough to make a striking contribution to the field. However, scholars with a special interest in Defoe’s writings on colonialism, gender, state formation, war, or slavery will find much of this material worth perusing, particularly the material on Memoirs of a Cavalier.

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WORKS CITED

