Anglo-American literary criticism has a strong tradition of close reading, which is evident in many textbook series and readers’ guides offered to college students, teachers, and general readers. This emphasis on “practical criticism” is apparent in Palgrave Macmillan’s Analysing Texts series, which has already produced more than twenty books written to introduce key authors’ works in English literary history by focusing on the analysis of pivotal extracts from their works. The aim of the series is to provide tools for the readers so that they can better “enjoy, understand and analyse literature” (x). The books in the series are divided into two sections. The first and main one concentrates on closely analysing passages of text and explaining the major features and themes of the works in question. The second part consists of chapters about the author and his or her life and works, connecting the works to larger developments in literature. Furthermore, there is a sample of critics’ views, summarizing prominent trends in the scholarly study of the author. Nicholas Marsh is the general editor of the series and he has also written Daniel Defoe: The Novels, as well as many other titles published in the series.

As Marsh notes in his first chapter, Defoe’s novels have produced a wide variety of opinions and interpretations, and therefore he asserts that the purpose of the book is to recapture “the original experience of reading the novels themselves for the first time” and “to take a fresh look at Defoe’s fictions” (3). I take this statement as a signpost for students who have never read Defoe’s novels and who are looking for a companion not only to guide them through this challenging task, but also to offer new perspectives for a returning reader. Marsh has chosen to deal with only three of Defoe’s novels, Robinson Crusoe (1719), Moll Flanders (1722), and Roxana (1724), still supposedly the best-known and most frequently studied fictions; yet there is no clear explanation why he has selected these and not, for instance, Captain Singleton (1720) or Colonel Jack (1722), both of which also include important subjects from a modern point of view, such as colonialism, slavery, and the question of “the Other.” Unfortunately, neither of the latter two...
novels is currently available in an affordable student edition, a situation which will continue to limit the number and selection of Defoe’s novels studied.

The first part of Daniel Defoe: The Novels is divided into six chapters which have similar structures: first, three or four short extracts from the novels and their analysis; then comparative discussions and/or conclusions, followed by a review of methods used in the analysis; and finally suggested further work. Apart from the first extract that Marsh offers from each novel, which are introductory excerpts intended to set the agendas for the overall discussions, the extracts are chosen for their thematic significance. In relation to Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, and Roxana, Marsh analyzes conscience and repentance, society and economics, women and patriarchy, and instability and the outsider. The analyses are detailed, concentrating on paragraph divisions, paragraph-by-paragraph summaries, aspects of sentence-structure, diction, presentation of speech, and other linguistic and formal features.

The book, therefore, provides an informative guide to the Defovian novel that will enable students to study and understand its literary characteristics. Interestingly, what previous scholars have proved in more general terms, Marsh’s analysis shows through detailed close reading. For instance, as he deals with conscience and repentance in Robinson Crusoe, Marsh notices the fluidity of Defoe’s method of narration: the chosen extract “dazzles with many elements but will not be pinned down” (36), and the episode Marsh studies provides us “with several simultaneous narratives” (39). Thus, we are in the middle of the mystery of the elusive Defoe; there is no clear authorial voice or point of view and, therefore, the interpretations are many.

Marsh’s analyses are enjoyable to read and are in accord with our prevalent critical preoccupations. For instance, after analyzing repentance in the novels, Marsh concludes that there is no unequivocal view of spiritual experience in Defoe’s fiction; instead “both morality and religion seem to exist in a rather drifting, intermittent, and detached form in the novels” (58). He also concentrates on how all three protagonists, Robinson, Moll, and Roxana, are preoccupied with money, earning and saving, although economic activity always seems to involve immorality, and how Defoe is highly critical of the social and commercial conventions governing gender roles, sexuality, and marriage. Perhaps more than is usual in extant critical readings, Marsh emphasizes Defoe’s ironic, even satiric, tone of writing, which is one of the reasons for the existence of manifold interpretations. He also underlines the unpredictability of Defoe’s world: “events, wealth, possession, activity, people, and legal or contractual agreements are utterly unpredictable” (92). The characters live in a world where it is almost impossible to predict the circumstances of tomorrow: it is a world dominated by uncertainty and change.

Marsh also deems it necessary to consider the milieu in which Defoe wrote. In the second part of the book, Marsh supplies contextual material—historical and literary background and a sample of critical views to support his analyses and to suggest other perspectives to be considered when studying Defoe. He offers a
succinct life of Defoe and covers very briefly some of Defoe’s other works. In the last chapter we find a sample of contemporary critical views that underpin the many different approaches and interpretations that we have of Defoe’s novels. The critical excerpts are taken from the writings of Miriam Lerenbaum (portrayals of female experience), Virginia Ogden Birdsal (characters as “perpetual seekers”), John J. Richetti (the overall structures of the novels), Ellen Pollak (gender and society), Michael Seidel (imagination and “fiction within fiction” in Robinson Crusoe), and Katherine Clark (revelation and redemption). All of these views are central to Defoe scholarship, but the choices could surely have been otherwise. In particular, classic studies such as G. A. Starr’s Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography (1965) and J. Paul Hunter’s The Reluctant Pilgrim (1966) still offer core analyses of the religious aspects of Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders, and Max Novak’s Economics and the Fiction of Daniel Defoe (1962) serves as a pivotal text for understanding the economic contexts of Defoe’s novels.

As a teacher, it is motivating to read the sections at the end of each chapter called “Suggested Work,” in which Marsh offers a set of assignments for students. One of them asks students to make a detailed study of an extract, taking into account Defoe’s portrayal of members of different social classes and the attitudes associated with them. A thought-provoking question is posed: “Is there any evidence that a person can be liberated from a class attitude?” (99). The interaction between text and contexts and the overall method of close reading makes this kind of question difficult for students to answer. How do we deal with the historical distance if the purpose is to examine “the original experience of reading the novels themselves for the first time,” as noted earlier? To what extent do we expect students to connect their initial reading with historical, cultural, and social contexts? And, further, is it impossible to write a textbook or a study guide which connects the text and context from the beginning and does not see them as separate parts or stages of the process? These are important methodological and pedagogical questions, which have an effect on how we construct views and ideas about literature.

All in all, I find Marsh’s readings of Defoe’s novels inspiring, although it could be said that he explains too much for the reader. However, our “first job is to study the text” (225), as Marsh reminds us. This is rather good advice for students. It is only after reading the novels that it is useful to approach critical work about them, such as Daniel Defoe: The Novels.

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WORKS CITED


