Reading Daniel Defoe in Twenty-First Century American High School Textbooks

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EARLY in the semester, a student in my course on eighteenth-century British women’s travel narratives stated that Jane Austen should be on the syllabus because Austen “wrote old literature too.” This comment prompted a class discussion on how surprised many students were, upon taking the class, to learn that there were so many early-modern British women writers. In speaking with colleagues about this seemingly common misconception, others came to light: students often refer to works written before 1800, for example, as “Old English,” especially if those works retain their original orthography or punctuation. Moreover, students frequently fail to differentiate between literary genres or understand when they emerged, were popular, or faded: for example, some students identify epic poems like Beowulf or travel narratives like Lady Montagu’s Turkish Embassy Letters as novels, a catch-all term for lengthier works. Furthermore, these students can be reluctant to change their conception of early literature and culture.

These discussions with colleagues about freshmen’s misconceptions of literature written before the twentieth century, along with concerns about students’ inability to engage critically with that literature, led to my interest in how high school British-literature textbooks represent early literary works, specifically seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry and prose. A review and critical analysis of high school literature anthologies provided evidence to explain the disconnect between the high school and college literature classrooms and to clarify the nature of the obstacles faced by first-year students attempting to produce sophisticated analyses of early-modern literary works in a postsecondary context. From misrepresentations of texts and literary history to lack of promotion of critical thinking and literary analysis, the content of these textbooks makes it clear that first-year college students taking courses in literature from the Anglo-Saxon through the Victorian periods must undergo a paradigm shift, a process that involves overcoming resistance to a different version of
conceptualization of what they already believe they know, as well as gathering new skills for learning.

This essay analyzes four high school literature textbooks currently in use, focusing on their treatment of Daniel Defoe and his works as a case study. It does so in order to establish how these textbooks represent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature, to catalogue textbook-related problems experienced by first-year students enrolled in postsecondary British literature courses, and to propose strategies that can be implemented by college English faculty to help incoming students overcome obstacles in reading and analyzing literature.

The Literature Textbook in the High School Classroom

Textbooks, generally presented to students as authoritative and objective sources of facts, are often the primary source of teaching material in the high school classroom (Sosniak and Perlman; Applebee). With large budget cuts to education throughout the United States, and funds for supplementary books and materials drying up, textbooks are likely to continue to function as the primary learning tool in the high school setting. However, as Christine E. Sleeter and Carl A. Grant warn in their article on the marginalization of minority groups in textbooks, these sources frequently provide students with “only one version of reality. That version embodies certain interests, reifies certain interpretations and value judgments, and gives prominence to some pieces of knowledge while rendering others invisible” (97). Certainly, not all students will accept or cling to this single version of reality; however, the textbook can still distort the perception of resistant readers, since “it withholds, obscures, and renders unimportant many ideas and areas of knowledge” (Sleeter and Grant 97). As such, it is not surprising that students may initially oppose new readings or different interpretations of texts or feel intellectually threatened when asked to consider a new framework for a work of literature that unsettles the paradigm acquired from high school literary textbooks.

In a comprehensive study of textbooks conducted in the 1990s, involving seven different textbook series used in grades 7 through 12, Arthur Applebee found that for 63 percent of the public high school classes and for almost 80 percent of the Catholic high school classes studied, the textbook is the main source of classroom material (“Literature Instruction” 54). Examining the content of these textbooks, Applebee noted that the material in many British literature textbooks assigned to juniors and seniors is arranged chronologically, whereas the textbooks for grades 7 through 10 are typically arranged according to genre (“High School Literature Anthologies” 8). 97 percent of the selections in the textbooks are contextualized by a brief biography of the author, and 93 percent of the British literature textbooks provided additional social or historical background for students (37). Most relevant to this study are the
most commonly anthologized works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature, with numbers after each title indicating in how many of the seven different textbook series they appear: *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (7), *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (7), *Gulliver’s Travels* (6), *A Journal of the Plague Year* (5), and *A Modest Proposal* (4) (“High School Literature Anthologies” 64–65). With the exception of *A Modest Proposal*, these texts are presented to students as excerpts from the original.

Because the presentation of literary texts has an immediate impact on how students learn to read and analyze those works, it is essential that postsecondary instructors become familiar with the kind of knowledge these textbooks are, or are not, teaching. As A. Graham Down of the Council for Basic Education notes, “Textbooks, for better or worse, dominate what students learn. They set the curriculum, and often the facts learned, in most subjects. For many students, textbooks are their first and sometimes only early exposure to books and to reading” (viii). Since textbooks hold such an authoritative position in high school courses, it is imperative that postsecondary instructors investigate what these books teach students during earlier stages of their education. Evaluating the standard literature anthologies used to educate high school students in early-modern British literature, with a focus on excerpt selection, authorial biographies, and historical topics discussed in relation to the selections, will elucidate the types of skill sets that most first-year students bring to the college classrooms, thereby identifying the kinds of skills that must be mastered if students are to succeed in the college literature classroom.

While Applebee and others provide an overview of literature textbooks, this essay, as noted earlier, focuses on a specific case study, that of Daniel Defoe and the excerpts of his works *A Journal of the Plague Year* and “The Education of Women” in four standard literature textbooks currently in use at the secondary level that are produced by three prominent publishers: Holt’s *Elements of Literature: Essentials of British and World Literature* (2005), Holt’s *Elements of Literature: Essentials of British and World Literature Teacher Wraparound Edition* (2009), Prentice Hall Literature: *The British Tradition* (2007), and Glencoe’s *The Reader’s Choice: British Literature Teacher Wraparound Edition* (2007). I analyze how these textbooks situate Defoe and his works by first answering a series of questions:

1. Which of Defoe’s works are selected for inclusion in the textbook and which portions of those works are reproduced?
2. What historical and cultural information is provided in the introduction and notes to frame the excerpts of Defoe works?
3. Which literary works by other authors are paired with excerpts from Defoe’s works?
4. How is Defoe presented as an author in the paratextual matter that surrounds the excerpts from his works?

I then consider how the various elements used to situate Defoe and his works in these textbooks combine to construct a distinct version of the life and writings of one
literary figure in particular as well as of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors more generally. I also identify the skills that students learn, and fail to learn, through the reading and analysis of these contextualized excerpts.

Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Works in the High-School Literature Textbook

To make sense of Defoe’s place in the secondary school English classroom, some context is needed on the format and overall content of these textbooks. First, the four British literature high school textbooks under discussion are prepared for senior high school students and thus aim to teach higher-order critical thinking skills such as analysis, critique, and evaluation. Second, all four textbooks are organized chronologically, although the Holt (2009) gives instructors various other organizational schema, such as genre and theme, and provides lists of the texts divided accordingly.¹ The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are consistently grouped in the same unit, with date ranges from 1625–1798 (Prentice Hall), 1640–1780 (Glencoe), and 1660–1800 (Holt 2005, 2009). Within these larger units, the texts are often grouped under smaller headings, which may be generic like Holt’s (2009) “The Rise of the Novel,” topical like Holt’s (2005) “Political Points of View,” or specifically historical like Glencoe’s “The English Enlightenment and Neoclassicism” and Prentice Hall’s “A Nation Divided.” In addition, several of the textbooks contain special sections in which students are asked to compare literary works, including texts from other time periods or other parts of the world.

Although the emphasis on the historical nature of the literature is apparent in the overall chronological schema, such a range of organizational strategies within the units increases the possibility that students will encounter seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British texts in a variety of contexts. This emphasis is reinforced at the opening of each unit, which provides a timeline and introductory essay on important world and literary events of the period, giving students a broader historical perspective in which to view the literature. Each of the textbooks covers the English Civil War, the Restoration, the Enlightenment, and major trends in literature, and each touches on religious issues and cultural values of the period. While the various introductions highlight certain events and ideas more than others, there is an overall importance placed on situating the texts in the unit within a specific historical framework.

There seems to be a standard collection of core writers and works in all four textbooks, many of which are cited in Applebee’s study: Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels and A Modest Proposal, Pepys’s Diary, Defoe’s Journal of the Plague Year, and Pope’s The Rape of the Lock.² The other works included vary widely from textbook to textbook. In the Holt (2005) edition, the only Defoe text used is his essay “The Education of
Women” and the only Swift text is *A Modest Proposal*. The Holt (2009) edition, however, adds excerpts from *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Gulliver’s Travels* while retaining the other pieces by Swift and Defoe. As such, Holt seems to adopt the core set of texts of British literature for students in their newest edition, and Glencoe and Prentice Hall’s lists mirror these. In addition, from its 2005 edition to the 2009 edition, Holt added considerably to its selection of eighteenth-century literature, expanding what was a very small group of excerpts to one comparable to the others.³ It is not clear exactly how these “standard” texts were chosen, although, as I will explore shortly, these texts are fragmented narratives and easily segmented, making them easier to excerpt.⁴

**The Place of Defoe’s Works in the High School Literature Textbook**

Where a text is situated in an anthology affects how the reader perceives its thematic elements and historical contextualization. In the Holt (2009) and Prentice Hall textbooks, Defoe’s fictional *A Journal of the Plague Year* is paired with an excerpt from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* about the Great Fire of London, enabling students to compare and contrast an actual diary with a fictional autobiographical narrative. This allows them to assess the realistic nature of Defoe’s first-person narrator, H. F., while comparing the two authors’ reconstructions of a single historical event. Moreover, Prentice Hall explicitly connects the 1660s plague that Defoe writes about with the Great Fire of London, which followed only a year later. Holt (2009) also provides some background on the plague and Defoe’s sources for the text, so the pairing of *A Journal of the Plague Year* with Pepys’s diary makes historical sense in demonstrating the hardships London faced during that time. However, it might be questionable to pair a nonfictional diary with a historical fictional journal so convincingly written that, as Benjamin Pauley notes, “students have to be reminded that ‘H. F.’ is not Defoe” (106). Such a pairing might have some unintended consequences for students because it could impede their understanding of the narrative work Defoe was doing in reconstructing the plague from secondhand accounts almost 60 years after the event, unlike Pepys, who wrote about his personal experience soon after the Great Fire.

The Glencoe textbook, in contrast, removes *A Journal of the Plague Year* from its historical context and instead focuses on thematic issues relating to how society at that time dealt with panic, disease, and death. Defoe’s work is placed alongside excerpts from *The Demon in the Freezer* by Richard Preston (2003), *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides (431 B.C.E.), and *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1947) in a special section entitled “Comparing Literature across Time and Place.” Together, these four texts construct a narrative of the ways in which different societies respond to disease and death and the ensuing threat of mass hysteria (although the emphasis on the modern experience is noticeable given that two of the four selections
were written after 1900). In this way, *A Journal of the Plague Year* becomes one episode in an apparently transhistorical narrative about human nature in the face of tragedy. Unfortunately, the Glencoe textbook does not offer any contextual background before each of the four selections. While this allows for a more fluid reading of the excerpted texts, it removes *A Journal of the Plague Year* from its historical context. As a result, students might not have a chance to discuss, for example, the journal’s ties to Enlightenment scientific inquiry and objective first-person narration.

In both Holt editions, Defoe’s essay “The Education of Women” is included to help the reader reconstruct the social and political plight of women in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Britain. Paired with an excerpt from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the poem “To the Ladies” by Mary, Lady Chudleigh, Defoe’s essay gives students an early male view on the education and rights of women. The editors of the Holt (2009) edition go further, stressing that Defoe’s stance was controversial for his time and implying that his own lack of “standard education” might have had something to do with his advocacy of women’s right to education (674). Reading both Defoe’s and Wollstonecraft’s essays and Lady Chudleigh’s poem, students can begin to compare and contrast the sentiments expressed on the status of women in the last decades of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unfortunately, as will later be considered in greater detail, the Holt editions exclude a large part of Defoe’s argument in “The Education of Women,” misrepresenting his case.

**Daniel Defoe in the High School Literature Textbook**

The biographical sketch of Defoe that precedes selections from his works in each textbook further illuminates the historical and social environment in which he wrote. A biography of Defoe is a complicated matter, as scholars of the eighteenth century well know. Though Paula Backscheider (*Daniel Defoe: His Life*), Maximillian E. Novak (*Daniel Defoe, Master of Fictions: His Life and Ideas*), and John Richetti (*The Life of Daniel Defoe*) have each devoted hundreds of pages to Defoe’s biography, many uncertainties remain; distilling the life of such an enigmatic author as Defoe into a few paragraphs is even more difficult. To that end, some allowances can be made for the editorial choice to highlight the more sensational parts of Defoe’s life, making him more memorable to high school students while still providing them with a fairly accurate account of who he was as a person and an author.

The brief biographies of Defoe vary from textbook to textbook, but there are general trends they all follow: all discuss Defoe as an unsuccessful entrepreneur and note his many and varied careers (his spy work is almost always granted a place of prominence), and *Robinson Crusoe* is always declared his “breakthrough” work. The Prentice Hall and both Holt editions mention Defoe adding the aristocratic “De” to
his name, giving students insight into his socioeconomic aspirations. The Holt editions reference some of his more colorful works on glass manufacturing, the history of the devil, and choosing a wife, while the Glencoe edition touches on his brief time in the pillory that led to the composition of his satirical poem *A Hymn to the Pillory*. The Holt editions point out the irony that although Defoe published prolifically, he is almost always remembered only for *Robinson Crusoe*, a claim reiterated in the Prentice Hall biography, which alludes only to *Moll Flanders* as his other major text. Most of the textbooks highlight Defoe's vast knowledge and expansive body of work, hopefully sparking students' interest in who Defoe was as an author and as a significant contributor to late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British society.

However, the Prentice Hall biography misrepresents not just Defoe and his work, but eighteenth-century readers and publishers as well. It states, “During his lifetime, Defoe’s books were considered so realistic that they were sold as nonfiction. In fact, the first-person narrators were so convincing that Defoe was even accused of ‘forging a story, and imposing it on the world for truth’” (502). As scholars of eighteenth-century literature know, Defoe did intentionally present a number of his imaginative texts as works of nonfiction, not even claiming them as his own, which is why an authoritative list of his works is nearly impossible to produce. Instead of informing students about the frequent mistrust of fiction in the eighteenth century and setting forth the reasons why Defoe might present his fictional novels as nonfiction, students are given the impression that eighteenth-century booksellers and readers were not savvy enough to distinguish between fictional and nonfictional genres or that some misunderstanding led to Defoe’s works being sold as nonfiction. Thus, not only do students miss an integral part of literary history, they receive a false impression of the intelligence of eighteenth-century printers, publishers, and readers.

Additionally, the short biography in the Prentice Hall edition adds to a subtle but common thread that runs through the majority of the textbooks. The Prentice Hall and Holt (2005, 2009) textbooks construct a gendered view of literary history, particularly where the English novel is concerned. Prentice Hall claims that Defoe “practically invented the modern realistic novel” (502), while Holt (2005) declares that “[b]y the mid-eighteenth century, people were writing—and others, including women, were eagerly buying (or borrowing)—long fictional narratives called novels” (424). The 2009 Holt edition is slightly more inclusive, stating that *Robinson Crusoe* is considered “by some” to be the first English novel, then listing other early novels by Fielding, Richardson, and Sterne, but also adding that women writers “also entered the literary arena for the first time,” citing Behn, Haywood, and Burney (533). These statements effectively overlook the literary work done by early-modern women writers before and after the Restoration and reaffirm the centrality of the male author as the originator of the novel. Of the four textbooks, Glencoe is the only one to discuss a woman as an early novelist, stating, “[Aphra Behn] wrote one of the first novels by an English author, *Oroonoko; or the History of the Royal Slave*” (542). Considering that no
lengthy works of prose fiction written by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women are excerpted in any of the textbooks, it is no wonder that many students are surprised to learn how many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century female authors wrote early English novels.\(^5\)

**A Journal of the Plague Year in the High School Literature Textbook**

The textbooks containing an excerpt from *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Glencoe, Prentice Hall, Holt 2009) strip away the historicity of the physical text by standardizing spelling, capitalization, and italicization to fit present-day English standards. For example, Defoe’s “tho’” is changed to “though”; italicized names such as *Algate* and *White Chapel* are changed to Roman type, with *White Chapel* compounded to one word; quotation marks are placed around dialogue; and only proper nouns and words at the beginnings of sentences are capitalized. By removing an important part of the compositional and print history of this and other texts, the editors have ensured that students will have no exposure to the ongoing evolution of printing and writing practices in Britain. As the textbook presents it, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722, has the precise same grammatical, orthographic, and typographic qualities as a text published in the 1800s or 1900s. While it would be difficult for textbooks to reprint a photo-facsimile of the original text in every case, reproducing the original text as closely as possible is a ready way for students to contextualize a piece of writing historically, sensing its alterity and “pastness.” In his article “Teaching the Text(ual),” Andrew Ettin argues that the “estrangement” brought about by the “orthographic texture of an old-spelling edition” visually reminds students that the work is a product of a cultural context different than their own (646). Moreover, college-level students are expected to read texts with many of the original compositional and printing features intact. Publishers such as Penguin and Norton usually reproduce texts with the original punctuation, spelling, and typography, and these are often the texts that students read in the college English classroom. Additionally, the often-added page of “Notes on the Text” in these editions makes clear which edition of the original text is used and notes any changes made to the orthography, capitalization and italicization (among other things) of the copy text, making the editing process transparent to the reader.

Modernization of excerpts from *A Journal of the Plague Year* in high school literature textbooks includes changes to original punctuation. Interestingly, each textbook makes note of familiar features of Defoe’s writing style, describing it as “plain” (Holt 2009 556), “clear” (Glencoe 622), “energetic,” and “detailed” (Prentice Hall 502), but then each textbook alters his style by modernizing his punctuation to reflect current conventions. For example, in passages in the original text where longer sentences are connected with a number of semicolons, as is the norm in eighteenth-
century prose, the editors alter the punctuation to produce a series of shorter sentences, which is presumably easier for students to negotiate. A section of Defoe’s original text reads:

They told him they had no Lodging that they could spare, but one Bed, up in the Garret, and that they could spare that Bed but for one Night, some Drovers being expected the next Day with Cattle; so, if he would accept of that Lodging, he might have it, which he did; so a Servant was sent up with a Candle with him, to shew him the Room; he was very well dress’d, and look’d like a Person not used to lie in a Garret, and when he came to the Room he fech’d a deep Sigh, and said to the Servant, I have seldom lain in such a Lodging as this; (70)

The Holt (2009) textbook breaks this one sentence into three:

They told him they had no lodging that they could spare but one bed up in the garret, and that they could spare the bed for one night, some drovers being expected the next day with cattle; so, if he would accept of that lodging, he might have it, which he did. So a servant was sent up with a candle with him to show him the room. He was very well dressed, and looked like a person not used to lie in a garret; and when he came to the room he fetched a deep sigh, and said to the servant, “I have seldom lain in such a lodging as this.” (561)

This kind of editorial practice is problematic for several reasons. First, by altering sentence structure in early works, editors prevent high school students from learning to navigate proficiently seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose. These students then struggle in college when they are assigned to read seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature. Second, the moment the original sentence structure is changed, the reproduced work fails to represent accurately Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Instead, it becomes the editors’ interpretation of the original work. Ettin notes “the allegation that [a text has] merely ‘modernized’ punctuation implies that the amended version is the equivalent of the [original] text” (646), which he claims is patently false. Emendations to punctuation, he demonstrates, can change the tone or meaning of a work. Other scholarship on textual editing suggests that when a text is edited for nonspecialists like students, readability is a key guide for editorial decisions concerning accidentals. Leah S. Marcus argues that some early-modern spellings and punctuation that might be difficult for nonspecialists should be modernized, although she also advocates for “intermingling textual and historical notes [about variants] as a way of calling attention to the historicity of all the elements of the text” (1075). What is most troubling is that students are not informed that these changes have taken place. Mentioning that all aspects of the text have been modernized and why, perhaps in the historical-background section preceding the text, would at least highlight the changes in language and print culture for students.
The fragmented narrative of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which Defoe partially composed by combining oral stories, written accounts, and other historical records, seems to be slightly easier to excerpt than most linear narratives. Still, finding a chunk of text to represent the whole is difficult. The excerpt included in the Glencoe edition tells the story of H. F. visiting the pit of bodies behind the church, beginning with “I went all the first part of the time freely about the streets” (625) and ending with “for coffins were not to be had for the prodigious numbers that fell in such a calamity as this” (627). This excerpt, focusing on horror and death within the city of plague-ridden London, is the only one out of the four textbooks that presents a single passage of the text rather than piecing an excerpt together from several different sections of this work.

Fragmenting *A Journal of the Plague Year* rather than presenting a single section of it, the Holt (2009) edition’s excerpts thoroughly disrupt the substance and structure of the piece; moreover, how the pieces of text are presented does not permit students to understand how the form and content of the text work together to produce its realism. In the Holt (2009) textbook, there are three separate section headings followed by a small excerpt from the text: “The Infection Spreads,” “Dismal Scenes,” and “Escape from Quarantine.” Initially, this strategy seems to provide students with a broader view of the various societal issues stemming from the plague that Defoe brings to light in the text. However, the first section, “The Infection Spreads,” is taken from near the end of *A Journal of the Plague Year* when H. F. discusses how the doctors, looking back, begin to understand how the infection spread so quickly. The editors of the Holt (2009) textbook thus present the people of the time as knowing how the infection spreads from the start, when Defoe makes clear in his text that the exact opposite occurred. The “Dismal Scenes” section jumps to an earlier part of the narrative with H. F. walking the streets, hearing about the suicide of an alderman, and describing the painful conditions of the plague that pushed people to commit “self-murder.” The last section, “Escaping Quarantine,” comes from an even earlier point in the text in which H. F. describes how a sick man pretends to be well in order to stay a night at an inn and ends up infecting everyone residing there. In the Holt (2009) edition, these stories construct a broader view of the issues presented in Defoe’s text than do the other textbooks. However, in reproducing them out of chronological order, the editors take away from the historical nature and structure of the story. After all, when reading the full text, readers experience the events of the plague more or less chronologically with H. F., and his digressions and stories add to the overall realistic unfolding of the narrative. By contrast, when reading nonchronological segments, students do not learn how to navigate a complex text that digresses and returns to the main plot as the narrator weaves his way through the narrative. Instead, sections are separated and labeled for them, which also removes an opportunity for students to identify and analyze the text’s themes on their own.
The four textbooks provide questions along the way to guide students’ analyses of the text. While each textbook uses a different name for this section — “Reading Strategy,” “Literary Analysis,” or “Literary Focus” — the objectives are the same: to direct students to parts of the text and either check for their comprehension or have them make connections to larger ideas. For example, the Glencoe text asks the student, “How do the details and characterization of the cloaked man in the preceding two paragraphs contribute to the story?” (627). The Prentice Hall text asks students, “Where in the first paragraph does the narrator indicate that he is providing a personal account intended to be read by others? Explain.” (511). There is at least one question like these, and often two, per page, leading students through the text and selecting the elements on which they will focus. Such a method is what Dallas Dillon, in his paper on the use of textbook anthologies, calls the “recipe to literary study” (4). Having students identify elements of different genres or specific details in the story encourages them to comprehend different structures and checks for plot comprehension. However, as Benjamin Bloom points out in his taxonomy of the varying levels of intellectual behavior, the ability to answer a question about a text and the ability to initiate an analysis of the text are two different skill sets and require different levels of thinking. While general comprehension and the identification and explanation of a textual element are important, these are not higher-order thinking skills. In contrast, employing the skills of application, analysis, evaluation, and creation in response to a work of literature demands a higher level of critical thinking. While presenting set questions does not bar students from conducting their own analyses, the questions can be quite leading, and they can block the idea that one’s own analysis is necessary or preferred. Thus, when students arrive in the university classroom, they may believe there is a “right” answer to an analytical question and may not possess the ability to engage critically with a work through analysis and critique.

“The Education of Women” in the High School Literature Textbook

The inclusion in the Holt 2005 and 2009 textbooks of the essay “The Education of Women” is somewhat surprising, given the many more famous Defoe texts to choose from (it did not make any of the “most anthologized works” lists in Applebee’s textbook study); but what is frustrating about its inclusion is that parts are omitted and the introductory essay lacks contextualization. The same sections of the essay are presented in each edition, and the excerpt goes through the same modernization process as A Journal of the Plague Year.

On the content level, the essay is problematic in several ways. First, it was originally a part of Defoe’s An Essay upon Projects (1697) and was titled “An Academy for Women.” Certainly, as the original title suggests, Defoe’s main argument in this essay was not just for the education of women but for the establishment of their own
academy. In the Holt textbooks, however, large portions of the essay related to such an academy have been omitted; these omissions are marked by ellipses throughout the excerpt. Second, since neither edition states that this essay was originally part of a larger work with a different name, students would not be able to find the essay should they want to read it in its entirety: a Google search of “The Education of Women” by Daniel Defoe yields virtually the same excerpt that is in their textbooks.7

Third, the end of Defoe’s essay is altered in a way that changes both the main thought with which Defoe meant to leave his readers and the essay’s place within the framework of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century culture. In the Holt textbooks, the essay ends with an anecdote from Defoe informing the reader about a woman who laments her lack of schooling and is ashamed to speak to her maid because she does not know whether what she says is right or wrong. The essay abruptly ends with the single line: “‘Tis a thing will be more easily granted than remedied…” (2005, 497; 2009, 676). Because of the material that has been excised from the Holt editions, there appears to be no direct referents for “‘tis” and “thing.” However, Defoe’s complete last paragraph reads, ‘I need not enlarge on the Loss of the Defect of Education is to the Sex, nor argue the Benefit of the contrary Practice; ‘tis a thing will be more easily granted than remedied: This Chapter is but an Essay at the thing, and I refer the Practice to those Happy Days, if they ever shall be, when men shall be wise enough to mend it” (Defoe, Essays 304). When read within the original context, the referents for “‘tis” and “thing” are apparent. While the ending in the textbooks leaves the readers with a sense that Defoe was hopeless about when this would come to fruition, Defoe’s full ending is clear about what needs to happen to bring about change. In some ways, Defoe ends by calling men to action, which makes sense within the larger scope of the original essay: in the sections omitted from the textbook, he outlines fairly explicitly how an academy for women should be set up. Students who read only those parts of the essay pertaining strictly to how and why women should be educated lose half of Defoe’s main argument. While some of his ideas for setting up the rules for the academy (e.g., “An Act of Parliament shou’d make it Felony without Clergy, for any man to enter by Force or Fraud into the House, or to solicit any Woman, tho’ it were to Marry, while she was in the House” [291]), might seem outlandish to students, they provide an excellent way to broaden discussions of women’s roles in society at the time. Therefore, in addition to depriving students of a sense of how extended arguments are constructed, removing these sections ensures that students do not have an accurate picture of Defoe’s argument and its place within a larger conceptual framework on the role of women in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Holt focuses students on a rhetorical reading of Defoe’s argument. Unfortunately, the editors of the Holt (2005) textbook frequently interrupt the text with leading questions enclosed in bright yellow boxes, such as “What conclusion does Defoe draw about the true reason for the neglect of women’s education?” and “Do you
detect any subtle biases against women in Defoe’s argument?” (497). Instead of having students analyze the text in order to discover for themselves any “subtle biases” in the essay, these questions strongly imply that they already exist and that students can simply look for and identify them. As a result, students are not given the chance to practice analyzing the text from their own perspective; the questions shape how they think about the essay, and Defoe’s strategies are synthesized and named for them. Because these questions appear within the larger text of Defoe’s work, students are compelled to at least skim them, thereby reading Defoe’s work through the editors’ interpretive lens, not their own. That the questions actually invade the text is troubling because they interrupt the reader’s flow of thought. Experienced readers learn to ask and answer their own questions through engagement with the text, not through engagement with someone else’s questions. Perhaps the Holt (2005) page setup would be useful for younger readers, like high school freshman, but this textbook is written for seniors; these “helpful” questions do not facilitate the skills needed for the college classroom, where students are expected to read a text and analyze it without the benefit of a reading guide.

Findings

Although the present study is narrow in its scope, there are some overarching patterns in the way that secondary-school textbooks present seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors and their literary works, explaining why there is a disconnect between the skills we expect students to learn in high school literature classes and the skills with which they enter our first-year British literature college classrooms. First, high school students are exposed to modernized versions of early-modern texts, never gaining access to the spelling, capitalization, italicization, and punctuation practices of the period that are critical elements of style. Second, students, for the most part, only encounter small portions of early-modern texts that are often excerpted in such a way as to oversimplify or distort the content of the entire work from which the selection is taken. Third, students are provided with one view of early-modern authors, their texts, and their historical and cultural contexts, which is presented as authoritative and definitive. Ideological forces that inform the viewpoint taken by editors of the textbook are hidden behind the guise of authoritative objectivity (which, ironically, is a notion that often presents itself in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature). Fourth, textbook editors walk students through a piece, asking leading questions that summarize and synthesize the excerpted material for the student rather than fostering a general spirit of critical or analytical inquiry. As a result, resistance, confusion, and/or opposition to a range of alternate readings, all of which I have encountered in my own classroom, often occur because students have not been required to conduct certain kinds of intellectual work, or they have been taught a particular version of
seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature. However, knowledge of the material encountered by students in the high school literature classroom can improve instructors’ understanding of the information and skill sets with which students come to college, preparing literature instructors to teach them seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature more effectively in first-year college literature courses.

**Strategies for Student Success in the First-Year College Literature Classroom**

The majority of students have been taught literature with a textbook anthology at some point in their secondary education. As such, their past experiences with reading and studying a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century text, whether authored by Defoe or not, will be significantly different than what they will be asked to perform as readers and writers in the college literature classroom. For some students, it is even possible that they have not read a lengthy early-modern work, like *A Journal of the Plague Year*, in its entirety. However, there are strategies for working within this reality.

Given that most students will have only come across modernized excerpts of early-modern literary texts, it is imperative that instructors highlight the status of assigned literary works as whole cultural artifacts with material features distinct to the historical and cultural contexts in which they were produced and consumed. Reading noncanonical early-modern genres and texts will further help students to begin to grasp early-modern culture and literature and contextualize popular genres like the novel, rendering what seems a distant history and culture less alien or foreign. Textual artifacts like letters, chapters from grammar textbooks, book reviews, and periodicals expose students to, and familiarize them with, the evolution of language, genres, and compositional and printing practices. As Shannon L. Reed and Kirilka Stavreva discuss in their research on information literacy and critical thinking, student exploration of the multiple layers of meaning in texts and the relationship among texts in and across historical periods “requires intellectual curiosity, sustained attention, open-mindedness, creative courage, and multi-dimensional cognitive abilities — all aspects of critical thinking” (439). Rather than simply being told about a given culture and history as background to an assigned text, active engagement with these noncanonical works builds a more concrete mental model of eighteenth-century language, genres, and people.

With active engagement comes higher-order thinking skills that we expect our students to have at the university level: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. However, these skills need to be modeled in the British literature classroom in order for students to master them. During class discussions or explanations of assignments on early-modern literature, making one’s pedagogy transparent is a small way to reinforce the level of participation expected, such as pointing out and praising strong analytical work carried out in class discussions or perhaps even retracing the mental steps taken
to arrive at the conclusion. More active than simply showing students a “good paper” on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, practicing close reading and textual analysis in the classroom demonstrates the level of critical thought expected in college-level coursework. Even advanced students appreciate taking time to practice constructing a specific, concise thesis.

Additionally, scaffolding lessons on analysis enables students to learn to make their own inquiries and lead discussions instead of only responding to pre-set questions, improving their ability to draw connections and critically engage with early-modern texts. Students can begin by recording their own questions while reading a text and these can be incorporated into class discussion. As students grow accustomed to inquiring about texts of this period rather than passively reading them, the questions that they devise will generally move them beyond plot comprehension to a sophisticated synthesis and evaluation of the themes of a text. Incorporating constant application of the expected skills into classroom exercises will yield more engaged, active, and learned students of early-modern literature.

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NOTES

1 Applebee also found nearly twenty years ago that literary works were arranged chronologically in high school literature textbooks.

2 The absence of selections from texts written by women of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is noticeable. Incidentally, excerpts from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* are the only texts written by a female to make the list of “Most Frequently Anthologized Selections.” This trend has changed slightly since Applebee’s study. Each textbook now has at least one or two selections by women (typically poems) or, on occasion, as in both of the Holt editions, they are relegated to a special section entitled “Views on Women’s Rights.”

3 I am including an earlier edition of one of these textbooks to determine how textbook companies change these books and supporting materials over time, although it is important to remember that some schools still use the older edition. Given the significant difference between the two Holt editions, though published only four years apart, it is easy to see how Holt adapted to keep up with the standard text choices in the marketplace, which helps to keep their textbook competitive.

4 Exactly who chooses and edits the texts for inclusion in the textbook is unclear. Each textbook provides several lists of people with titles like “Program Consultants,” “Advisory Council,” and “Teacher Reviewers” that vary from publisher to publisher. All included,
these names can number around fifty or more depending on the textbook; however, none of the publishers state which group selects or edits the selections in the book.

5 The poetry or nonfiction essays of Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, Queen Elizabeth I, and Aphra Behn are excerpted in some of the textbooks.

6 I suspect that the punctuation in excerpts from *A Journal of the Plague Year* was modernized, in part, to reflect current “correct” English punctuation and usage in order to prevent students from imitating Defoe’s insertion of semicolons, colons, and commas in places where current usage does not permit them. That is, the excerpts are modernized so that Defoe’s works can serve as an example to modern students of how to write properly or effectively.

7 The “Teacher Preparation Selection Summary” in the teacher’s edition (Holt 2009) claims that the excerpt is part of a larger essay entitled *The Education of Women* written by Defoe in the early 1700s. The editors of the Holt textbooks seem to have gotten incorrect both the date and the original work; various searches on the database *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* yielded no results for this essay as a standalone piece or under this specific title.

WORKS CITED


