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Roxana: A Contemporary Analysis to an Eighteenth Century Voice for Women's Rights

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Cover Page Footnote

Greenblatt, Stephen, and M. H. Abrams. "Daniel Defoe." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 1. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. 2424-431. Print.

Roxana: A Contemporary Analysis to an Eighteenth Century Voice for Women's Rights by Kendra Gardner

As a woman in the twenty-first century, it is difficult to imagine a world in which I have no power or influence: a world where I am merely a man's daughter or wife. Today, the control that I have over my decisions and my possessions is a right that I see as natural: a right given to me when I first entered this world. In Daniel Defoe's story *Roxana*, Defoe takes the reader into the life of an eighteenth century woman who is fighting for her personal liberty. The character Roxana has seen a life of hardship as she was put to the streets after her first husband destroyed the family's fortune, and now Roxana feels a powerful force that drives her to hold on to the small estate that remains. With children to look after, she finds herself in a quandary that she needs to solve. To shelter her family and preserve her right to administer her personhood, she chooses to act as a courtesan to her landlord rather than become a wife to a new man. Through the story, Defoe demonstrates a feminist philosophy that challenges the social code for women in the eighteenth century by portraying a character that is passionately arguing against marriage. Roxana succeeds in obtaining a selfhood that is more free than that of a married woman by professing a single woman's natural and legal ability to manage her own affairs, identifying that giving up one's virtues to provide for one's family is more noble than giving up one's natural rights by marrying.

While lying in bed together, the landlord asks Roxana why she refuses to marry him – provoking her to reveal the deep-seated moral code of marriage that dwells within her. He tries to guess her reasoning, proposing her reasons are that she has either already promised another man that she will marry him or that she does not want to relinquish her possessions to the landlord. When Roxana reveals the truth, the landlord learns that she refuses not only due to the matter of money, but also stressing the matters of her personal freedom. She presents her view on the subject, stating that marriage is “nothing but giving up liberty, estate, authority, and everything to the man, and the woman was indeed a mere woman ever after – that is to say, a slave” (2427). The comparison of a wife to a slave is a simile that creates a driving connotation to reveal the severity of Roxana's beliefs on marriage. As a slave is subjected to every command of his or her master, a wife in the eighteenth century is a marionette to the husband: her actions and beliefs must be in line with his desire. The discussion of her refusal to marry continues after the landlord counter argues, insisting that he will grant her complete control over her property, declaring that there is no need to be concerned over losing her financial freedoms. His persistence does not sway

Roxana, who explains that the property will no longer legally be her own. Though the husband may allow the wife to act as the manager of the property, she will be forced to administer according to the husband's instructions.

As Roxana's persistence to stand against marriage shows her disobedience to eighteenth century standards for women, her ideology of women's innate abilities further challenges the social system of her time. She feels that women are born with the intellectual capacity to manage finances and personal decisions. To defend her belief that a woman should remain single to govern her own property, she explains, "while a woman was single, she was a masculine in her politic capacity; that she had then the full command of what she had, and the full direction of what she did," (2428). The argument that a single woman is as legally able as a man to sufficiently control herself and her property is one that is completely resistive of the norm of society because women at the time (single or betrothed) were not seen as equal to men, and did not have the opportunities to advance in society as a man had. The only social status that a woman was granted was the one she married into or was born into. According to Roxana, the only way for a woman to maintain a sense of free will is to preserve the finances that she had rather than risking a complete loss by renouncing the total of her property to a man through marriage. She argues that any woman with a large estate who marries is deserving of any hardships that may come to her as a consequence to her ignorance.

Although Roxana does not engage in her personal view of evil, which is marriage, she engages in social misconduct of another regard: sex before marriage. She has a family that she is responsible to take care of and she finds that the solution to her financial burden is to receive free rent from her landlord while repaying him with sexual acts. Though she feels that the moral action is to marry before having physical relationships with a man, she understands marriage to be the greater unethical action as it completely strips a woman of her freedoms of finance and surrenders her body completely to her husband. She tells the landlord that as she "could not reconcile my judgment to marriage... and [had] obligation too much on me to resist you, I suffered your rudeness and gave up my virtue" (2429). Roxana clearly finds her actions to be shameful in the eyes of society and does not feel pride in the deeds that she engages in, but feels that there is no other choice than the one that she has chosen. After losing all that she owned in her first marriage, Roxana is trapped between two decisions – both of which she finds to be injustices to her freedom and virtue. Analyzing her situation, one finds that she has selected the course that violates her freedom the least: acting as a courtesan. By soliciting her sexuality to another man, Roxana has secured a home for her family and has granted herself the rights to her property and the rights to her selfhood. While a married woman acts as sexual property to

her husband, Roxana's decision to act as a courtesan ensures more personal liberty than matrimony because she is free to choose who she sleeps with, controlling her body along with her property. As a courtesan, Roxana gains two authorities that a married woman does not have – her estate and her body – as she chooses who she sleeps with and who she does not.

In the eighteenth century, women were provided with few options in leading a fulfilled existence, as laws and social conduct fought to restrain a woman's abilities in the world. Throughout *Roxana*, Defoe presents a powerful position that is unique to its peers: a position that defends women. The character Roxana is ahead of her time in the argument for women's liberties, painting a picture of the path that a woman must take in order to find liberty in a society that rarely allows any. By upholding her stature as a single woman, she finds financial power in addition to her autonomy. Though life as a courtesan is not admired today, one can applaud Roxana in her efforts and her success in holding on to her sense of freedom to become more than a puppet to the male members of society.

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen, and M. H. Abrams. "Daniel Defoe." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 1. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. 2424-431. Print.