

# Mary Davys's "Probable Feign'd Stories" and Critical Shibboleths about "The Rise of the Novel"

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THE WORLD is so taken up of late with Novels and Romances, that it will be hard for a private History to be taken for Genuine, where the Names and other Circumstances of the Person are concealed, and on this Account we must be content to leave the Reader to pass his own Opinion upon the ensuing Sheets, and take it just as he pleases.<sup>1</sup>

'Tis now for some time, that those Sort of Writings call'd *Novels* have been a great deal out of Use and Fashion, and that the Ladies (for whose Service they were chiefly design'd) have been taken up with Amusements of more Use and Improvement; I mean History and Travels: with which the Relation of Probable Feign'd Stories can by no means stand in competition.<sup>2</sup>

Although only just over three years separated the publication of *Moll Flanders* in January 1722 and *The Works of Mrs. Davys* in 1725, the evidence they offer about the contemporary appeal of "the novel" appears to be peculiarly conflicting. Whereas the preface to the former opens by referring to the popularity "of late" of "Novels and Romances," the preface to the latter expresses fears that "Probable Feign'd Stories" are

1 Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, ed. G.A. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 111.

2 Mary Davys, *The Works of Mrs. Davys: Consisting of, Plays, Novels, Poems, and Familiar Letters* (London, 1725), p. iii.

out of fashion and unable to compete with the new vogue for "History and Travels."

As it is a commonplace of accounts of the emergence of the English novel since the publication of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* in 1957, if not before, that "novels" increased in popularity during the early decades of the eighteenth century, Mary Davys's contention that, from the perspective of 1725, "*Novels* have been a great deal out of Use and Fashion ... for some time" is rather disconcerting and appears to be in need of investigation and explanation. Indeed, it seems to me that, in a single sentence, Davys succeeds in complicating several issues at the heart of debates about the "rise of the novel."

Since its publication in 1957, Ian Watt's classic study has been criticized on a number of grounds: its "teleological bias";<sup>3</sup> its assumption that "the novel" was "a new literary form ... begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding"<sup>4</sup>—an assumption that not only rules out earlier writers of fiction but contemporaries of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, especially women writers such as Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Eliza Haywood, Jane Barker, Elizabeth Rowe, Penelope Aubin, and Mary Davys herself;<sup>5</sup> its identification of the "lowest common denominator" of the novel, formal realism, which, Watt maintains, is "the narrative embodiment of a premise that Defoe and Richardson accepted very literally, but which is implicit in the novel form in general";<sup>6</sup> and, more recently, the very soundness of the "triple-rise" thesis itself—the argument, in other words, that the rise of the middle class leads to the rise of the reading public which leads, in turn, to the rise of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

Mary Davys's observation, then, has a bearing on most if not all of the issues at dispute: the assumption that "the novel" was "a new literary form ... begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding"; the assumption that a growth in the reading public in the early eighteenth century led to an increase in the popularity of "the novel"; the assumption that "formal realism" was the

3 John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700–1739* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 2.

4 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 9.

5 Cf. Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

6 Watt, p. 32.

7 See my essay "The Making of the English Novel," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9 (1997), 249–66. Cf. J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1990), pp. 66–67.

novel form's "lowest common denominator" and that this was what was new about the fiction of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding; the assumption that "the hallmark of the novel" was "a special dynamic between fact and fiction";<sup>8</sup> the assumption that a process of "novelization" was taking place in the 1720s;<sup>9</sup> and the assumption that "the origins of the English novel, whose climax is signalled by the Richardson–Fielding rivalry of the 1740s, consist in the establishment of a form sufficient for the joint enquiry into analogous epistemological and social problems."<sup>10</sup>

Let me interrogate these assumptions in turn, beginning with Ian Watt's quasi-axiomatic assumption that the novel was "a new literary form ... begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding." Clearly definitions are of the essence here, but it is important to remember that writings calling themselves novels had been appearing in print in English for about a hundred and fifty years before the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* and that this, on its own, complicates Watt's thesis in a number of ways.

Everyone knows that the term seems to have been introduced from the Continent. Thus William Painter, in his dedication to *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566), refers to "these histories (which by another terme I call Nouelles)," Robert Burton, in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) refers to the "Nouells" of Boccaccio, and Milton, in 1643, refers in his divorce pamphlets to "amatorious novel[s]." Subsequently, seventeenth-century translations of Continental writers of fiction used the term in their titles. Gradually, English writers followed suit. Thus, following translations such as *Tachmas, Prince of Persia: an historical novel* (1676) and *The Serasquier Bassa, An historical novel of the times* (1685), we have *Tudor, a prince of Wales. An historical novel* (1678) and *The Amours of Edward IV. An historical novel* (1700). Perhaps of more significance for our purposes, a work was published in 1683 with the significant title *The Unsatisfied Lovers. A New English novel*—the earliest instance I have found of what was to become a familiar sales pitch.

A number of considerations should, therefore, be taken into account before we jump to any conclusions about what Mary Davys meant when she referred to "those Sort of Writings call'd Novels." Not unreasonably, J.

8 Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 19, 71.

9 John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 74. Bender of course derives his thesis from M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

10 Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 410.

Paul Hunter explains how the “term ‘novel,’ which originally designated a short tale of romantic love, gradually was broadened to include longer fiction of various kinds and then narrowed again to describe the new ‘realistic’ fiction that featured ordinary people in familiar, everyday, contemporary circumstances.”<sup>11</sup> But where does this leave Davys’s contention that, from the perspective of 1725, “Probable Feign’d Stories” were no longer fashionable? Aren’t what Davys calls “those Sort of Writings call’d *Novels*” examples of precisely “the new ‘realistic’ fiction” identified by Watt and Hunter?

I think two interrelated points must be made about the popularity of “novels” throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. First, *there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to suggest that there was a significant growth in the market for prose fiction in the early eighteenth century.* And second, before we endorse the conclusion that the novel was, indeed, a new literary form begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding—a conclusion which seems to me to beg several questions—I think we ought, first of all, to try to chart the fluctuations in popularity of various kinds of “novels” up to, say, the crucial decade of the 1740s.

Although statistical evidence relating to the publication of novels from the Elizabethan period to the middle of the eighteenth century has been available for a number of years, no account of the “rise” of “the novel” appears to have made use of it. William Harlin McBurney’s *Check List of English Prose Fiction 1700–1739* appeared in 1960, soon after the publication of *The Rise of the Novel*. McBurney listed every new work of fiction published in English he could find, year by year, including translations. As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> the evidence—which is borne out by the Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue—is revelatory. Between 1700 and 1719, the year in which *The Strange, Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* appeared, only in 1708, according to McBurney, were more than ten new works of fiction published in English, and seven of those were translations! From 1718, the year before the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, McBurney could find only a single new work in English, plus three translations. From most of the years between 1700 and 1719, McBurney lists four, five, six, or seven new works.

’Tis now for some time, that those Sort of Writings call’d *Novels* have been a great deal out of Use and Fashion....

11 J. Paul Hunter, “The Novel and Social/Cultural History,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9.

12 Downie, pp. 253–54.

What does Mary Davys mean? Because if we go back into the *seventeenth* century, using the bibliography to Paul Salzman's *English Prose Fiction 1558–1700*, we discover that ten or more works of fiction were published in 1655, 1656, 1660, and 1671, and that between 1677 and 1692—the year in which *Incognita: or, Love and Duty Reconcil'd. A Novel* was published—more than ten were published in almost every year, and no less than twenty-three in 1683.<sup>13</sup>

These figures are not meant to be definitive. They cannot be. We do not know how many works of fiction have simply not survived, or how many are still buried in obscurity in the various collections. But, as a guide, they indicate that *the popularity of prose fiction tout court declined between the 1690s and the publication of Robinson Crusoe in 1719*. Defoe's success, and doubtless the success of Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess*, the first part of which was also published in 1719, seem to have stimulated the market for a while. According to McBurney's *Check List*, sixteen new works of fiction were published in 1724, including, significantly for my purposes, Marys Davys's *The Reform'd Coquet*, plus three translations. And thirteen plus six translations were published in 1725. A year later, in 1726, of course, *Gulliver's Travels* appeared.

'Tis now for some time, that those Sort of Writings call'd *Novels* have been a great deal out of Use and Fashion....

What does Mary Davys mean?

I think we must try to discern changes in popular taste for prose fiction in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries if we want to understand the process which I have called the making of the English novel. In addition to the evidence of the prefaces to *Moll Flanders* and Davys's *Works*, it is interesting to look once again at those of *Incognita* and *The Secret History of Queen Zarah, and the Zaranians* in particular.

Congreve takes considerable pains to explain how his "story" differs both from romances and from previous novels:

Romances are generally composed of the constant loves and invincible courages of heroes, heroin[e]s, kings and queens, mortals of the first rank, and so forth; where lofty language, miraculous contingencies, and impossible performances elevate and surprize the reader into a giddy delight, which leaves him flat upon the ground whenever he gives off, and vexes him to think how he had suffered himself to be

13 Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction, 1558–1700: A Critical History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 351–78. Salzman's bibliography "lists all known extant works of fiction published between 1558 and 1700, including translations." Interestingly, Salzman remarks that seventeenth-century fiction "is much more an unknown quantity" than Elizabethan fiction. It is also more of an unknown quantity than eighteenth-century fiction.

pleased and transported, concerned and afflicted at the several passages which he has read, viz., these knights' success to their damosels' misfortunes, and such like, when he is forced to be very well convinced that 'tis all a lye.<sup>14</sup>

This well-known passage has not been sufficiently taken into consideration by those who argue that there was some sort of confusion in the minds of contemporary readers about what was fact and what was fiction. In addition, the implications of Congreve's explanation of how novels differ from romances have not been fully teased out:

Novels are of a more familiar nature, come near us and represent to us intrigues in practice, delight us with accidents and odd events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unpresided, such which not being so distant from our belief bring also the pleasure nearer us. Romances give more of wonder, novels more delight.

Congreve is writing in 1692, twenty-seven years before the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, forty-eight years before the publication of *Pamela*, fifty years before the publication of *Joseph Andrews*. He draws attention to the differences between novel and romance, specifically identifying the former with what seems to me to be suspiciously like the very characteristic which Ian Watt identifies as the "lowest common denominator" of the novel form, "formal realism," "the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience."

Congreve, then, not only differentiates between novel and romance, he recognizes that "the novel" is "of a more familiar nature" in which the story-line includes events which, in order to delight the reader, may be unusual—"emotions of surprise," perhaps—but which are not implausible or "unpresided," as well as quite clearly implying that, as a form, "the novel" was not new in 1692—it was not, in short, "a new literary form begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding." Acutely aware of tradition—which is the term he uses—Congreve even explains how he has attempted something new in *Incognita*:

Since all traditions must indisputably give place to the drama, and since there is no possibility of giving that life to the writing or repetition of a story which it has in the action, I resolved in another beauty to imitate dramattick writing, namely, in the design, contexture, and results of the plot. I have not observed it before in a novel.

14 [William Congreve,] *Incognita: or, Love and Duty Reconcil'd. A Novel* (London, 1692), preface.

Like Fielding fifty years later, then, Congreve professes to be doing something new in *Incognita*, a work which he, unlike Fielding, makes no bones about calling a novel.

What did Congreve mean by the term? *Incognita* is "a short tale of romantic love" in the tradition which was largely established, not by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, but by French writers of the later seventeenth century before being imported into England by writers such as Aphra Behn. And it is in this tradition, I suggest, that Mary Davys wrote, and to which she refers when she mentions "the Relation of Probable Feign'd Stories."

I am drawn to this conclusion partly by the burden of the preface to *The Secret History of Queen Zarah*. Until recently this used to be thought the work of Delarivier Manley herself, and critics sometimes continue to refer to it as such. However, as John L. Sutton, Jr, pointed out in 1984, it is a literal translation of an essay on prose fiction contained in a French courtesy book published in 1702, the abbé Morvan de Bellegarde's *Lettres curieuses de littérature et de morale*, which, in its turn, is a paraphrase of a section of the sieur du Plaisir's *Sentimens Sur Les Lettres, Et Sur L'Histoire, Avec Des Scrupules Sur Le Stile* (1683).<sup>15</sup>

This preface, then, should be read not as Delarivier Manley's commentary on English prose fiction in the first decade of the eighteenth century, but as an adaptation of remarks made in 1683 by du Plaisir on a change in taste in France:

The Romances in France have for a long time been the diversion and amusement of the whole world; the people both in the city and at Court have given themselves over to this vice, and all sorts of people have read these works with a most surprizing greediness; but that fury is very much abated, and they are all fallen off from this distraction. The little Histories of this kind have taken place of Romances, whose prodigious number of volumes were sufficient to tire and satiate such whose heads were most filled with those notions.

These little pieces which have banished Romances are much more agreeable to the brisk and impetuous humour of the English, who have naturally no taste for long-winded performances, for they have no sooner begun a book but they desire to see the end of it: the prodigious length of the ancient Romances, the mixture of so many extraordinary adventures, and the great number of actors that appear on the stage, and the likeness which is so little managed, all which has given a distaste to persons of good sense, and has made Romances so much

15 John L. Sutton, Jr, "The Source of Mrs. Manley's Preface to *Queen Zarah*," *Modern Philology* 81 (1984), 167-72. This is not the place to raise the old chestnut of Manley's authorship of *The Secret History*. It is important, however, to remember not only that the preface is not original commentary by Manley on English taste c. 1705, but also that her involvement in its adaptation from de Bellegarde and du Plaisir is unknown.

cry'd down, as we find 'em at present. The authors of Historical Novels, who have found out this fault, have run into the same error, because they take it for the foundation of their History no more than one principal event, and don't overcharge it with episodes, which would extend it to an excessive length; but they are run into another fault, which I cannot pardon; that is, to please by variety the taste of the reader, they mix particular stories with the principal History, which seems to me as if they reasoned ill.<sup>16</sup>

That the second paragraph of the preface is derived from *du Plaisir*, and tells us at least as much about the humour of French readers of fiction around 1683 as it does about English readers in the early eighteenth century, is clear when it is compared with the following passage from his *Sentimens*:

Ce qui a fait haïr les anciens Romains, est ce que l'on doit d'abord éviter dans les Romains nouveaux. Il n'est pas difficile de trouver le sujet de cette aversion; leur longueur prodigieuse, ce mélange de tout d'histoires diverses, leur grand nombre d'Acteurs, la trop grande antiquité de leurs sujets, l'embarras de leur construction, leur peu de vray-semblance, l'excès dans leur caractères, sont des choses qui paroissent assez d'elles-mêmes.<sup>17</sup>

Equally clearly, "the little Histories of this kind [which] have taken [the] place of Romances" appear to be the same as Mary Davys's "Probable Feign'd Stories." They are neither romances in the French tradition "en quatre ou six Volumes" nor the "historical novels" which flourished in the later seventeenth century.

In addition to the evidence of the preface to *The Secret History of Queen Zarah*, there is, of course, the evidence of Mary Davys's own writings. She appears to have published her *Works* in 1725 in an attempt to cash in on the success of *The Reform'd Coquet*, which had been published the previous year. According to Paula Backscheider, *The Reform'd Coquet* "was immediately popular and went through seven editions by 1760."<sup>18</sup> Unusually, the first edition was printed "for the AUTHOR," instead of for a bookseller such as Edmund Curll or William Chetwood. Davys, a decayed

16 *The Secret History of Queen Zarah, and the Zaranians; being a Looking-glass for — — In the Kingdom of Albion* (Albion [i.e. London], 1705). "To the Reader."

17 Du Plaisir, *Sentimens Sur Les Lettres, Et Sur L'Histoire. Avec Des Scrupules Sur Le Stile* (Paris, 1683), pp. 89–90.

18 *Popular Fiction by Women 1660–1750: An Anthology*, ed. Paula R. Backscheider and John J. Richetti (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 251. Interestingly, *The Reform'd Coquet* was one of those titles repackaged and republished by the Noble brothers. For the role of the Nobles in the promotion of the novel in the mid-eighteenth century, see James Raven, "The Noble Brothers and Popular Publishing, 1737–89," *Library* 12 (1990), 293–345. See also P.N. Furbank and W.R. Owens, "Defoe and Francis Noble," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 4 (1992), 301–13.

gentlewoman who "went for meer want to Engl<sup>d</sup>" in 1700 on the death of her clergyman husband,<sup>19</sup> claimed that she had been encouraged by a number of Cambridge gentlemen to "print [her novel] by Subscription."<sup>20</sup>

Other than a factual and descriptive essay by McBurney,<sup>21</sup> critical commentary on *The Reform'd Coquet* is slight. In *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists 1621–1818*, B.G. MacCarthy suggested that "its priggish outlook suggests Richardson," before offering this brief synopsis:

Amoranda, the heroine ... is a wealthy and giddy young beauty who seems in danger of losing her head through the adulation of the fops who surround her. Her guardian chooses as her future husband a young nobleman, who loves Amoranda as much as he deplores her foolishness. He disguises himself as a friend of her guardian, and goes to live in her house in the role of an elderly advisor. He soon disperses her worthless suitors, saves her from compromising situations, and then reveals himself as her ideal lover.

Clearly this is a very different piece of work from *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, and MacCarthy openly prefers what she calls the "fresher breeze [which] flows through the works of Penelope Aubin," who was "Obviously ... much influenced by Defoe and by records of travel."<sup>22</sup>

With reference to *The Reform'd Coquet*, Jane Spencer, on the other hand, regards Davys as being "at the beginning of a long line of women writers who create coquettish heroines and lover-mentors to reform them,"<sup>23</sup> such as Emma Woodhouse and Knightley. Paula Backscheider also finds rather more in *The Reform'd Coquet* than Bridget MacCarthy. As well as being "a carefully written, well-plotted novel," it is, according to Backscheider, "full of clever tricks and disguises deployed for a variety of purposes, [and] weaves strategies from several genres together expertly, and delivers what Davys promises: 'an hour or two of agreeable Amusement.'<sup>24</sup> If they mention Davys or *The Reform'd Coquet* at all, contemporary critics

19 According to Swift, who knew her in Dublin. See *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams [and David Woolley] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963, 1965, repr. corr. 1965, 1972), 4:84.

20 Mary Davys, *The Reform'd Coquet; A Novel* (London, 1724), preface.

21 William Harlin McBurney, "Mrs. Mary Davys: Forerunner of Henry Fielding," *PMLA* 74 (1959), 348–55.

22 B.G. MacCarthy, *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists 1621–1818*, preface by Janet Todd (Cork: Cork University Press, 1994), pp. 229–30. I shall comment briefly on the relationship between the fiction of Defoe and Aubin later in this essay.

23 Spencer, p. 146.

24 Backscheider and Richetti, p. 252.

tend to side with Backscheider. Thus John Richetti refers to “the sprightly and intelligent” Mary Davys, Janet Todd to “the brisk often satiric Mary Davys,” and Jerry C. Beasley to Davys’s “skillful blendings of comedy of manners with sentimental didacticism.”<sup>25</sup>

To Lennard J. Davis, however, *The Reform'd Coquet* seems “to lack ambivalence and a special attitude toward fact and fiction.” “The inability, in formal terms, of such works to create or belong to a genre points to their unique and experimental value.”<sup>26</sup> At the root of his misunderstanding is not only his preordained “hallmark of the novel,” but his misreading of Davys’s preface, which follows that of *The Secret History of Queen Zarah* in criticizing French romances. “I have read a *French Novel* of four hundred Pages, without the least Variety of Events, or any Issue in the Conclusion, either to please or amuse the Reader, yet all Fiction and Romance.” This Davys contrasts with her own practice:

I have in every Novel propos'd one entire Scheme or Plot, and the other Adventures are only incident or collateral to it; which is the great Rule prescribed by Criticks, not only in Tragedy, and other Heroick Poems, but in Comedy too. The Adventures, as far as I could order them are wonderful and probable; and I have with the utmost Justice rewarded Virtue, and punish'd Vice.<sup>27</sup>

Echoes here, surely, of Congreve, as McBurney pointed out forty years ago.

Davys, then, is aware of previous criticism of the novel—a term she uses quite unapologetically. (*The Reform'd Coquet* is described as “a novel” on its title-page.) Most important, she knows that although fiction writers *pretend* to be writing fact, this is merely a pretence. They are actually writing “Probable Feign'd Stories.” As far as Davys is concerned, it is a convention *even in the early eighteenth century*, and recognized as such. Thus she also attacks French writers of fiction, “who hav[ing] dealt most in this kind, have I think, chiefly contributed to put [readers] out of countenance,” because the French “upon all Occasions, and where they pretend to write

25 Richetti, p. 169n; Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 50; Jerry C. Beasley, “Politics and Moral Idealism: The Achievement of Some Early Women Novelists,” *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670–1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens, Ohio, and London: Ohio University Press, 1987), p. 231.

26 Davis, p. 122.

27 Davys, *Works*, pp. iv–v. Cf. Davis, p. 122: “Davys ... is using the word ‘novel’ to refer to the French heroic romances, as is clear when she says that novels ‘have been a great deal out of use and fashion.’ Given the date of this statement, 1727, it would be impossible for Davys to be referring to the novel in our sense of the word.” Davis does not appear to realize that he is quoting from the preface to the *Works* (1725).

true History, give themselves the utmost Liberty of feigning, are too tedious and dry in their Matter, and so impertinent in their Harangues, that the Readers can hardly keep themselves awake over them."<sup>28</sup>

So "those Sort of Writings call'd *Novels*" are "Probable Feign'd Stories" or even "true Histories"—works of whose primary conventions readers are perfectly well aware in 1725. And, as Davys explains, if they are not done well, there is no point: "the commonest Matters of Fact, truly told, would have been much more entertaining" than these long, tedious French romances:

Now this is to lose the only Advantage of Invention [she goes on], which gives us room to order Accidents better than Fortune will be at the Pains to do; so to work upon the Reader's Passions, sometimes keep him in Suspense between Fear and Hope, and at last send him satisfy'd away. This I have endeavour'd to do in the following Sheets.<sup>29</sup>



The complicating factor is that there are other sorts of writings which do *not* acknowledge or affirm their fictionality. In her dedications to *Oroonoko*, *The Fair Jilt*, and other prose fiction, Aphra Behn maintained that, despite her talent for poetry, the stories she told were true. The events she was relating really had taken place—to some of them, indeed, she was an eyewitness. As a consequence, as she wrote in the dedication to *The Fair Jilt*, she "now desire[d] to have it understood that this is reality, and matter of fact." Forty years later, as Ros Ballaster points out, Eliza Haywood was still resorting "to the substantiating claims typical of Aphra Behn, rather than Delarivier Manley."<sup>30</sup>

It was not so much a question of contemporaries being unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. Given that the very word "romance" meant "fiction" in this period, that would appear to be an absurdly condescending argument to attempt to sustain. "I do not doubt but you would know where 'twas written; and perhaps, whether the Author be living," *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* begins, "and whether you must expect a *Romance* or a *real History*."<sup>31</sup> This is precisely the sort of circumstantial detail which Ian Watt identifies as

28 Davys, *Works*, p. iv.

29 Davys, *Works*, pp. iv–v.

30 Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 155.

31 *The First Volume of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* (London, 1694), "To the Reader," n.p.

the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.<sup>32</sup>

*Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* quite deliberately raises the issue of readers' expectations, and assumes that contemporaries would want to know whether it was authentic, or one of "those Sort of Writings call'd *Novels*."

Now Defoe, for one, had no doubt that *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* was "a Meer Romance," as he explained in a letter to his employer, Robert Harley.<sup>33</sup> Why, then, does he seek to complicate the matter not only in the preface to *Moll Flanders*, but in the prefaces to all his other fiction as well? "The Editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact," the preface to *Robinson Crusoe* explains, "neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it."<sup>34</sup> Defoe, as his contemporaries were ready enough to point out, was trying it on. The first criticism of *Robinson Crusoe* to appear in print, *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Mr D[aniel] De F[oe], of London, Hosier*, usually attributed to Charles Gildon, not only attacked the book on grounds of subject-matter and style but, in identifying Defoe as the author, ridiculed any suggestion that it was "a just History of Fact," and that *Crusoe* was a real person. There is nothing in Gildon's response to indicate the existence in the early eighteenth century of an "undifferentiated matrix of news/novels," as Davis argues. Gildon was exposing what he took to be a straightforward deception on Defoe's part.

What is less often remarked upon is the reaction of other contemporaries to Defoe's fiction, because Gildon was not the only one to question *Crusoe's* authenticity. "As for the truth of what this narrative contains," Penelope Aubin wrote in the preface to *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil And his Family* (1721), "since Robinson Crusoe has been so well received, *which is more improbable*, I know no reason why this should be thought a fiction" (emphasis added).<sup>35</sup> Once again, this is not indicative of an existing "undifferentiated matrix of news/novels." Aubin is perceptively playing off Defoe's deception for her own ends. If he could do it, why not she?

32 Watt, p. 32.

33 See Downie, p. 258.

34 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. J. Donald Crowley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 1.

35 Penelope Aubin, *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil And his Family* (London, 1721), preface.

The strategy of Defoe's prefaces and their insistence on the "factuality" of the spurious autobiographies they purport to introduce is well known. It was a marketing ploy which seems to have worked. It was not so much that contemporaries could not distinguish between fact and fiction, could not tell novels from news—rather the reverse. The primary conventions were already in place, *but Defoe had problematized them*. This gives me pause for thought not only as far as the thesis that the origins of the novel lie in "a special dynamic between fact and fiction" is concerned, but also the thesis that it was in this period—the decade of the 1720s—that the crucial process of "novelization" was taking place.

If Foucault is to blame for providing the off-the-shelf theory behind the idea that Defoe's contemporaries were unable to distinguish between discourses which purported to be factual and discourses which purported to be fictional, Bakhtin has a lot to answer for as far as the theory behind the process of "novelization" is concerned. Despite the congruence of their subject-matter, it is doubtful whether works as diverse as *Moll Flanders*, *The Beggar's Opera*, and *The Rake's Progress* would have been linked together as sorts of proto-novels if Western critics had not become familiar with *The Dialogic Imagination*.

What these critics fail to take into account is that, far from stabilizing the terminology contemporaries used to describe narrative fiction, in problematizing the nature of his narratives by asserting their factuality, Defoe destabilized it. Thus Jane Barker, in *A Patch-Work Screen For The Ladies* (1723), anticipates Mary Davys in identifying a vogue for history rather than fiction. What is disconcerting is the fact that she classifies Defoe's narratives as "history" and confounds his eponymous heroes and heroines with real-life contemporaries:

*especially since HISTORIES at Large are so Fashionable in this Age; viz. Robinson Crusoe, and Moll Flanders; Colonel Jack, and Sally Salisbury; with many other Heroes and Heroines ... 'tis certain, the Uncommonness of any Fashion, renders it acceptable to the Ladies.*

*And I do not know but this may have been the chief Reason why our Ladies, in this latter Age, have pleas'd themselves with all this sort of Entertainment.*<sup>36</sup>

Not only do both Jane Barker and Mary Davys identify a vogue for "history" rather than "fiction" in the 1720s, they both identify a female readership as the primary audience for both sorts of writings.

36 Jane Barker, *A Patch-Work Screen For The Ladies; Or, Love and Virtue Recommended: In a Collection of Instructive Novels. Related After a Manner intirely New, and interspersed with Rural Poems, describing the Innocence of a Country-Life* (London, 1723), p. iv: "To the Reader."

They are not alone in these assumptions. It is a commonplace of accounts of the “rise of the novel” that women constituted the principal audience for fiction.<sup>37</sup> Yet contemporaries such as Elizabeth Thomas drew attention (in 1722) to the paradox at the heart of male attitudes to female reading habits:

... if we enquire for a book,  
Beyond a novel or a play,  
Good lord! how soon th' alarm's took,  
How soon your eyes your souls betray,  
And with what spite ye look!<sup>38</sup>

And even earlier, Mary, Lady Chudleigh, in her poem *The Ladies Defence*, explained how early eighteenth-century women “Instead of novels, histories peruse, / And for their guides the wiser ancients choose.”<sup>39</sup> Apparently women *were* inquiring for books beyond novels and plays not only in the period between the 1670s and the early 1690s when “novels” were in vogue, but also in the early 1720s when, according to Mary Davys, “History and Travels” were more fashionable than “Probable Feign’d Stories.”

In the light of contemporary comments, however, it is far from clear that the vogue for “Probable Feign’d Stories” with an emphasis on love had given way to a vogue for “history” as such. Instead it seems much more likely that Defoe’s narratives had captured a market for “authentic” rather than “Probable Feign’d Stories.” Again, Jane Barker was not alone in confusing “factual” accounts like the biography of the courtesan Sally Salisbury with Defoe’s spurious autobiographies. Commenting in 1725 on the popularity of “the fabulous Adventures and Memoirs of Pirates, Whores, and Pickpockets, wherewith for some time past the Press has so prodigiously swarmed,” James Arbuckle cited as examples “your *Robinson Crusoe*’s, *Moll Flanders*’s, *Sally Salisbury*’s, and *John Shepherd*’s.” Interestingly, Arbuckle observed “how indulgent we are to the *Biographers* of *Newgate*, who have been as greedily read by people of the better Sort, as the *Compilers* of *Last Speeches* and *Dying Words* by the rabble.”<sup>40</sup> “[P]eople of the better Sort” is a telling phrase. The preface to yet another novel of the 1720s, *The Hermit, or, the ... Adventures of Mr. Philip*

37 See, *inter alia*, Watt, p. 299; Richetti, *Popular Fiction before Richardson*, pp. 125–26; and Hunter, *Before Novels*, p. 71.

38 *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 41.

39 *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, p. 3.

40 [James Arbuckle], *Hibernicus’s Letters*, no. 9, 29 May 1725, cited in *Moll Flanders*, p. xvii.

*Quarll*, insisted that while "Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, and Colonel Jack have had their Admirers among the lower Rank of Readers," *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726, and addressed of course to "The Gentle Reader," appealed to "the Superiour Class of Mankind."<sup>41</sup>

I regard *Gulliver* as crucial to the development of prose fiction in the 1720s and 1730s. Curiously, its existence is acknowledged neither by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*, nor by Lennard J. Davis in *Factual Fictions*, nor by John Bender in *Imagining the Penitentiary*. Its absence is telling. If, as I am arguing, Defoe's narratives, with their claim to authenticity as a principal selling point, not only stimulated the market for prose fiction in the early 1720s but changed popular taste, then Swift's satirical exposure of "Amusements of more Use and Improvement, I mean History and Travels" appears to have had its effect also. After the discernible growth in the publication of prose fiction during the early 1720s, one can detect a decline in the late 1720s and 1730s so that, in 1738, according to McBurney, no new works of prose fiction were published in 1738 and only four translations.

After the publication of *Gulliver's Travels*, perhaps, it was no longer tenable for writers such as Defoe to claim that their narratives were factual accounts. *Roxana* (1724) was his last attempt at one sort of narrative, *A New Voyage Round the World* (1725) his last attempt at another.<sup>42</sup> As the *Champion* put it on 20 March 1740:

Several excellent Accounts of *Asia* and *Africa*, have been looked on as little better than fabulous Romances. To omit *Robinson Crusoe*, and other grave Writers, the facetious Captain *Gulliver* is more admired, I believe, for his Wit than his Truth; and I have been informed, that several ignorant People, doubt at this Day, whether there be really any such Places as *Lilliput*, *Laputa*, &c.

The implications of this passage for accounts of the emergence of the novel are far-reaching. There is no question here of "a special dynamic between fact and fiction," no question of the novel emerging "in order to mediate" a change in attitude towards authenticity. The writer accepts that "History and Travels" of this sort are simply "fabulous Romances" or made-up stories.

It is interesting that when, with the benefit of hindsight, critics first started "ordering" novels, Defoe's claims to authenticity were simply ignored. Thus James Beattie offered *Robinson Crusoe* as a prime example of "New

41 Cited in *Moll Flanders*, p. xvii.

42 Francis Noble repackaged *Roxana* as a novel by Defoe in 1775, before publishing "Daniel Defoe's Voyage Round the World. By a Course Never Sailed Before" in 1787.

Romance.” “Robinson Crusoe must be allowed, by the most rigid moralist,” Beattie observed, “to be one of those novels, which one may read, not only with pleasure, but also with profit.”<sup>43</sup> Significantly, although Beattie was writing after the bookseller Francis Noble had repackaged Defoe’s narratives as novels in the 1770s, he did not refer to any other than *Crusoe*. Until then, with the exception of *Crusoe* and *Colonel Jack*, not only had Defoe’s spurious autobiographies not been attributed to him, they had not been specifically described as fiction. All this changed once Noble re-issued them as novels by Defoe. As the *Monthly Review* for March 1775 remarked: “Few novels are better known than the story of the Lewd Roxana; which, we see, is ascribed to the famous De Foe.”<sup>44</sup>

Early critics of the novel seem to have been either unaware or uninterested in what was published in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries:

Of the lighter species of this kind of writing, *the Novel*, till within half a century we had scarcely any. The *Atalantis* of Mrs. Manley lives only in that line of Pope ... Mrs. Haywood was a very prolific genius ... that truly original genius De Foe.

At length, in the reign of George the Second, Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett appeared in strict succession, and their success raised such a demand for this kind of entertainment, that it has ever since been furnished from the press, rather as a regular and necessary supply, than as an occasional gratification. Novels have indeed been numerous “as leaves in Vallombrosa.”<sup>45</sup>

Mrs Barbauld’s perception of the growth in supply of novels can be borne out by data derived from the Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue. On average, new works of prose fiction in English appearing annually between 1700 and 1740 could be counted on one’s fingers, more or less, apart from a brief but limited upsurge between 1719 and 1726. After the publication of *Pamela* in 1740, supply rose to around twenty new works per annum. Only in the last thirty years of the eighteenth century did numbers of new “novels” increase to around forty a year.<sup>46</sup>



43 James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, 1783), p. 566.

44 *Monthly Review* 52 (March 1775), 274.

45 Mrs Barbauld, *The British Novelists; with An Essay; and Preface. Biographical and Critical* (London, 1810), 1:36–38.

46 On this point, see, above all, James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750–1770: A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland* (Newark: Delaware University Press, 1989).

To conclude: there are serious difficulties with the assumption that "the novel" was "a new literary form ... begun by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding"; it is not only teleological to insinuate that the early novel was a genre evolving through some sort of natural selection into the form familiar to us from nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction, it takes no account of earlier novels, or of novels by contemporaries of Defoe, or of the role of publishers and critics as well as readers and writers in the process which I have called the making of the English novel.

This conclusion is supported by compelling evidence which contradicts the secondary assumption that the growth in the reading public in the early eighteenth century led to an increase in the popularity of "the novel"; on the contrary, there is no evidence of a sustained increase in demand for any form of prose fiction until the publication of *Pamela*. While it can convincingly be argued that the creative dialogue between Richardson and Fielding was a significant factor in the growing popularity of "the novel"—an argument that can be supported by hard evidence—Defoe's narratives belong to another tradition and another era, and did not lead to a substantial, sustained demand for prose fiction.

In addition, I think a large question mark surrounds Watt's thesis that formal realism is the lowest common denominator of the novel. I have two major problems with this. First, as Hunter strikingly puts it: "no single word or phrase distinguishes the novel from romance or from anything else, and to settle for 'realism' or 'individualism' or 'character' as the defining characteristic diminishes the very idea of the novel."<sup>47</sup> Quite clearly, William Congreve and Mary Davys (to name but two) were fully aware as writers of the importance of what we would call realism. I think this conclusion is inescapable if one takes the time to analyse Davys's reference to "Probable Feign'd Stories." This, in turn, would appear to question Watt's assertion that formal realism refers to "a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel, and so rarely in other literary genres, that they may be regarded as typical of the form itself."

Comparing Defoe's fiction with that of his contemporaries throws other assumptions about the "rise of the novel" into relief. In complicating readers' expectations about what they were about to read, Defoe was not so much exploiting contemporary uncertainty about fact and fiction as employing a shrewd marketing ploy which worked, probably beyond all his expectations. When Mary Davys refers to the popularity of works of "History and Travels," she is undoubtedly referring to the works of Defoe which

47 Hunter, *Before Novels*, pp. 22–23.

sold themselves on their own authenticity. Thus not only was *Crusoe* represented as “a just History of Fact,” *Roxana* was represented as “not a Story, but a History,” and the last words of the title-page of *Moll Flanders* read: “Written from her own MEMORANDUMS.” Defoe knew what he was doing. His comments on *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* rule out, for me, any innocence on Defoe’s part. Thus when he writes the following statement in the preface to *Colonel Jack*, “neither is it of the least Moment to enquire whether the Colonel hath told his own Story true or not; If he has made it a *History* or a *Parable*, it will be equally useful, and capable of doing Good,”<sup>48</sup> one cannot but think that he is deliberately problematizing the status of his narratives for rhetorical effect.

This must, I feel, raise doubts about the confidence with which recent critics, slavishly following Bakhtin, have identified the earlier eighteenth century as the period during which the process of “novelization” was taking place, because of course Bakhtin’s thesis locates the period of the “novel’s creative ascendancy” in the *second* half of the eighteenth century. For the thesis to work, it is essential that the process of “novelization” takes place in one of what Bakhtin calls the “periods of preparation preceding this era.”<sup>49</sup> It must, therefore, have taken place in the early eighteenth century, during the period in which Defoe was publishing his narratives. What this fails to address is Mary Davys’s contention that it was precisely in this period that “those Sort of Writings call’d *Novels*” were “a great deal out of Use and Fashion.”

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48 Daniel Defoe, *Colonel Jack*, ed. Samuel Holt Monk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 2.

49 Bakhtin, p. 6.