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Humanity Just For Men: Lockean Linguistic Barriers for Feminism in Defoe's *Roxana*

Much research and commentary has been done concerning the influence of John Locke on the literary, philosophical, and political thought of eighteenth century, and his works have been of particular interest for feminist critiques of patriarchy. Locke's views on political liberalism, religious tolerance, and his criticisms of monarchy could have been potentially enabling for women, but a close examination of his epistemology reveals a deeply-rooted male gender bias that helped to block women from enjoying the liberties he espoused as natural to all. This is not to assert a direct causal relationship between Locke as an individual and the patriarchal oppression of women in general, but to illustrate how his theories on language and ideas undermined his conceptual framework of liberty and natural rights for half of humanity. This paradoxical relationship between the liberty and oppression of women in the ideas of Locke can be illustrated by mapping a Lockean epistemology onto the text of Defoe's *Roxana*. By analyzing the protagonist of Defoe's text through a Lockean frame-work the paradoxes in Locke's epistemology become apparent in key moments of conflict within the narrative.

There are many difficulties with approaching Locke's thought that must first be worked through before attempting to use his theories as a form of literary criticism. Exegesis of Locke has proved very fruitful in the study of eighteenth century literature, as William Walker points out in his essay "Locke Minding Women: Literary History, Gender, and the *Essay*" that

“[u]nderstandings of Locke... are of central importance to several major statements of post-Renaissance literary history, and it is a notion of how Locke envisions the mind or self which is frequently a central component of this understanding” (246). Locke’s empiricist conception of the self as a continuous chain of consciousness over time mirrors the emerging form of autobiographical first-person narration. Nevertheless, Walker is cautious of using Locke’s theories as a coherent system to be applied to a literary text, and he argues

What seems to be operative in several but not all accounts of this history is a notion of the philosophical text as a homogenous text which presents coherent doctrine and image. This notion allows for the luxury of being able to postulate a text such as Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as a central document to literary history without being obliged to consider the text comprehensively. (247)

Walker argues for a responsible engagement with Locke’s text that does not presuppose a singular system of thought or singular view on a particular issue such as the self or the mind. Locke himself argued against the rationalist system building of philosophers, such as Descartes, who built their arguments upon fundamental axioms. Therefore, this essay will attempt to specifically address how Locke’s views on the connection between language and ideas influenced his conception of humanity in often contradictory ways. Then, only after a thorough analysis of Locke’s deletion of the female during the process by which the mind comes to form ideas can the problematic implications of his political views regarding women be addressed.

Locke himself claims he did not set out to address the issue of language in his *Essay*, but in trying to describe how ideas can enter the mind he found himself increasingly compelled to

look at the relationship between ideas and words. Kenneth Winkler writes in his introduction to the *Essay* that

Book III [‘Of Words’] was not part of Locke’s original plan for the *Essay*. He intended first to move directly from ideas (the ‘instruments, or materials, of our knowledge’) to the ‘use the understanding makes of them, and what knowledge we have by them’. But he discovered that because there is ‘so close a connection between *ideas* and words,’ and because abstract ideas, in particular, have ‘so constant a relation’ to general words, ‘it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our knowledge, which all consists in propositions, without considering, first, the nature, use, and signification of language.” (xxi-xxii)

This passage illustrates the conflicted attitude Locke had toward language: he sees words as secondary to and less important than ideas, and yet he cannot begin to address the concept of ideas without first analyzing words. He carries this conflicted attitude into his very conception of how language functions.

It is important to note that, as a devoutly religious man, Locke’s theological views inform and permeate his philosophy. His first lines of Book III ‘Of Words’ are “GOD having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with language, which was to be the great instrument, and common tie of society” (Locke 176). Thus, Locke makes sure to begin his investigation of language by giving due credit to his creator before he proceeds. However, as an empiricist, Locke wants to ground his arguments only from experience, and so he only grants that God “fashioned” our “organs” to “be fit to frame articulate sounds” (176). From here he makes a key move from words as sounds to “the signification of words” (178) which he grounds

in an essentially secular argument. He continues that “[t]he comfort and advantages of society, not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary, that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible *ideas*, which his thought are made up of, might be made known to others” (178). Here again is another source of conflict for Locke regarding language: he posits that the motivation for language was social (communication) but the source of language is private thoughts in each individual's mind (*ideas*). Thus, language is both inherently social and inescapably private.

Another aspect that causes this conflict for Locke is that he has an agenda for his conception of language. He is arguing against the scholasticism of the Renaissance and its use of language which Locke saw as misleading and detrimental to the pursuit of true knowledge.

Catherine Peardon writes in her essay “Understanding Differently: Re-Reading Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,”

offered up at the threshold of the scientific era when the mystical Renaissance language theories were still being debated, Lockean epistemology critiques what he calls the ‘double reference’ or ‘double conformity’ theory of language. In this theory, words conform both to ‘ideas’ and to the ‘real essence’ of things.... Locke argues against the Adamic or innatist notion that a ‘name’ can impart the knowledge of species or the essence of it, arguing instead for the conventional or arbitrary nature of words. Since words are in an arbitrary relationship to things and to ideas (as well as being hopelessly subjective) they are ‘perfect cheats’ and must be controlled. (76-77)

This adds an important element to Locke’s theory of language in that he wants to control the use of words and rein in their innately deceptive nature. Locke wanted to break from a tradition he

saw as misusing language for theological and political benefit, and he associates this tradition with the rhetorical argumentation of Renaissance scholasticism. This desire to reform language away from a scholastic 'double reference' by means of a rigorous methodology is typical of the enlightenment's discourse of the new science of Bacon and Newton which Locke was highly influenced by.

But, Locke's agenda to combat scholasticism carries with it problematic implications, the examination of which, will begin to explain the implicit gender bias of Locke's language theory. Peaden explains of Locke that "[t]his theory of the extreme privacy of language makes it necessary for much of Locke's discussion of language to be directed to curing the abuses of language by positing rules for a philosophical language" (79). This has important implications later for his political theory in that "[f]or with this extreme subjectivity, unless humans make extraordinary efforts to control language, there will be no 'Common Tye,' no social contract" (79). To perform this policing of language, Locke makes a key move of dividing language into two distinct categories: Civil and Philosophical. Peadan argues that this divide is "...along the same lines as the traditional divisions of philosophy and rhetoric" (79). Having made this divide Locke then increasingly argues against the Civil use of language and holds up the Philosophical as inherently superior for its precision.

This move from Civil to Philosophical, or rhetoric to mathematical logic, reflects the larger trend of the Enlightenment's perceived transition from a 'feminized' view of knowledge to a more 'masculine' one. Peadan argues that "in his [Locke's] attempts to control language, he sets up anew the old quarrel of rhetoric and philosophy, but with a difference: Rhetoric is explicitly personified as a seductive woman banished from the masculine arena of pure logic" (77). Thus rhetoric, the goal of which is to persuade by means of stylistic argumentation, is

equated with seduction, which is equated with the feminine. Pure logic, however, is seen as masculine in that it is based in a more scientifically rigorous process that does not rely on emotion. Peadar employs “Foucault’s theories of a rift from the Renaissance to Classical ‘epistemes,’” and she also draws on the work of Timothy Reiss who she claims “mapped a discursive shift that occurred over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During these two centuries... . . . one ‘class’ of discursive activity gradually disappeared” (76). This older form of discourse “saw knowledge and discourse as part of the world, a ‘discursive exchange *within* the world.” The new form of discourse, championed by many Enlightenment thinkers, was “a discursive order that saw knowledge as a ‘practice *upon* the world,’ an effort to dominate and master the world and make it serve our purpose—what Reiss calls the ‘analytico-referential’ class of discourse” (76). This argument is compelling and the evidence for it is thorough, but it is also problematic in itself in that it also employs gender stereotypes of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in order to argue for the very formation of these stereotypes within systems of knowledge. It also applies to an entire period that, although Locke is certainly characteristic of, is a relatively broad swath of history that is perhaps unfair to simply lump Locke into. Nevertheless, digging deeper into Locke’s theories, particularly his notion of abstract ideas, does seem to ultimately support an argument of gender bias.

In order to apply Walker’s critique of Locke’s *Essay* it is necessary to examine Locke’s conception of the process of abstraction that connects *words* to *ideas*. In Book II ‘of Ideas’ Locke describes

the use of words being to stand as outward marks of our internal *ideas*, and those *ideas* being taken from particular things, if every particular *idea* that we take in, should have a distinct name, names must be endless. To prevent this, the mind

makes the particular *ideas* received from particular objects, to become general....

This is called *ABSTRACTION*, whereby *ideas* taken from particular beings, become general representatives of all of the same kind..." (64)

This process, in itself, seems harmless enough on the surface, and resembles in form similar classical Aristotelian and Platonic arguments of abstraction from philosophy. However, to illustrate his arguments, Locke frequently appealed to his famous 'historical plain' method of argument whereby he demonstrates the process by which his theories were carried out over a period of time in real life.

As Walker points out, the difficulty lies in the illustration Locke chooses to demonstrate this process and the particular beings and names he deems abstracted in the process. Locke's demonstration of how 'ideas ... become general' is:

to trace our Notions, and Names, from their beginning, and observe by what degrees we proceed, and by what steps we enlarge our *ideas* from our first infancy. There is nothing more evident, than that the *ideas* of the persons children converse with... ..are like the persons themselves, only particular. The *ideas* of the nurse and the mother, are well framed in their mind, and, like pictures of them there, represent only those individuals. The names they first give to them, are confined to those individuals; and the names of Nurse and Mamma, the child uses, determine themselves to those Persons. Afterwards, when time and a larger acquaintance has made them observe, that there are a great many other things in the world, that in some common agreements of shape and several other qualities, resemble their father and mother, and those persons they have been used to, they frame an *Idea*... ..and to that they give, with others, the name Man, for example.

And *thus they come to have a general name, and a general idea.* Wherein they make nothing new, but only leave out of the complex *idea* they had of Peter and James, Mary and Jane, that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all. (181)

This long passage that is intended to show the process of abstraction from particular beings to a general term for all like beings also serves to demonstrate what Walker calls ‘the vanishing of the female’ from Locke’s theory. Walker points out, regarding this passage, that “[w]hat is peculiar about this history of the general idea of and term for humanity is how reference to the nurse and the mother drops out” (225). The history begins with a ‘clear picture’ of the mother and nurse and ends with the general term ‘man’.

This is not to make an anachronistic attack on Locke for being a chauvinist, but to examine the systemic process by which a male gender bias permeates Locke’s very notions of language, ideas, and naming. Walker continues “the first part of the passage may lead us to expect that the general concept the child is formulating will be not that of humanity in general, but that of the woman or female since that is the more specific common ground of the particulars first described” (255). This certainly seems to make more logical sense than the conclusion Locke offers. Walker concludes that “the fade of the female is made more noticeable with the defeat of this expectation, the disappearance of the nurse, and the peculiar way in which the father is designated as residing in the originary position with the mother” (255). Given that Locke typically attempts to be precise with his logic, and in fact, the entire *Essay* is primarily concerned with the grounding of knowledge in logic: this surprising blind spot in his history of the formation of general terms speaks to more than just a simple mistake or the passive influence of the pervasive gender bias within his historical period.

Thus, it seems as though Locke's illustration of the formation of general terms contains within it an implicit argument for why the term 'man' for 'humanity' logically excludes women. Walker surmises from this "the idea of not just humanity, but the male sex is designated by the ostensibly general and asexual term 'Man'. In the duplicity of this general term the sex of men survives the mental abstraction that would cut out any idea of it—in the name of humanity, the sex of men is saved (258). Ironically, the demonstrable fact that Locke's use of the general term 'Man' has a double meaning of both 'humanity' and 'men' is precisely the type of 'double reference' or 'double conformity' Locke wanted his theory of language to combat. With this argument in mind, new meaning can perhaps be found in Roxana's declaration of "I wou'd be a *Man-Woman*" (Defoe 171). Perhaps Roxana's protagonist is attempting to salvage the deleted female from Locke's terminology. Roxana, a character who is abandoned by her husband and then coerced into prostituting herself to her landlord in order to provide shelter and food for her children, desires nothing more than the ability to earn and manager her own finances. Locke's political theory that criticizes monarchical rule in favor of democratic process provides the key ideas of rights to liberty and property that enable Roxanna to articulate her desires and critique the inequality of the institution of marriage in her time.

Whether or not Defoe was particularly influenced by Locke is perhaps incidental to performing a Lockean reading of *Roxana*, but there is evidence to suggest that Locke had more than a passing influence on Defoe. In his essay "Defoe's Theory of Fiction," Maximillian E. Novak asserts that "[Defoe] had read the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* at least as early as 1705" (662). Novak argues further that "so far from being indirect Locke's influence on Defoe's Theory of Fiction is a major cause for his realistic technique." Novak provides many examples of both Defoe's ideas and technique having been influenced by the philosophy of

Locke. He even concludes that “Defoe's belief in the shaping influence of environment on character, which pervades his fiction, may be partly credited to Locke.... In his attitude toward reality, then, Defoe appears to have been a disciple of Locke” (662). Thus, Defoe not only read Locke, but there is evidence to suggest that Locke’s *Essay* actually had a formative influence on Defoe’s style. It is not implausible then, to further argue that Defoe was at least familiar with Locke’s political and religious views. It is possible that, Defoe’s protagonist in the text *Roxana*, when attempting to articulate Enlightenment views on liberty and natural rights, has also assimilated the same problematic aspects of Lockean language and identity theory. Furthermore, it is this assimilation that contributes to the character *Roxana*’s failed feminist liberation, regardless of what Defoe’s authorial intent may have been for her.

Roxana’s attitude toward desire and deception seem to mirror Locke’s attitude toward the seductiveness in Rhetoric. In his famous denunciation of rhetoric Locke writes “ ‘Tis evident how much Men love to deceive, and be deceived since Rhetoric, that powerful instrument of Error and Deceit... is publicly taught.... And ‘tis in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein Men find pleasure to be deceived” (508). Thus Locke is satirically acknowledging the power and pervasiveness of rhetoric while also portraying it as negative. In a strikingly similar passage Defoe has Roxana quote a limerick:

[i]t cannot be doubted but that I was the easier to perswade myself of the Truth of such Doctrine as this, when it was so much for my Ease, and for the Repose of my Mind, to have it be so. In Things we wish, tis easie to deceive; / What we would have, we willingly believe” (68)

An interesting note from the editor, John Mullen, is that this limerick could not be found in any archive and was possibly coined by Defoe himself. The resemblance of the two passages may be

only a trivial coincidence, but it is important to note that Roxana is debating internally with herself here, and furthermore, that the entire text basically functions as a rhetorical argument between Roxana and herself.

Melinda Snow argues for this view in the essay “Arguments to the Self in Defoe’s *Roxana*”, Snow writes that the text *Roxana* has a “...rhetorical complexity not found in Defoe’s other fiction” (524). Snow suggests that “...in reading *Roxana*, one hears the narrator’s argument and overhears Roxana’s ongoing arguments to herself” (524). This view positions the reader as an Aristotelian auditor to a rhetorical debate between the old Roxana reflecting on her past, and the young Roxana lost in the present recollection of that past. This makes the entire text a showcase of the effects of rhetoric, and ultimately, the young Roxana, grasping for liberation, fails. The reader learns at the end of the narration, that the narrator “fell into a dreadful Course of Calamities” (Defoe 329), thus re-affirming the Lockean distrust of rhetoric.

Of course, Roxana not only argues against herself, but against her would-be suitors, and in these arguments against marriage Roxana’s rhetorical skill reaches its greatest heights. Additionally, these arguments are also the key moments when Lockean views on liberty and natural rights are invoked. To the proposal of marriage from the Dutch Merchant Roxana replies “[t]hat the very Nature of the Marriage-Contract was, in short, nothing but giving up Liberty, Estate, Authority, and every-thing, to the Man, and the Woman was indeed, a meer Woman ever after, that is to say, a Slave” (148). Here Roxanna is making a rhetorically powerful statement that also employs several of Locke’s political notions. Amongst the many of his terms explicitly mentioned Roxana is also implicitly relying on Locke’s idea that an individual cannot rationally sell themselves into slavery. That notion alone should have been enough to cause a drastic reform in the coverture doctrine of marriage, but as has been shown, technically speaking, the

law chose to attach meaning to only one dimension of the term “man”. Thus, “man” meaning male and not men and women, women are excluded from all the protections allotted in Locke’s political theory. And it is Locke himself who provides the underlying philosophical basis for this process in his theory on abstraction of general terms.

In other words, by employing the terminology of Locke to speak out for her freedom Roxana has inadvertently invoked a patriarchal gender bias into her language. This gender bias of terminology is so profound that the effect is immediate. Apparently, the meaning of the words liberty and freedom are inverted if the speaker is female. This is shown by the Dutch merchant’s reply to Roxana that “Dear Madam, you argue for Liberty at the same time that you restrain yourself from that Liberty, which God and Nature has directed you to take; and to supply the Deficiency, propose a vicious Liberty, which is neither honourable or religious; will you propose Liberty at the Expence of Modesty?” (157). Thus the very definition of Liberty entails a masculine gender bias such that Roxana is denied access to it on the grounds that the only Liberty women should enjoy is the domestic freedom of a wife. This of course invokes Locke’s political theories on the private and public sphere, which have been argued by some to be empowering for women and seen by others as confining for women. Nevertheless, those issues shall be left aside for now as they are perhaps beyond the specific scope of this linguistic analysis of Locke.

Perhaps the most revealing moment of this linguistic bias occurs in a debate with Sir Robert Clayton, an actual British merchant banker who lived from 1629 to 1707 and who functions as Roxanna’s financial advisor in Defoe’s text. This is where Roxana herself draws attention to the linguistic aspect of her arguments for freedom. She declares that

...I did not understand what Coherence the Words Honour and Obey had with the Liberty of a *Free Woman*; that I knew no Reason the Men had to engross the whole Liberty of the Race, and make the Women, notwithstanding any despairity of Fortune, be subject to the Laws of Marriage, of their own making; that it was my Misfortune to be a Woman, but I was resol'd it shou'd not be made worse the Sex; and seeing Liberty seem'd to be the Men's property, I wou'd be a *Man-Woman*; for as I was born free, I wou'd die so" (171)

Here Roxana is re-asserting, for herself, the gender equality of male and female, and she is pointing out that the entirety of patriarchal oppression is based upon an abuse of language. Males are deliberately misusing linguistic terms for their benefit, and denying women access to the same liberating terms that men declare sacred and 'inalienable'. Of course, Sir Robert replies that she "talk'd a kind of *Amazonian* Language,"(171) but in his dismissal of her he too draws attention to the issue of language. Ironically, the language she is speaking should be perfectly familiar to him because it is the very basis upon which he is acting as a wealthy free agent, but those same words used by a female speaker suddenly sound bizarre.

This emphasis on the abuse of language for the benefit of patriarchal oppression is of course not to ignore the various social, economic, religious, and educational methods by which women have been oppressed, but instead is meant to illustrate the process by which language that should have benefited women only served to further oppress them. As Peadar writes, "Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* can serve to exemplify these tensions because it articulates values that served as seeds for modern feminism(s) while paradoxically participating in the construction of a discursive system that has been used to oppress women" (74). In the case of Roxana, it would seem that the Lockean conception of language as a private process by

which an individual's words correspond only to ideas in their mind further confines her. When she speaks of liberty for women she is speaking for herself and by herself. The ideas in her mind and the words she uses to express them conflict with the male gender bias of her period, and communication breaks down. Thus Roxana is trapped in patriarchal control both physically in her life and linguistically in her words. What she lacks is a social network of women to share in her ideals and create new conventional uses of language. Seen this way, whether or not Defoe intended it, the text *Roxana* becomes an argument for a collective woman's movement, inspired by the words of Locke, but breaking free of his gender-bias by redefining his terminology to include women. If, as Locke argues, language is arbitrary and established by convention, then Roxana's struggle anticipates a woman's movement that could ascribe new, more inclusive, conventional meanings to the language of liberty.

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