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*“As Trade and Traders increase, so must industry and ingenuity: and there are at this day, such a great plenty of Whores, that to live well, and continue in that state, it is necessary to understand more than what is vulgar and common”*

– The Whore’s Rhetorick

### **The Role of the Prostitute in England c. 1660-1810: Female Capitalist or Sinful Victim?**

Prostitution has existed throughout the course of human history but the sex trade was particularly rampant in England between 1660-1815, an era in which market capitalism took hold at the expense of traditional moral, social, religious, familial and legal codes. The rise of prostitution is concomitant with the transition from an agrarian to capitalist culture, where the commodification of human life meant that everything was ‘for sale’. Participation in the sex trade became inextricably linked to London, a microcosm of urban excess. In *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis* (1806), London magistrate Patrick Colquhoun estimated the population of prostitutes in London to be around 57,500 in 1797, a sum that comprises 4.5% of the total urban population<sup>1</sup>. Prostitutes were often perceived as ubiquitous commodities in London, with William Blake’s friend John Stedman observing in his diary in August of 1795 that he had ‘Met 300 whores in the Strand’<sup>2</sup>. Although prostitution was illegal during this period, prostitution was generally condoned due to popular demand for the profession. Both prostitutes and brothel owners were able to manipulate the public’s implicit acceptance of its existence as well as the loose enforcement of the legal system to continue their business.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis* (London: H. Baldwin and Son, New Bridge-Street, Blackfriars, 1806), p. 340.

<sup>2</sup> David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 3rd edn (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), p. 291.

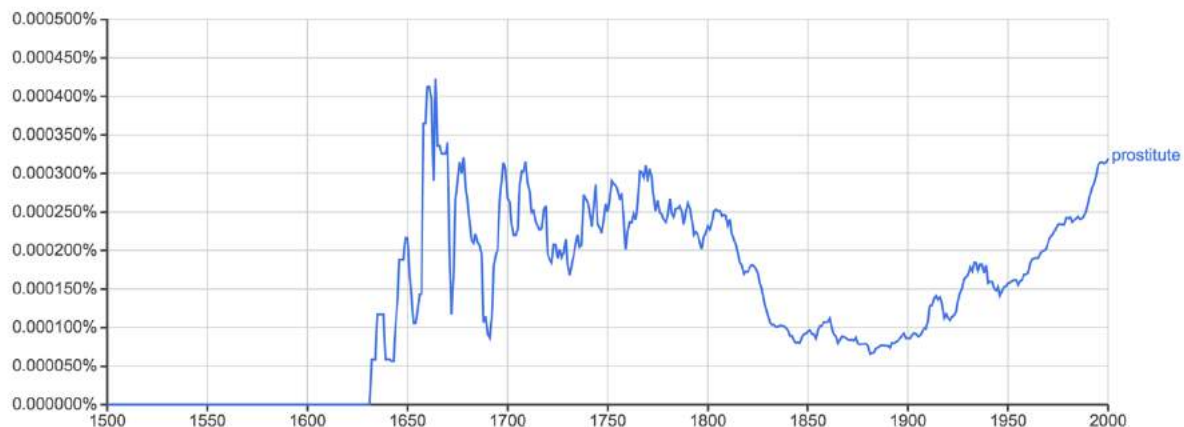


Figure 1. Google Ngram Viewer for the word 'prostitution' between 1500-2000

The preoccupation prostitution in historical texts from 1660-1815 illustrates the widespread concern about the sex trade during this period but the mixed public sentiment regarding prostitution begs the question as to whether prostitution was empowering for the female or disempowering due to their inherent victimization. Views towards prostitution were divided during this period, with some perceiving prostitutes as lascivious whores that violate the tenants of Christianity others who saw prostitution as arising out of economic necessity. The unease with which individuals approached prostitution indicates anxieties about the fluidity of societal structures, which enabled more freedoms for women. In the late seventeenth century, the treatment of prostitutes in a series of proto-pornographic literature called the 'Whore Dialogues' adhered to the former view. They depicted prostitutes as 'poisonous vermin, which live upon the ruin and destruction of many Families'<sup>3</sup> because prostitutes can 'destroy miserable man with a single entrance'<sup>4</sup>. Such views are consistent with religious rhetoric which portray women as harbingers of sin, prone to leading men into

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<sup>3</sup> *The Wandering Whore. Dialogue between Magdalena a Crafty Bawd, Julietta an Exquisite Whore, Francion a Lascivious Gallant, And Gulman a Pimping Hector* (London, 1660)

<sup>4</sup> *Ferrante Pallavicino, The Whore's Rhetorick* (London: I. Obolensky, 1683), p. 20. All subsequent references to this text will be in quotation marks with page numbers.

temptation in the vein of the biblical Eve who committed the original sin that instigated the downfall of man. Collier's *Essays upon several moral subjects* (1700) promulgates the abject immorality of prostitution by citing the Old Testament, a text that deems fornication and co-habitation outside marriage sinful: 'In the first Ages of the World, and long before the Mosaic Institution, co-habitation without Marriage, was look'd on as great Wickedness.'<sup>5</sup> Marriage was considered an act of 'holy matrimony', binding two souls in eternal bliss, but prostitution challenged that notion and those who feared the potentiality of prostitution often used religion as a means to reign in the sex trade at the end of the seventeenth century.

England witnessed a departure from the social liberalism of the Restoration period to the staunch moral censorship following the overthrow of James II in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The moral reform movement between the late 1680s and mid-1730s adopted a stance towards prostitution that mirrored that of the Whore Dialogues and Collier's *Essays* as the immorality of prostitution was brought to the forefront of English politics, with individuals calling for a 'reformation of manners'. Morality laws existed in the past but had not been strictly enforced, which led to the founding of the Society of the Reformation of Manners in 1691. They initiated movements such as the 'suppression of publick bawdy houses' in London, where a coalition raised money to legally persecute bawds and brothel frequenters, and brought lawsuits against playwrights whose plays were morally insufficient. The reforms proposed by the Society emphasized prosecution over rehabilitation and often used dubious means to gather information about immoral behaviour such as paying informants through a network of 'moral guardians'<sup>6</sup> and is demonstrated in *Figure 2*, where the prostitute betrays her client to the authorities.

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Collier, *Essays upon Several Moral Subjects* (London: R. Sare and H. Hindmarsh, 1700).

<sup>6</sup> Rictor Norton, *Reformation Necessary to Prevent Our Ruin* (London: 1727)



**Figure 2.** William Hogarth, *Industry and Idleness*, Plate 7, British Museum (1747).  
“The idle apprentice return’d from sea & in a garret with a common prostitute.”

The public’s attitude towards moral reformers began to shift from the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century as their initiatives were seen as discriminatory towards the poor, blurring the distinction between prostitutes and those who persecuted them. As Madan observed in his *Treatise on female ruin* (1781), ‘[t]o punish a poor deserted creature for being a prostitute, when it is put out of her power to force her seducer to provide for her as the divine law enjoins, is equally cruel and foolish.’<sup>7</sup> The role of the prostitute became reconfigured in literature and popular rhetoric to emphasize the prostitute’s victimization. In Dingey’s *Proposals for Establishing a Public Place for Penitent Prostitutes* (1758), he depicts prostitutes as ‘Objects of Compassion [...] poor, young, thoughtless Females, plunged into ruin by those temptations, to which their very youth and personal advantages exposes them’. He suggests that prostitutes have been exploited by a male-driven economy, ‘[s]urrounded by snares, the most artfully and industriously laid, snares laid by those

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Madan, *Thelyphthora, or, A treatise on female ruin, in its causes, effects, consequences, prevention, and remedy : considered on the basis of the divine law under the following heads, viz. marriage, whoredom, and fornication, adultery, polygamy, divorce : with many other incidental matters, particularly including an examination of the principles and tendency of Stat. 26 Geo. II. c. 33, commonly called The marriage act. v. 2.* (London: J. Dodsley, 1781).

endowed with superior faculties’<sup>8</sup>. Although misogynistic in its suggestion that women are intellectually incapable of defending themselves against ‘snares’ that have been placed upon them by society, authors began to frame prostitutes as victims rather than the perpetrators of urban crime. The establishment of the Magdalen Hospital for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes, which provided a rehabilitative space to protect prostitutes from being ‘seduced’, was a testament to the success of the humanitarian approach to prostitution. By the mid-eighteenth century, public sentiment was largely unanimous in its opinion that prostitution could not be eradicated and that rehabilitation was a more sensible alternative.

The waves of reform that occurred this period are intertwined with the development of the novel as writers became interested in the moral responsibilities of literary realism. Prostitution was an accepted part of the urban space during this period but the clash between the uninhibited social passions of the Restoration period and the moral censorship under William and Mary is evident in the narratives that surround prostitution. Bullough affirms this shift in attitude by stating ‘eighteenth-century reformers regarded [the prostitute] more as a victim’ compared to ‘religiously oriented writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’, who perceived the figure of the prostitute as the living embodiment of sin. He also postulates that ‘most of the concern expressed by writers in the last half of the eighteenth century was economically based. The eighteenth-century reformer saw the prostitute as a victim of her economic situation; at the same time reformers recognized that prostitution for many was an economic necessity’<sup>9</sup>. The preoccupation with prostitution in eighteenth-century literary and visual works, be it the depiction of prostitutes as cunning or victims of their own plight, are reflective of wider anxieties regarding urbanization and commercialization. This is

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Dingley, *Proposals for Establishing a Public Place of Reception for Penitent Prostitutes* (London: W. Faden, 1758).

<sup>9</sup> Vern L. Bullough, ‘Prostitution and Reform in Eighteenth-Century England’, in *‘Tis Nature’s Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality During the Enlightenment*, ed. by Robert P. Maccubbin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 61–74 (p. 61).

consistent with Carter's argument, which suggests that 'literary and visual representations depicted the practice of prostitution in the city in a carefully mediated fashion that aimed to enforce dominant social values, preserve cultural norms and apportion blame and responsibility'<sup>10</sup>. In this regard, prostitution was a threat to patriarchal order as it enabled women to accumulate financial capital through their own means rather than relying on patriarchal prerogatives.

Defoe explores female capitalism in *Roxana*, where the emphasis on the accumulation of capital and financial transactions is considered by Marshall to be a 'veiled autobiography'<sup>11</sup> of Defoe's experience with being a writer in an economically precarious market. The beginning of the novel details Roxana's economic plight as she is thrust in a situation where she has been abandoned by her husband and left to poverty with five children and 'not one farthing subsistence for them, other than seventy pounds in money, and what few things of value I had about me, which, though considerable in themselves, were nothing to feed a family, and for a length of time too'<sup>12</sup>. The description of Roxana's dejection during this period elicits sympathy but would have also been empathetic for a contemporary audience due to a mutual anxiety towards the instability of market forces. Roxana's drive towards prostitution exemplifies the need for women to sell their bodies out of economic necessity, with sex functioning as a form of currency for women to purchase social advancement and transforming commodification into an ironic means to achieve female liberation in a capitalistic world: 'I receiv'd his Kindness at the dear Expence of Body and Soul, mortgaging Faith, Religion, Conscience and Modesty, for (as I may call it) a Morsel of

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<sup>10</sup> Sophie Carter, *Purchasing Power: Representing Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century English Popular Print Culture (British Art & Visual Culture since 1750: New Readings)*. (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shafiesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Roxana the Fortunate Mistress Or, a History of the Life and Vast Variety of Fortunes of Made..* (United Kingdom: Oxford Paperbacks, 1998), p. 12. All subsequent references to this text will be in quotation marks with page numbers.

Bread' (38). The first-person narrative provides an autobiographical account of Roxana's life, forcing the reader to see from the perspective of a prostitute and sympathize with her plight. She adopts a confessional tone throughout the novel, directly speaking to the reader in order to offer a realistic portrayal of the female struggle for economic survival and imbue the narrative with a didactic purpose: 'If you have any regard to your future happiness, any view of living comfortably with a husband, any hope of preserving your fortunes, or restoring them after any disaster, never, ladies, marry a fool' (8). Roxana is victimized by society but finds a means to turn victimization into an economic opportunity, which is why Rosenthal believes that Roxana's prostitution demonstrates the 'complex experience of negotiating a radically unstable financial world with only the body's labour and imagination's capacity as resources'<sup>13</sup>. She possesses the skills necessary to manipulate the social world to her advantage, exemplifying the theatricality of the social world.

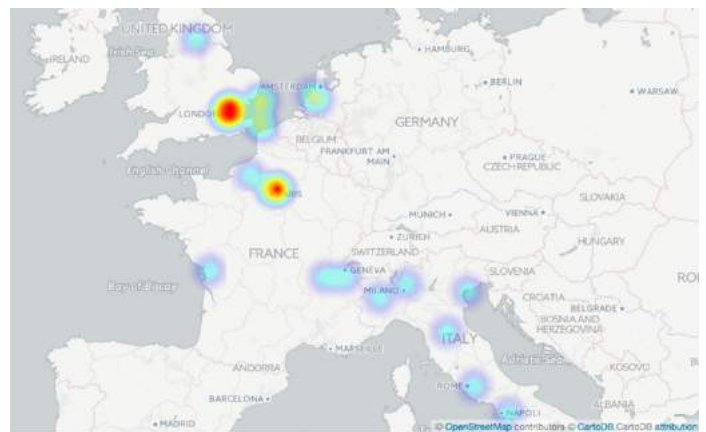
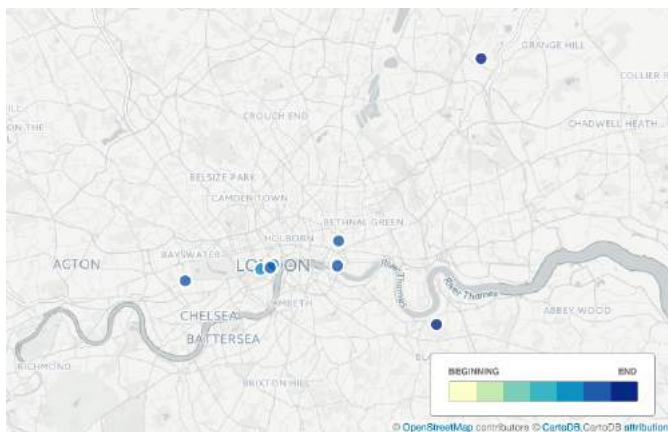
Roxana masters her situation through social performance, which is inextricably lined to the culture of theatre. The notion of prostitution as an 'art' is steeped in the long-standing tradition of associating prostitution with theatre as Mudge notes that female playwrights such as 'Behn, Manley, and Haywood became the standard bearers for a dangerously impassioned popular culture precisely at the time that the nascent literary establishment began policing its errant fictions'<sup>14</sup>. The theatre functions as an extended metaphor throughout the novel as Roxana's chameleon-like tendencies, 'putting a new Face' by switching identities from Madmoiselle de Beveau to the Countess of Wintelsheim, evokes a world of economic uncertainty where the stringent social order of the past was thrown into constant flux due to emergent capitalism. Like prostitution, the theatre is a socially subversive space that promotes social freedom and mobility. Roxana is a character that fully utilizes the

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<sup>13</sup> Laura J. Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Bradford Keyes Mudge, *The Whore's Story: Women, Pornography, and the British Novel, 1684-1830* (United States: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 227.

theatricality of the urban space by mastering her situation and claiming ownership over her body, echoing the sentiments expressed in *The Whore's Rhetorick*, where the author states that the rhetoric of prostitution is capitalistic in nature: 'As Trade and Traders increase, so must industry and ingenuity: and there are at this day, such a great plenty of Whores, that to live well, and continue in that state, it is necessary to understand more than what is vulgar and common' (36). The figure of the prostitute is presented as theatrical and socially mobile, allowing Roxana to enjoy the financial and geographical freedoms of emergent capitalism. This can be observed in *Figure 3*, where Roxana starts off in East London – a traditionally working class neighbourhood in London – before living in a more upper class neighbourhood like Mayfair and ending up in the geographical fringes of London when she loses her wealth at the end of the novel. *Figure 4* demonstrates the geographical mobility afforded to Roxana as a result of her capital accumulation in addition to the fact that she mostly frequents epicentres of wealth and trade during this period: London, Paris and Amsterdam.



**Figure 3.** Roxana's order of appearance mapped geographically **Figure 4.** Heat map of Roxana's movement throughout the world

Roxana embodies the market-based discourse perpetuated by Defoe as she navigates the world through marketplace strategies. She exploits emergent capitalism through her body, which Sherman interprets to be a reprise of Defoe's *Lady Credit* because like *Lady Credit*, Roxana becomes a representation of the marketplace and treads the stark dichotomy between



between Lady and Mistress<sup>15</sup>. She resists domestication by the Dutch Merchant in order to maintain financial independence, informing him that she had ‘different notions of matrimony from what the received custom had given us of it [...] a woman was a free agent as well as a man, and was born free, and, could she manage herself suitably, might enjoy that liberty to as much purpose as the men do’ (147). Defoe subverts the marriage plot of early amatory fictions such as Eliza Haywood’s *Love in Excess* and Madam de La Fayette’s *Princess de Cleves* by appropriating the tropes of material extravagance, superficial idealism and courtship rituals but having the heroine pursue financial capital rather than men. She spouts Enlightenment ideals, functioning as a proto-feminist figure when she suggests that ‘the very nature of marriage contract, was in short, 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’ (148). Prostitution deviates from the marital framework by having the woman responsible for her own financial capital and Roxana’s sense of economic empowerment illustrates that she is not merely a prostitute but a self-proclaimed ‘man-woman, for as I was born free, I would die so’ (171). She defies the patriarchal notion that women cannot be financially independent unless tied to a man, which impels her to go against gender norms in order to succeed in a male-driven, capitalistic world.

The contradictory nature of achieving female liberty in a capitalistic world is similarly explored in Cleland’s *Fanny Hill*, where the sexual relationship between human beings become commoditised and codified as objects. Haslanger believes that the depersonalization of the narrative, which rarely emphasizes negative emotions such as sadness and fear (as illustrated in Figure 5), renders Fanny and the other prostitutes ‘set pieces of a sexual

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<sup>15</sup> Sandra Sherman, *Finance and Fictionality in the Early Eighteenth Century: Accounting for Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

encounter, objects that must be imaginable as persons'<sup>16</sup>. Much as Roxana is a literal and figurative product of commercial culture, Fanny is a commodity but her actions indicate that achieving freedom as a female during this period necessitated adherence to the laws of commodification. Sex functions as a powerful currency in a city like London, which was a breeding ground for sexual vices. In a Marxist reading of *Fanny Hill*, Gautier argues that the novel challenges the bourgeois construction of what constitutes a woman's sexuality, identity and maternity by making that construction legible to the reader before exposing it as ludicrous<sup>17</sup>. The aesthetic representation of the body is one that sees each part as objects; sexual organs such as breasts are described as 'two hard, firm, rising hillocks, that just began to shew themselves' and the vagina as 'young tendrils of that moss, which nature has contrived at once for use and ornament'<sup>18</sup>. Cleland's emphasis on autonomous sexual organs and the objectification of the female body allows the body to be mapped onto the commoditised values of the bourgeois world, coding sexual relations between human beings as relations between 'things'. Fanny's realization of this causes her to adjust herself so that she can become 'a player in the eighteenth century marketplace of economic individualists' (476). As such, the pornographic novel becomes an essential product of the bourgeois cultural narrative, which would not have been possible prior the rise of capitalism.

The fact that Fanny and Roxana both come to see their bodies as products in a commoditized world is simultaneously empowering and disempowering; they are both commodified by society but harness the powers of commodification to become active agents, ultimately exploiting rather than becoming a victim of capitalistic values. In this regard,

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<sup>16</sup> Andrea Haslanger, 'What Happens When Pornography Ends in Marriage: The Uniformity of Pleasure in *Fanny Hill*', *ELH*, 78 (2011), 163–88 (p. 168) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2011.0002>>. All subsequent references to this article will be in quotation marks with page numbers.

<sup>17</sup> Gary Gautier, 'Fanny Hill's Mapping of Sexuality, Female Identity, and Maternity', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 35 (1995), 473–91 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/450893>>.

<sup>18</sup> John Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, ed. by J. Clel (United Kingdom: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), p. 16.

prostitution can be configured as a form of female capitalism because it gives women agency. However, the Cleland and Defoe's differing approach to the prostitution narrative and the fate of the titular prostitute in *Fanny Hill* and *Roxana* complicates the extent to which prostitutes should be viewed as empowered female capitalists or sinful victims. Unlike *Roxana*, *Fanny Hill* is a novel that chronicles a life of prostitution ending in a happy marriage. Haslanger believes that *Fanny Hill* 'offers a crucial commentary on *Pamela* and on the marriage plot in general because it tests the ability of marriage to extend retroactive consent and excuse previous harm' (164). Fanny is a character that aligns more traditionally to the marriage plot as the narrative of *Fanny Hill* implies that marriage enables vice to become virtue. The coming together of man and woman under the law is a process that the marriage plot portrays as a form of mutual happiness. Marriage legitimizes prostitution in *Fanny Hill*, allowing Fanny to achieve happiness at the end of the novel, whereas Roxana loses her wealth and is left to a miserable fate.

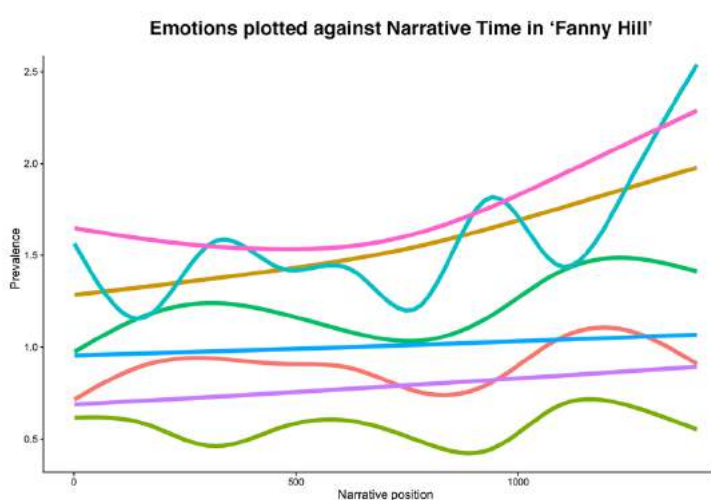


Figure 5

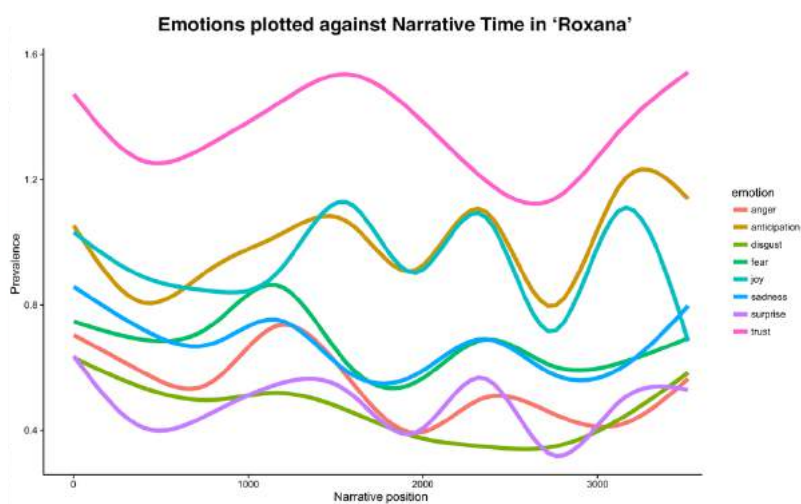


Figure 6

The contradictions in the depiction of and attitude towards prostitution in *Fanny Hill* and *Roxana* is evident in the novels' narrative structure. *Figure 5* and *Figure 6* are data visualizations of the change in emotional sentiment throughout the narrative structure of

*Fanny Hill* and *Roxana*. Sentiment analysis was conducted on both texts using the R programming language in order to identify data points for the prevalence of each emotion before the results were visualized as a graph to show the emotional changes throughout the narrative. The instances of joy in the narrative trajectory of both novels indicates that Fanny and Roxana start off with a relatively similar degrees of joy but the ending of *Fanny Hill* shows a marked increase in joy whilst *Roxana* suggests a marked decrease to reflect the situational differences faced by the two protagonists: Fanny ends up married to a man she loves and achieves financial stability whilst Roxana ends up alone in a state of abject poverty. The levels of trust, surprise and anticipation are indicative of the emotional fluctuations that Roxana is subject to as well as the dramatic plot changes that occur throughout the novel. The general instability of emotion in *Roxana* – illustrated by the peaks and troughs in the *Figure 6* – provides a stark commentary on the morality of prostitution since emotional and situational fate often correlates with moral interpretations of literature.

Compared to *Fanny Hill*, *Roxana* follows a strict moral theme as the novel's structure tracks the moral decay of Roxana's journey as a prostitute, from the virtuousness of poverty to the corruptness of wealth. Roxana's emphasis on her own 'Wickedness' and her pleas 'not to make the Story an Incentive to the Vice, which I am now such a sorrowful Penitent for being guilty of' (75) foreshadows her unhappy fate. Hume observes that 'the clarity of the moral scheme makes it plain very early that the novel is conceived almost as a morality play. Only Roxana's undoing can end it, and Defoe moves through the steps toward her ruin with tight-knit economy'<sup>19</sup>. The didactic nature of the ending is accentuated by the fact that her vices are at the verge of being unmasked only when she is prepared to marry the Dutch Merchant. Defoe utilizes the security afforded by marriage as a plot device to dramatize

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<sup>19</sup> Robert D Hume, 'The Conclusion of Defoe's *Roxana*: Fiasco or Tour de Force?', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3 (1970), 475–90 (p. 483) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2737863>>.

Roxana's fall, rendering the story one of crime and punishment. The fate of Roxana echoes that of the depiction of prostitutes in earlier writings about the immorality of prostitution like *The Evils of Prostitution* (1792), which suggests that the 'lawless love' of the sex trade takes a physical and psychological toll on prostitutes, often resulting in prostitutes self-medicating with alcohol before losing their 'charms of beauty and innocence' and ending up in poor houses or hospitals<sup>20</sup>. The former is the fate of Roxana, who becomes 'friendless, scanty of clothes' and with 'very little money' (382). She how she 'advanced in years, to give up all I could raise in the world, and on the sale of everything I had to go into one of the Proveniers' houses, where I should be settled for life' (427). The fact that *Roxana* was published during a period where prostitutes were portrayed as sinners whereas *Fanny Hill* was published when views towards prostitution began to shift contributes to the divergences in the moral structure of both novels. The figure of the prostitute began to metamorphose into one that emphasized their victimization and potential for penitence.

Views regarding prostitution were constantly changing according to the fashions of the period but moralizations about the evils of prostitution ultimately mask anxieties about female potential afforded by rise of capitalism. Although prostitutes are a victim of economic circumstances, they are not 'sinful victims' but victims of market forces where a woman's body is rendered her most valuable asset. Both Roxana and Fanny function as mouthpieces for the commercial energies of the period. They turn themselves into commodities, taking advantage of the emergent belief that everything is for sale, in order to gain agency and become socially mobile during a period in which everything was in a state of flux.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Evils of Adultery and Prostitution: With an Inquiry into the Causes of Their Present Alarming Increase, and Some Means Recommended for Checking Their Progress.* (London: T. Vernor, 1792)

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