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Kill Your Darlings:

Birth Control, Child Abandonment, and Infanticide in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Britain

I. Introduction

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were few ways to prevent a birth that were both effective and safe, yet single or impoverished women often had no way to provide for children. As a result, infanticide became an increasingly prominent issue in British society. It was in this context, during a period of debate and reform, that Daniel Defoe wrote *Roxana*, a novel which, as Figure 1 illustrates, is full of children—children who often remain nameless rather than becoming fully realized characters. In *Roxana*, Defoe takes a surprisingly sympathetic view toward the plight of the eighteenth century woman, a view which is complicated by his more explicitly negative positions on the topic presented in *A Treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed* (hereafter referred to as the *Treatise* for brevity). These two texts show Defoe contributing to the debate on a growing public concern—and confusion—around morality, socioeconomic inequity, and reproductive rights.

II. Historical Contexts

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, measures to prevent pregnancy were both controversial and unreliable. Certain sexual taboos and post-partum amenorrhea brought on by lactation provided protection for nursing mothers, but not all women experience amenorrhea

while nursing, and women could not expect to nurse indefinitely (McLaren 66-67). Herbal remedies and oral contraceptives were available, but as scholar Angus McLaren points out, “One presumes that most did not have the desired physiological effect,” and magical remedies—which, according to Defoe’s *Treatise*, involved “call[ing] to the Devil for help”—were understandably frowned upon in Christian society (McLaren 75, Defoe, *Treatise* 152). Indeed, Defoe goes so far as to claim that

“The Argument against taking Medicines to prevent or destroy Conception, which is the same thing, is very just, since, in the Nature of the Crime, it is as much a real Murther to destroy the one as the other, as it is as much a real Murther to kill a little Boy as a full grown Man” (Defoe, *Treatise* 150).

Defoe states that preventing birth “seems not to consist with the Character of a modest and virtuous Woman,” but just a few pages later, he concedes that for some women, who are “always subject to Abortions, or constant and dangerous Miscarriages,” or who have other health issues affecting their ability to have a healthy pregnancy, “this would alter the Case” (note that, at this time, “abortion” could refer to roughly the same thing as “miscarriage” and did not become a fully separate idea until after 1803) (Defoe 163, 165). Nevertheless, the overwhelming opinion seems to be that attempting to prevent conception was immoral.

Many herbal and oral remedies focused not on preventing conception but on causing abortion; indeed, McLaren believes that abortion was “perhaps the most important” form of birth control at this time (McLaren 114). Abortion did not become a statutory crime in England until 1803, but that does not mean that it was an ideal option (McLaren 114). An 1879 edition of the *York Herald* contains a paragraph titled “Fatal Attempt to Procure Abortion,” which recounts the court proceedings against a midwife “for causing the death of a young widow... by performing

an operation to procure abortion” (“Fatal Attempt To Procure Abortion”). An 1854 edition of the *Morning Chronicle* contains a longer story about the death of a domestic servant in an alleged abortion attempt (“Alleged Abortion”). One 1796 publication details the trial of Job Ward for the murder of Hannah Oldfield, to whom he gave arsenic “for the purpose of procuring abortion, she being with child by him” (*A True and Particular Account of the Cruel and Inhuman Murder* 1). Clearly, in the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth century, abortions were publicized as dangerous, even fatal procedures. R. Sauer notes that “it was widely asserted early in the [nineteenth] century that the only effective abortifacients were those which would also probably do grave harm to the woman”—like arsenic, for example—and that professional abortions, whether surgical or via abortifacient, were likely to have been rare (Sauer 83). Therefore, although abortion may have been one of the most common and reliable forms of birth control, it was also unappealing to many women.

If birth control was fallible and abortion both dangerous and subject to ever growing public condemnation (as evinced by the eventual passing of the 1803 law), then what solutions were available for women who did not want children? For many women, the cost of providing for a child was simply too much; some way of dealing with these children needed to be found. Jennifer Thorn’s introduction to *Writing British Infanticide: Child-Murder, Gender, and Print, 1722-1859* explains that infanticide was a widely discussed problem during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: “Broadsheets and ballads told tales of those accused of child-murder, mostly women, conjuring the deed itself and often the accused’s dying words, sometimes with illustrations....” (Thorn 13). Beyond being a gendered phenomenon, child-murder was often linked to a certain class and marital status: Thorn describes the “generic infanticidal mother” as “unmarried and desperate, frequently a domestic servant” (17). In Thorn’s opinion, it seems that

the general public viewed infanticide as a very real and common way of dealing with illegitimate children, especially amongst social classes where parents would have less excess funds to set aside for an illegitimate child.

Thorn's analysis of the generic infanticidal mother is in keeping with textual accounts of trials from the time period. Take the case of Jane Williams, for example. As John Penrose describes in his 1741 account, Williams "lived very comfortably" in the service of "a reputable tradesman"; she was a domestic servant (Penrose 10). After the birth of her illegitimate child, however, Williams did not "[have] wherewithal to keep herself and the infant from starving" (Penrose 10). Even a woman with the necessary skills for employment, if unmarried, would apparently have trouble providing for herself and a child. Additionally, fathers were under little obligation to provide for illegitimate children. As a 1791 source details:

"though the officers of the parish may oblige [the father] to pay for [the child's] support, he will do nothing more than he is compelled to contribute, and... perhaps, to the great discredit of the understanding, the humanity and the policy of the parish, a sum paid down at once, which he considers as a compensation for his crime, and a release of every care and duty that he owed his child" (*Advice to Unmarried Women* 18-19).

Without a father to help maintain a child, women like Jane Williams were forced to seek other ways of alleviating the economic strain of parenthood.

There were some social safety nets in place to deal with children like that of Jane Williams, but especially prior to the founding of the London Foundling Hospital, the systems in place tended to have high child mortality rates and often failed to provide mothers economic relief in a timely manner. According to Penrose, "it occurred to her, to put her child upon the

parish; but that expedient she thought would be attended with so many difficulties, and delays, that she must either want bread the while, or else go through the discipline of *Bridewell*” (10). The parish would indeed accept children who could not be maintained by their own families, but as Penrose states, the process was not simple, and furthermore, the care received by these children was poor. Mortality rates were high; as Jonas Hanway states in an 1859 history, “the sooner [a child] died the less expense it would create to the parish” (Hanway 21). Hanway explains that the London Foundling Hospital was established in 1839 to curb child mortality and prevent “the frequent murders of poor miserable infants at their birth; or... exposing new-born infants to perish in the streets, or... the putting out of such unhappy foundlings to wicked and barbarous nurses, who... do often suffer them to starve for want of due sustenance or care”, but infanticide continued to be an issue throughout the nineteenth century (Hanway 17).

Jane Williams, unable to depend upon parish care, was convinced by her lover to murder her child to save herself, and she was ultimately executed for her crime (Penrose 10). Penrose’s account is clearly one of the “Broadsheets and ballads” depicting the story and dying words of an archetypal infanticidal mother, but actually, as the nineteenth century began, infanticide became more tacitly accepted by British society than such accounts suggest (Thorn 13). Writing in 1863, George Greaves explains that for a child to be considered murdered, it had to have been alive at the time of being fully born; apparently, even after 1803, abortion—killing a child before birth was completed—was not a crime of the same level as murder (Greaves 20). Greaves complains that “[A] woman, acquitted on a charge of child-murder, may be found guilty of the offence of ‘concealment of birth,’ which is declared to be a misdemeanour punishable at the utmost with two years’ imprisonment” (22). Sauer explains further:

“...a law passed in England in 1623 and in Scotland in 1690 made some

alleged infanticides the only offences in which the burden of proof was on the defendant rather than on the Crown. If a woman secretly bore an illegitimate child which was later found dead, it was the woman's responsibility to prove her innocence, rather than the Crown's to prove her guilt.

“The unfairness of these laws, however, resulted in most juries refusing to convict, and in 1803 the earlier acts were replaced by a more equitable law.... The 1803 Act also created a lesser offence, concealment of birth. If the birth and death of a child were concealed, but there was insufficient evidence of infanticide, a woman was still liable to imprisonment for up to two years” (Sauer 82).

Sauer claims that “coroners returned murder verdicts in only the most obvious cases of infanticide, such as stabbing and beating,” but that many methods of infanticide appeared accidental; overlaying, neglect, and ‘dropping’ or abandoning are all common forms of infanticide which were difficult to prove intentional and which would therefore be punishable as “concealment of birth,” if punishable at all (Sauer 81-82). We can see then that at the same time restrictions around abortion became tighter, the punishment for infanticide became implicitly less severe.

From the mid-eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, the resources available to women and the laws around reproduction and infanticide underwent widespread discussion, resulting in social change. Because women rarely had access to reliable birth control, and because parishes could not be relied upon to care for children when their families could not, abortion and infanticide were two of the primary ways to cope with unwanted pregnancy. The 1739 establishment of the London Foundling Hospital was an early step in British social reform meant to combat infanticide. The 1803 criminalization of abortion may have been meant to curb

use of abortion as a birth control method, but the simultaneous reform of the laws regarding infanticide effectively made infanticide even more desirable; not only was infanticide safer for the mother than abortion, but it was now difficult to prosecute to the full extent of the law.

III. *Roxana* in Context

Both *Roxana* and Defoe's *Treatise* were written in the 1720s; as Figure 2 shows, much of the textual material I have discussed thus far was written after the London Foundling Hospital was founded, but naturally one assumes that some public discussion had to precede the 1739 signing of the London Foundling Hospital charter. Clearly, the *Treatise* positions itself as part of the growing discussion around birth control, abortion, and infanticide; its rhetorical purpose is, primarily, a social critique. In contrast, *Roxana* seems to not focus on children or parenting much at all; in Figure 1, one may note that only one child in the entire book receives a name, and most of the children simply drop out of the narrative once Roxana leaves their respective fathers. Nevertheless, I posit that *Roxana* uses a fictional, feminine perspective to explore many of the same societal debates which led to the reforms of the mid-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries; in this sense, *Roxana* has a similar rhetorical purpose to that of the *Treatise*, but it is presented in a different genre in order to better empathize with the women making these decisions.

Roxana's moral descent begins after her husband the brewer disappears, leaving her in a difficult financial situation with "a Family of Children on [her] Hands, and nothing to subsist them" (Defoe, *Roxana* 13). With help from a few women acquaintances, including her maid Amy, Roxana develops a plan to provide for her children so that she may stand a chance of providing for herself:

“the Children should be all carried by them to the Door of one of the Relations mention’d above... the People should be told, That if they did not think fit to take some Care of the Children, they might send for the Church-Wardens if they thought better; for that they were born in that Parish, and there they must be provided for; as for the other Child which was born in the Parish of ---, that was already taken Care of by the Parish-Officers there” (18-19).

Roxana’s relations have, up to this point, offered no assistance and appeared generally unfriendly; why would she go to them for help, instead of going directly to the parish as she does for her youngest?

First, there is the problem of the quality of parish care; Roxana remarks that “a hundred terrible things came into [her] Thoughts; *viz.* of Parish-Children being Starv’d at Nurse; of their being ruin’d, let grow crooked, lam’d, and the like, for want of being taken care of” (19). Her fears are similar to the neglect by the parish which Hanway cites as a reason for building the London Foundling Hospital. There is not a good way to avoid the parish in the 1720s, however, except to appeal to wealthier relations for aid; Defoe inserts Roxana’s worries, caused by her faultless poverty and a lack of societal provision for such cases, to highlight the impossible choice of a mother torn between watching her children starve and letting them be starved elsewhere.

Furthermore, the parish system could be dangerously impractical to a mother struggling for survival. As the case of Jane Williams shows, the amount of time it might take to have one’s child—let alone five or six children—accepted into parish care might be a hardship for a starving mother. Understandably, it could be better to force relatives to care for children in the interim between appealing for and receiving parish support; therefore, one compelling reason to send

Roxana's children to her relatives is that, even if it does not save the children from parish care, it will free up Roxana's limited resources in the short-term so that she may provide for herself. It is for this reason that, even if one's relatives simply send one's children to parish themselves, it is still beneficial to appeal for familial support.

Therefore, despite her fears and desperation, Roxana is actually a lucky single mother; women of a lower social standing, or unmarried mothers, might not have anyone on whose doorstep to leave children for which they cannot provide. Roxana's maid Amy, for example, is nearly put in such a position. Amy's socioeconomic status is exactly that of the archetypal infanticidal mother when she becomes pregnant with the jeweler's child: "unmarried and desperate, ...a domestic servant" (Thorn 17). Luckily for Amy, Roxana promises that she "wou'd take Care of the Child and her too," even claiming she will "take the Child as [her] own" (Defoe, *Roxana* 48). Amy is sent away to have her daughter in secret, Roxana mentions that they "had it nurs'd," and nothing more is said of the matter (Defoe, *Roxana* 48).

This arrangement seems very unusual. Certainly, the close relationship between Amy and Roxana is especially notable for the way it transcends socioeconomic barriers, and the fact that Roxana and Amy both have children with the jeweler only brings them closer together; yet it is an equally important step in their relationship that not only was Amy one of the women who helped Roxana manage the provision of her first five or six children, but now Roxana is helping Amy to avoid social stigma and financial ruin by ensuring her child is provided for, too. In this and in Roxana's earlier difficulties, Defoe stresses the role of women in providing support for single or abandoned mothers; in a society where fathers cannot be relied on, the burden of child-rearing often falls solely to women, and compassion between women gains extra importance.

Still, both Roxana and Amy are incredibly lucky to not have been driven to more desperate means of dealing with illegitimate children. Roxana considers herself fortunate in that her illegitimate children are unusually well provided for, and her financial position has not forced her to infanticide:

“Great Men are, indeed, deliver’d from the Burthen of their Natural Children, or Bastards, as to their Maintenance: This is the main Affliction in other Cases, where there is not Substance sufficient, without breaking into the Fortunes of the Family; in those Cases, either a Man’s legitimate Children suffer, which is very unnatural; or the unfortunate Mother of that illegitimate Birth, has a dreadful Affliction, either of being turn’d off with her Child, and be left to starve, &c. or of seeing the poor Infant pack’d off with a Piece of Money, to some of those She-Butchers, who take Children off of their Hands, as ‘tis call’d; that is to say, starve ‘em, and, in a Word, murther ‘em” (Defoe, *Roxana* 80).

She makes a point of explaining, not only that infanticide is practiced, but why it is practiced; she seems to feel sorry for the “unfortunate Mother[s]” and their “dreadful Affliction[s],” even as she implicitly lauds her own good fortune at escaping the necessity of starvation or child-murder. There is a sympathy here that is harder to find in the *Treatise* and other moralistic essays of the day.

Nevertheless, Roxana is not herself a morally upstanding character, and given the society she lives in, it would not be implausible to posit that she does commit infanticide. As Figure 1 illustrates, Roxana gives birth to six children after her husband abandons her, two of whom die as infants. The first, her daughter with the jeweler, dies at six weeks of age, and Roxana seems disappointed; she complains about the expense and travel, “all that Work... to do over again,”

and talks of making the jeweler “amends” by having a son the next year (Defoe, *Roxana* 49).

Although Roxana’s manner is surprisingly brusque, this death seems unremarkable. Her other child, however, the second son with the Prince, dies somewhat more suspiciously, drawing into question whether Roxana really has not killed any of her children.

This son is born while Roxana and the Prince are travelling in Italy; Roxana devotes only a paragraph to relating the story of this child’s birth and death, and she seems, like before, unfazed at the loss of an infant:

“...it liv’d not above two Months; nor, after the first Touches of Affection (which are usual, I believe, to all Mothers) were over, was I sorry the Child did not live, the necessary Difficulties attending it in our travelling, being consider’d” (Defoe, *Roxana* 104).

The sheer convenience of this child’s death is suspicious; it was perhaps not unusual for children not to survive their first two months—her daughter with the jeweler died at about this age as well—but as Sauer points out, the accidental death of infants was difficult to tell apart from intentional homicide, and Roxana never states how this child, nor her daughter, dies. I will not go so far as to claim that Roxana has without a doubt had this child or the daughter murdered, but certainly, the unspoken acceptance of certain forms of infanticide during this period, coupled with Roxana’s increasingly dubious moral character and her apparent lack of attachment to many of her children, does cast a shade of doubt upon her insistence, years later, that she “wou’d not murther [her] child, tho’ [she] was otherwise to be ruin’d by it” (313).

Furthermore, the page after Roxana recounts this birth and death, she pauses to explain why, despite having the assurance that her children will be well provided for, she worries about having too many: “if I bred often, it wou’d something impair me in the Great Article that

supported my Interest, I mean, what he call'd Beauty" (Defoe, *Roxana* 105). "Breeding often" is the exact opposite of a problem Roxana had before with the jeweler; before Roxana has her daughter, Amy remarks that it is surprising that Roxana is not pregnant after a year and a half of living with the jeweler (45). Defoe never directly states that Roxana does or does not use contraception; no abortions or miscarriages are mentioned, either; nevertheless, he provides her with ample motive, and she does seem to go stretches without becoming pregnant, despite having lovers. She never has as many children with any of her lovers as she had with her husband the brewer, either, so perhaps the reader may infer that it is possible that Roxana takes some measures to avoid having too many children after her disastrous first relationship.

In the *Treatise*, Defoe makes it clear that he believes that any means of contraception, abortion, or infanticide is equivalent to murder. He is sympathetic only insofar as he concedes that women with health issues and "whores" might understandably make use of contraceptive methods (Defoe, *Treatise* 163-165). In *Roxana*, the discussion of fertility and child-rearing is much more complex and empathetic to women. After she becomes a mistress, some of Roxana's children die suspiciously, and it seems possible that she sometimes uses contraception; implicitly, Defoe aligns the lurking possibility of infanticide and contraception with Roxana's growing moral fallibility. Yet the young Roxana, abandoned by her husband, is pitiable in her impossible situation, and throughout the book, Roxana expresses empathy towards other single mothers' financial inability to care for their children. Whereas the *Treatise* writes off contraceptive methods as immoral except in extreme cases, *Roxana* begins by pointing out the difficulty of providing for children once they are born; if a woman cannot reliably fall back on parish support in times of need, then it is no wonder that a woman who has become detached from the support of relatives will necessarily turn to more desperate methods. By portraying the

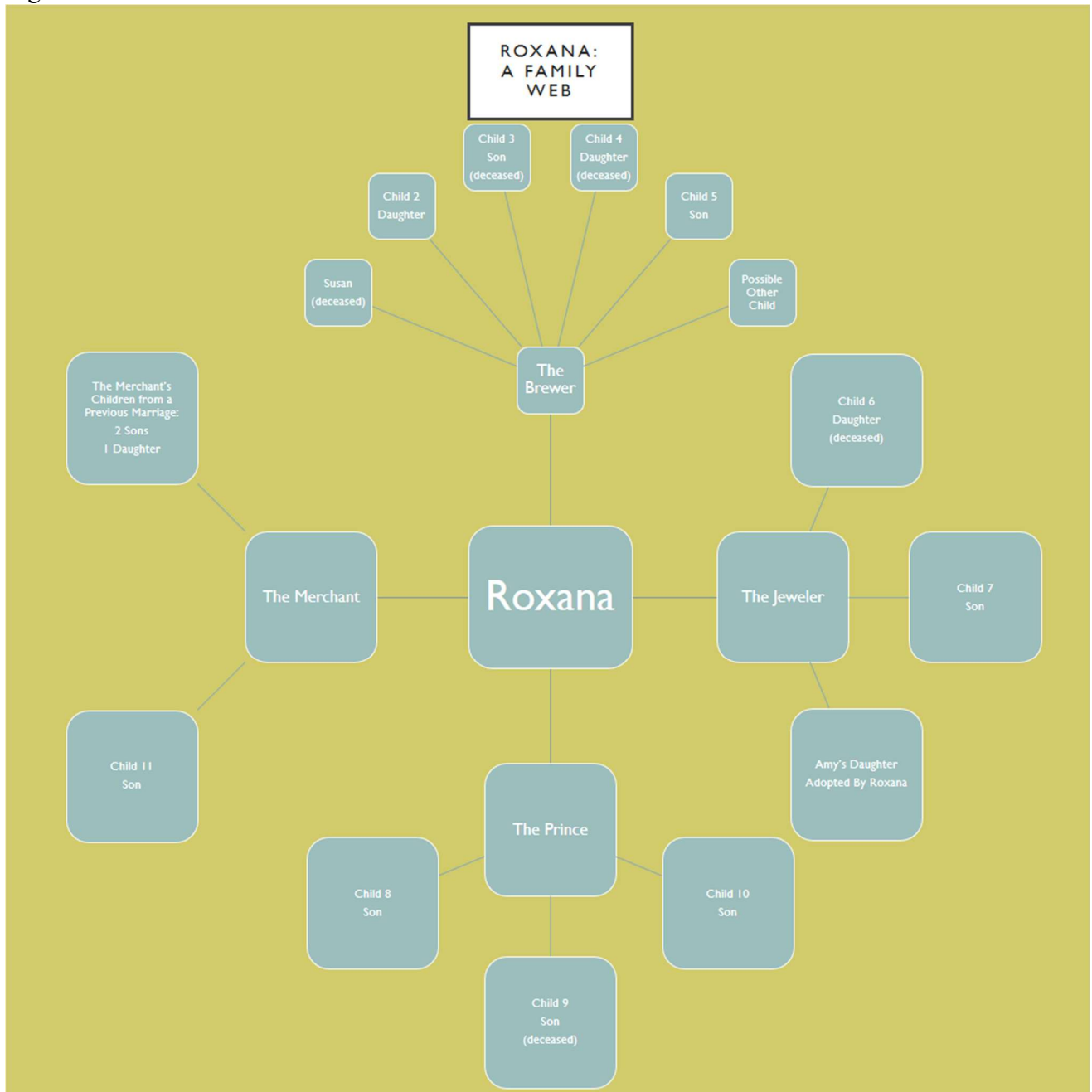
debate around contraception from the point of view of a woman, Defoe makes a compelling case for the reform of the parish system, even while continuing to support the growing societal disapproval of contraception and abortion through his characterization of Roxana as immoral and cold.

IV. Conclusion

As Figure 2 illustrates, Daniel Defoe wrote the *Treatise* and *Roxana* in the years leading up to the founding of the London Foundling Hospital, which in turn preceded changes in the laws regarding abortion and infanticide. Figure 3 shows that mentions of the words “child murder,” “abortion,” and “bastard” were less frequent in the 1720s, when Defoe wrote these pieces, than in later years, especially the period just before 1803 and the years after 1820. Although measures of term frequency can be inaccurate, this implies a trend which, given the changes happening in British society at this time, would be logical. Not only is British society invested in discussing issues around infanticide, abortion, and illegitimacy, with increasing interest as the eighteenth century ends and the nineteenth century begins, then, but Defoe wrote on these issues before they began to be widely discussed. Therefore, it is especially interesting that Defoe chose to write not only the discussion of birth control and morality found in the *Treatise* but also the more complex and compassionate views expressed in *Roxana*. These texts exhibit an unusually nuanced approach to the social and moral issues around birth control, abortion, and infanticide.

Appendix

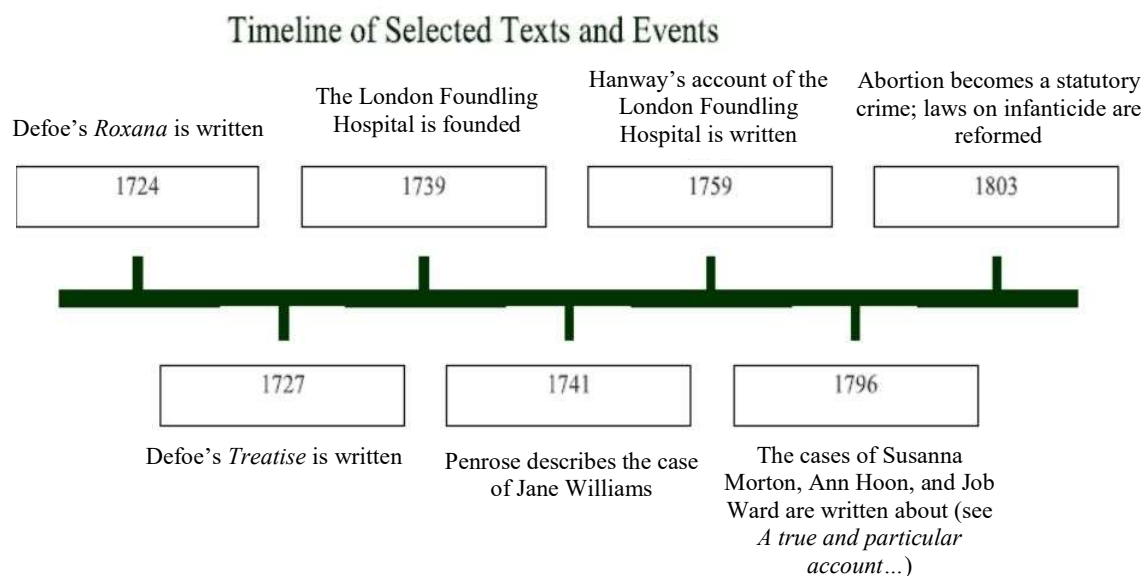
Figure 1



This web was produced using Microsoft PowerPoint.

Fig. 1. PowerPoint 2016; Microsoft; Computer software.

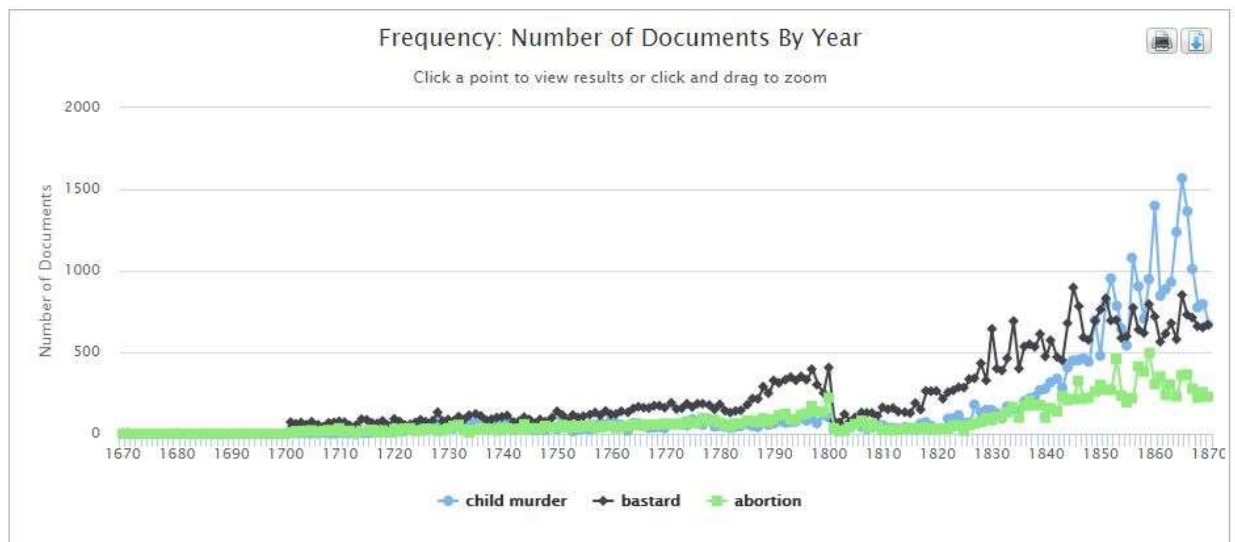
Figure 2



This timeline was produced using the softschools.com Timeline Maker. All events depicted here either refer to the publication of works which may be found in the Works Cited or to events described in these works (and elsewhere in the paper).

Fig. 2. *Timeline Maker*; Softschools.com; Web; 19 Apr. 2016;
 <http://www.softschools.com/teacher_resources/timeline_maker/>.

Figure 3



This term frequency graph was generated using the Artemis Primary Sources term frequency generator.

Fig. 3. *Artemis Primary Sources*; Gale Cengage Learning; Web.

For more visual media and discussion of birth control methods, see my wiki page at <http://english451winter2016.pbworks.com/w/page/104490268/Hoban>

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