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No Way Out: Gendered Vulnerability and Social Entrapment in Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724)

The eighteenth-century novel emerged as a powerful literary form amid profound social and economic transformation. As London expanded into a centre of commerce and spectacle, novels reflected and shaped mounting anxieties about urban life. In particular, they explored how women navigated these shifting landscapes, revealing that cities—often portrayed as sites of opportunity—were instead structured to entrap and expose them to danger. Urban life demanded social performance, requiring women to carefully curate their identities under constant surveillance, a dynamic that reinforced class hierarchies and patriarchal authority. With the rise of "possessive individualism" (Macpherson 1964), a defining ideology of the period, personal autonomy and social legitimacy became increasingly tied to self-ownership and economic agency. Yet for women, whose identities were dictated by patriarchal surveillance and marital dependency, true autonomy remained an illusion. Within this context, Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724) frame the city as a space of gendered vulnerability, where class anxiety and social mobility depend on performance and gothic entrapment. While *Evelina* initially suggests that patriarchal structures protect women from urban chaos, both Burney and Defoe ultimately reveal how these structures enable rather than prevent harassment, social danger, and gothic terror. Through staged performances and coerced social interactions, both novels expose the city not as a space of female empowerment but one where women are persistently policed, manipulated, and controlled.

In *Evelina*, Burney portrays the city as a stage where women must perform according to rigid social expectations. Yet Evelina's inability to master these performances exposes the dangers of misreading the unspoken rules of high society. She arrives in London and observes that women "[...] were more frequently served by men than by women; [...] [men] seemed to understand every part of a woman's dress better than we do ourselves" (Burney 19). This realization reinforces her growing awareness that women are not active societal participants, but objects to be appraised and claimed. London's masquerade culture heightens this dynamic; performance is essential for survival, yet Evelina struggles to assume a role that protects her from predation. Her discomfort intensifies when she is forced to get her hair dressed, making her feel alienated from her own identity: "You can't think how oddly my head feels; [...] you would hardly know me, for my face looks quite different" (Burney 19). The process physically alters her to fit elite beauty standards, reinforcing how femininity is constructed through artifice. Karin Kukkonen argues that masquerades, "[...] both literal and figurative, test a woman's social legibility, determining whether she is accepted or rendered vulnerable" (162). Unlike women who strategically use masquerades to manipulate their public image, Evelina's transformation is imposed upon her, leaving her more vulnerable to social scrutiny. Burney thus critiques how women's security in urban society depends not on virtue, but on their ability to conform to performative expectations.

While *Evelina* depicts the struggles of social performance, *Roxana* transforms the masquerade into a strategy, using calculated disguises to control her fate. Unlike Evelina, who passively experiences social scrutiny, Roxana carefully constructs her identity, recognizing that survival in the city depends on performance. She "[...] enter[ed] on a new scene of life" (Defoe 32), manipulating male perception through her clothing, speech, and demeanour. This mastery of self-fashioning is evident when she arrives at a social gathering in an extravagant dress, where "[...] the very music stopped awhile to gaze, for the dress was

indeed exceedingly surprising, perfectly new, very agreeable, and wonderful rich" (Defoe 265). Her transformation is both visual and theatrical—she wields fashion as a tool of power, controlling how others perceive her. Yet, Roxana's disguises do not grant true autonomy but reinforce her dependence on external validation and financial security. Within the framework of "possessive individualism" (Macpherson 1964), autonomy is tied to self-ownership, yet Roxana's identity is defined by transactional relationships rather than self-determination. In the eighteenth-century novel, identity is structured through social and economic exchanges, making legibility essential to survival (Lynch 169). While she appears in control, Roxana is trapped in a system where her worth depends on her ability to maintain an artificial identity. Her supposed autonomy is an illusion, reinforcing the city as a site of gendered vulnerability.

While both *Evelina* and *Roxana* depict the city as a space where women's survival depends on performance, they offer contrasting portrayals of female agency. Evelina, unable to manipulate her identity, is left vulnerable to ridicule and predation, while Roxana exploits performance to secure financial independence. Yet both novels reveal that women remain constrained by social scrutiny, where their worth depends on how successfully they conform to rigid expectations. As Kukkonen argues, "women in the eighteenth-century novel must remain legible to male spectators to secure their futures" (162). Evelina resists this system and suffers social alienation, whereas Roxana embraces it to only become trapped in a cycle of reinvention. Roxana's performance initially grants her power, but "[...] when [she] wants to move from the masquerade into the real world, she finds that honest signalling becomes a problem" (Kukkonen 166). She cannot escape the persona she has created, fearing exposure at every turn, making true autonomy impossible. This aligns with Deidre Lynch's argument that identity in the eighteenth-century novel is structured through social and economic exchanges (169)—Evelina is moulded into an acceptable role, while Roxana becomes a

prisoner of the one she crafted. Ultimately, the city is not a space of freedom but one of constant self-surveillance, where women remain dependent on societal approval.

In *Evelina*, Burney constructs the city (and its public venues) as spaces of surveillance, where women's behaviour is judged and corrected by male authority figures. From the moment Evelina enters society, she is evaluated not just for how she acts, but for how she appears. At the private ball, she recalls being "[...] frightened at the thoughts of dancing before so many people, all strangers, and, which was worse, *with* a stranger" (Burney 21), illustrating how public entertainment becomes an arena of pressure and performance. Sir Clement Willoughby exploits this dynamic, using the pretense of politeness to exert control. When he forces Evelina into a dance, she protests, "You have tormented me to death; [...] and intruded yourself upon me, against my will, for a partner" (Burney 38). This moment reveals how coercion hides beneath social ritual, with female discomfort dismissed in the name of propriety. Evelina's emotional responses—fear, nervousness, and embarrassment—emerge in involuntary reactions like laughter or hesitation. As Eugenia Zuroski argues, Evelina's laughter "[...] refuse[s] to perform the affective legibility expected of her and unsettl[es] the gendered dynamics of social observation" (167). In this context, her laughter subtly disrupts the roles imposed on her, revealing the emotional toll of constant male scrutiny.

In *Roxana*, surveillance takes on a distinctly gothic tone, as the protagonist is not merely watched but haunted by the constant threat of exposure. While Evelina is corrected in public to conform to social expectations, Roxana constructs her identity in secret and lives in fear of being recognized. Her past resurfaces in the form of her daughter Susan, whom Roxana admits "[...] haunt[ed] [her] like an evil spirit" (Defoe 465). Susan becomes a spectral presence (part memory, part threat) whose reappearance disrupts the fragile emotional boundaries Roxana has built within the city. This gothic language signals that surveillance in *Roxana* is not only external and social, but internalized and psychological. Roxana's fear is so

intense that even her facial expressions become a site of danger: “It was now the only valuable secret in the world to me, [...] if [Susan] knew me, I was undone” (Defoe 415). The novel transforms the city into a space of speculative surveillance, where women’s appearances are their currency, but this visibility also makes them vulnerable to punishment and ruin (Healey 497). Roxana’s terror of being unmasked is not just social—it’s existential. Visibility becomes a gothic threat, revealing how urban life transforms self-presentation into a fragile performance under relentless emotional and moral scrutiny.

Both Burney and Defoe depict the city as a site of female visibility, but they frame the consequences of surveillance in distinct ways. In *Evelina*, scrutiny often masquerades as moral guidance; characters like Willoughby use polite attention to subtly regulate Evelina’s behaviour. Yet Evelina’s involuntary laughter destabilizes this control by revealing that her body “[...] hosts desires that are her but not hers, [...] [exposing] that she [...] is made of more than what is proper to her subjective formation” (Zuroski 173). Drawing on the notion of “practical consciousness,” Evelina’s laughter registers cultural pressure at the level of feeling—what is lived, not just thought (Zuroski 173). Rather than complying neatly with the expectations of virtue, her laughter hints at a deeper, embodied resistance that cannot be fully disciplined or contained by male observation. In contrast, *Roxana* presents surveillance as an existential threat rather than a social correction. The mere possibility of recognition limits where Roxana can go and how she moves through the city. This dynamic “circumscrib[es] the spaces she can move through,” forcing her into self-monitoring and “counter-surveillance” (Healey 503)—a strategy that ironically reinforces her entrapment. Together, these texts reveal that women’s actions are never private. Whether under moral judgement or the threat of unmasking, their autonomy is shaped by how they are seen in the public eye.

Though often framed as a novel of manners, *Evelina* draws on gothic tropes to expose the hidden dangers lurking beneath polite society. Rather than supernatural horror, its threats emerge from everyday urban encounters marked by emotional intensity and physical coercion. In Letter twenty-one, the chariot scene with Willoughby resembles a gothic abduction, as Evelina protests, "Never, in my whole life, have I been so terrified. I broke forcibly from him, and, putting my head out of the window, called aloud to the man to stop" (Burney 98). Her terror and loss of control evoke a gothic heroine's helplessness, reimagined within the social spaces of the city. Places meant for leisure—carriages, fireworks displays, and assemblies—repeatedly turn dangerous. Carriages in the eighteenth-century, though symbols of status, often functioned as spaces of entrapment that "[...] value women's silence and complicity in the face of harassment" (Crone-Romanovski 160). The carriage becomes claustrophobic, revealing how women's movements are always contingent on male power and social expectations. In this context, the gothic register emerges—Evelina's forced confinement and emotional distress transform urban civility into a site of fear and coercion. Burney exposes how the structures that claim to protect women often facilitate their subjugation.

Roxana takes an inward approach to the gothic, using affective horror to dramatize the psychological toll of self-invention and repressed guilt. After years of reinvention, Roxana confesses, "I lived the happiest life woman could enjoy, had my former crimes never crept into my guilty conscience" (Defoe 524). Her guilt surfaces not through public exposure, but as a creeping sense of unease that reveals the fragility of the identity she has constructed. The reappearance of her daughter Susan intensifies this breakdown, functioning not just as a threat to Roxana's social status but as a spectral embodiment of the past she has tried to erase. This return of the repressed marks a shift from external danger to internal dread. In a chilling encounter, she recalls, "[...] all my blood ran chill in my veins, and a fit of trembling seized

me" (Defoe 406), underscoring how the gothic manifests through bodily effect and unresolved moral tension. These episodes limit Roxana's freedom, as "[...] her ability to move freely is severely restricted" (Healey 504). Her carefully crafted performances cannot shield her from emotional collapse; her conscience becomes the true site of entrapment. Through this psychological gothic register, Defoe exposes how female autonomy in the city is haunted—maintained only by secrecy and fear.

Both novels employ gothic tropes through the emotional and spatial realities of women navigating urban life. These novels use gothic motifs—entrapment, fear, and constraint—to critique how social structures masquerading as polite civility reproduce forms of confinement. The chariot scene in *Evelina* "[...] literalizes women's experiences of moving but getting nowhere, of traveling and never arriving [...] by showing a woman entrapped in the material object of a carriage, the property of a predatory man" (Crone-Romanovski 169). Evelina's confinement illustrates how urban spaces meant for pleasure can transform into gothic sites of entrapment, where mobility becomes a tool of social control rather than liberation. *Roxana* takes this further by exposing how urban women attempt to claim autonomy through economic and spatial self-fashioning. As Christina Healey notes, Roxana operates within a tension between appropriated space—shaped by individual agency—and dominated space, structured by institutional and social power (495). The gothic emerges through this instability, as even spaces she once controlled become claustrophobic. Eighteenth-century novels often presented themselves as rational correctives to sensationalist romance and gothic fiction, yet these novels reveal how the "realistic" social world reproduces the very gothic horrors it claims to move beyond. Through scenes of performance and entrapment, the city is exposed as a gothic landscape disguised by the rhetoric of civility.

After navigating the dangers of urban life, Evelina's story appears to resolve through her retreat into the domestic sphere—a space symbolically secured by marriage. Yet even at

the height of her apparent success, she confesses: “What a strange, unhappy circumstance, that my gratitude, though so justly excited, should be so fatal to my peace!” (Burney 336). This moment reveals the emotional cost of achieving safety through submission. Evelina is not distressed by cruelty or danger, but by the burden of being grateful for the very system that restricts her. Her marriage to Lord Orville is framed as a reward for her virtue, offering an apparent escape from the chaos and moral ambiguity of the city. At one point, she exclaims, “Your too, too great politeness oppresses me!” (Burney 365)—a telling moment where gratitude and shame collapse into one. Even kindness becomes overwhelming, signalling that Evelina’s sense of security is dependent on suppressing discomfort in the name of propriety. As Lynch argues, eighteenth-century novels equate virtue with legibility and coherence (16); Evelina becomes a “proper” woman only by disappearing into a sanctioned domestic role. Her safety is thus conditional, granted only when she withdraws from the city’s chaos into the carefully managed space of patriarchal control.

Unlike Evelina, Roxana openly resists marriage, viewing it not as a reward but as a threat to her independence. Early in the novel, she declares, “[...] never, ladies, marry a fool” (Defoe 5), rejecting the legal and economic limitations that accompany the institution. For Roxana, marriage would mean relinquishing control over her wealth, body, and choices—everything she has fought to secure through performance and reinvention. She insists, “[...] I had a mortal aversion to marrying [the Dutch merchant]” (Defoe 244), aligning herself with the logic of “possessive individualism” (Macpherson 1964), which promises autonomy through self-ownership. Yet, Defoe reveals the limits of this ideology. Without the legitimizing framework of marriage, Roxana becomes increasingly illegible to society and vulnerable to exposure. Roxana’s surveillance-filled world “[...] offers little room for a woman who exists outside institutional recognition” (Healey 494). Though she avoids marriage, she gains neither protection nor peace. Her eventual collapse (social and

psychological) suggests that women who reject patriarchal structures are left without a place in the world (Healey 494). Roxana's failure does not arise from a lack of virtue, but from the novel's refusal to imagine a stable subjectivity for women outside of marriage, casting her autonomy as unsustainable.

While *Evelina* ends with a seemingly triumphant marriage and *Roxana* concludes in ruin, both novels offer bleak visions of female possibility. Evelina is granted safety only by becoming a wife; Roxana is punished for refusing to do so. Despite their different trajectories, both narratives reaffirm that women's survival depends on their conformity to patriarchal expectations. Lynch notes that "[...] the codes of politeness regulating [spaces like the ballroom] allocate the signs of personhood as if they were a scarce resource" (165). In *Evelina*, the heroine's reward comes not through self-actualization but through emotional compliance within the structures of marriage. What appears as narrative closure masks the transformation of the heroine into a legible social object. In contrast, Roxana's performative identity cannot survive outside the systems that confine women. Her efforts to claim appropriated space are eventually overtaken by surveillance and control (Healey 494), revealing the limits of autonomy in a world where even private spaces are saturated with scrutiny. Though she initially navigates the city through calculated performance, this illusion of control unravels as boundaries between the public and private world collapse. Defoe thus exposes how capitalism and patriarchy render female self-possession impossible to maintain. Together, these outcomes reveal that the city offers no true escape: both heroines remain bound by systems of patriarchal regulation, where survival depends on performance within structures designed to limit it.

The city in the eighteenth-century novel is often imagined as a space of opportunity and transformation, yet *Evelina* and *Roxana* reveal it to be a site of gendered vulnerability, where female survival depends on performance and submission. Both Burney and Defoe

depict women navigating hostile urban environments shaped by surveillance, social judgement, and the illusion of choice. Evelina's apparent escape through marriage and Roxana's collapse into social illegibility represent two sides of the same coin: a world in which women are either contained or cast out. While the eighteenth-century novel claimed to reflect a rational social order, these texts expose the deep anxieties embedded within its form—about class mobility, female agency, and the costs of independence. By drawing on gothic tropes, Burney and Defoe demonstrate how the novel both critiques and reinforces patriarchal norms. Arguably, this contributes to ongoing conversations about the rise of the novel by showing how these texts do not simply mirror society, but actively participate in shaping its limits for women. *Evelina* and *Roxana* ultimately reveal the city not as a site of liberation, but as one of constraint—its promises of progress masking deeply entrenched systems of regulation and control.

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