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# A Bull Market for Moll Flanders: A Female Capitalizing on the Changing Economic Climate of Eighteenth Century London

Sarah Damewood

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A Bull Market for Moll Flanders: A Female Capitalizing on the Changing Economic Climate of  
Eighteenth Century London

Sarah Damewood

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Elizabeth Veisz, Thesis Director  
Dr. Gregory Chaplin, Committee Member  
Dr. Ellen Scheible, Committee Member

Moll Flanders, the title heroine of Daniel Defoe's 1722 novel, is a good-natured girl born into very unfortunate circumstances in London—the cultural and economic hub of the western world during the eighteenth century. Defoe portrays Moll as a capitalist; she is determined to make a fortune through the exchange of goods and services because she does not have the option of relying on an inheritance like a woman from a wealthy family would have had. London's rapidly changing economic climate—one transitioning from agrarian to a more commercial economy (Pollak 148)—creates what I call a “bull market” for Moll to change her future. Moll, like an investor, believes that she can make a profit despite not having any real fortune to begin with. And her biggest asset is herself; she believes that she is worth more than she has. In the pursuit to elevate her financial status, Moll simultaneously defies gender roles, or preconceived identities that determine how a male or female should behave. Moll's self-worth often challenges her assumed submissive, inferior, and domestic female gender role. The traits that Moll needs to succeed financially—indifference in emotional situations, meticulous money counting, and assuming authority in her marriages—all contribute to the distortion of gender roles. Thereby Defoe suggests that capitalism enabled a change in attitudes towards gender roles in eighteenth-century London.

Defoe gives the narrator an alias, Moll Flanders, to suggest that Moll could quite literally represent any lower class woman living in eighteenth-century London. Thus Moll's eventual financial success proposes that any underprivileged woman has the ability to change her own economic status. While Defoe intends for Moll to be a symbol of economic change, however, Moll never sees herself as role model for other women. Moll introduces herself without giving her real name simply so that she can protect herself: “My True Name is so well known in the

Records, or Registrars at Newgate, and in the Old-Baily...” (Defoe 9). Moll is concerned with her own safety and this is her reason for not revealing her true name. Defoe explains Moll’s discretion in the preface: “The Author is here suppos’d to be writing her own History, and in the very beginning of her Account, she gives the Reasons why she thinks fit to conceal her true Name, after which there is no Occasion to say any more about that” (3). Moll alludes to her criminal identity by referring to Newgate Prison and Old-Baily Courthouse: government facilities that deal with housing and prosecuting criminals. Moll, as a criminal, seems like an unlikely role model; however, Moll is an even better role model because of her flawed past; Defoe juxtaposes Moll’s false identity with iconic London landmarks to assure readers that Moll’s criminal confession story is a real one. This technique contributes to Defoe’s intention of creating a realistic and instructive story without being didactic. In fact, Defoe’s preface has the sole purpose of proving the tale’s veracity. Defoe calls the novel a “private History” and proclaims that the only changes he made were to tell the tale in “modester Words” (3). The promise that this story is a modulated version of truth has two purposes: it intrigues readers, and it also elevates Moll as a symbol of lower-class women to encourage economic and social change.

Sandra Sherman argues in *Finance and Fictionality in the Early Eighteenth Century: Accounting for Defoe* that Defoe’s “fictional narrator” technique creates confusion; this confusion between what is real and what is not real is comparable to confusion behind “credit-based tropes” (55). Credit refers to the ability to purchase goods and services before actually paying for them. Credit-based tropes are terms such as “stock” and “funds”—they convey value but have no intrinsic worth. Sherman argues that credit creates an “impersonal market” that keeps people from being directly at fault for their debt. Defoe employs a similar technique—a

fictional narrator—to “evade accountability” but still be a participant in economic discourse with his fiction (Sherman 57). Thus Moll, a fictitious narrator, employs the devices of a successful credit economy. Moll’s tale could not be effective without the reader’s belief in her existence, just as investors or consumers must have faith in credit. Ultimately, her “true” misfortunes and triumphs serve respectively as cautionary tales and how-to guides for women living in eighteenth-century London. In order for his fiction to instruct the masses, Defoe evades his own accountability and emphasizes Moll’s. For example, Defoe describes the difficulty of telling Moll’s story: “The Pen employ’d in finishing her Story, and making it what you now see it to be, has had no little difficulty to put into a Dress fit to be seen, and to make it speak a Language fit to be read” (Defoe 3). Defoe distances himself from the “Debauchery and Vice” (3) of Moll’s tale by claiming that he has refined it; he puts Moll’s story into a “Dress fit to be seen” by readers—namely female readers. The use of the word “Dress” symbolizes the fact that Moll is an unusual female character. Her actions and attitudes need to be toned down—put into a “dress”—because they might offend the average “lady.” Defoe denies his own accountability and emphasizes Moll’s because it increases his own credibility. Moreover, a reader is more likely to believe a female’s story of financial success when an actual woman tells it.

Establishing Moll’s credibility is important because, according to Sherman, a political fiction’s effectiveness depends on how well the reader believes the fictitious narrator (55) and Defoe urges the reader to believe his fictitious narrator by making Moll a sympathetic figure. To prove that Moll *earns* her financial success, Defoe assures the reader that Moll is born in the very worst of circumstances. Moll was born in Newgate prison, where her mother was being detained for a “Felony for a certain petty Theft” (10). Since Moll’s mother is imprisoned for stealing, it is as if Moll is in debt before she is even born. Her mother represents Moll’s probable future as a

criminal and thief. Furthermore, Moll's mother only committed a "petty theft." This detail suggests that Moll is not the daughter of a serious criminal, but possibly just a woman driven to steal due to her poverty. Moll's mother's crimes foreshadow the protagonist's future misfortunes. Moll may be born into unfortunate circumstances; however, she has an intrinsic worth in that she saves her mother's life. Her mother "pleads her belly," to avoid execution, and thereby Defoe foreshadows Moll's unique ability to survive, despite having no money. Furthermore, Moll is not just born in a prison, but in a prison in England. Defoe points out that there is a lack of government aid to support English orphans. Unlike French orphans who are "Bred up, Cloath'd, Fed, Taught" and given jobs as adults, Moll is completely on her own (Defoe 10). Defoe compares French and English government social security systems to create sympathy for Moll—an orphan without any familial or governmental help. Defoe invokes sympathy by exposing the harshness of poverty. Consequently, readers will feel connected to Moll because of mutual suffering. Moll, a daughter of a thief and an orphaned child abandoned by her country's government, has had a hard life; she *deserves* to tell her story and the reader should believe her. Moll's suffering essentially buys her credibility.

Since Moll has no family or government help, she is raised for the first few years of her life by gypsies; this event solidifies Moll's regrettable upbringing and possibly justifies her future as a thief. Moll was born to a mother in prison for theft, and now gypsies—stereotyped as beggars and stealers—raise her. Defoe depicts in Moll someone who has neither the financial nor moral upbringing to become successful later in life; however, Moll is determined to leave the gypsies, even at a young age. She says, "I believe it as but a very little while that I had been among them, for I had not had my Skin discolour'd or blacken'd, as they do very young to all the [gypsy] Children" (11). Moll has not been turned black, or corrupted, by the gypsies. Defoe's

color imagery highlights Moll's certitude; she cannot be "discolour'd or blacken'd" because she wants to be something better. Furthermore, Moll actually takes action to pursue her ambition; she hides herself because she does not want to keep traveling with the gypsies. This early memory reveals that Moll already believes that she deserves more than the life she was born into. It is not apparent at this point if Moll is driven by moral certitude or financial ambition, but she already wants more than what she already has. Moll also takes the steps necessary to free herself from traveling with the gypsies. She says, "I hid myself and wou'd not go any farther" (11). This is the first of many plans Moll devises to get what she wants. Her craftiness and risk-taking abilities are essential to her future financial success.

After Moll escapes the gypsies at three years old, magistrates place her under the care of a woman, called Nurse, who runs a school. Moll lives with this woman until she is eight and "must go to Service" (12). Moll recalls her childhood disregard for social structures and economic classes:

I had a thorough Aversion to going to Service, as they call'd it, that is to be a Servant, tho' I was so young; and I told my Nurse, as we call'd her, that I believ'd I could get my living without going to Service if she pleas'd to let me; for she had Taught me to Work with my Needle, and Spin Worsted, which is the chief Trade of that city... (12)

Even at eight years old, Moll devises a way to avoid what seems like a predestined life of servitude. She does not want to perform housework—doing jobs such as cooking and cleaning. Moll would rather "work" than do house work; she would rather work for herself than for someone else. Moll proves that she can be a good entrepreneur by demonstrating accounting skills; she knows exactly how much money she can make for her services as a seamstress. When

the nurse asks Moll how much money she can earn, Moll replies “three pence when I spin” and “4d when I work plain work” (13). This is the first of many instances in which Moll knows exactly how much she is worth. Defoe uses these precise amounts of money to suggest that Moll is always calculating. Moll confronts the social and economic structures that condemn her to servitude by taking advantage of her character traits that are suitable to business.

The character traits that make Moll a good entrepreneur—such as her scrupulous attention to her finances and her ability to remain unemotional in stressful situations—are typically deemed masculine traits. Moll’s concern for her money would have been abnormal for a woman of her time because even working women were limited to working within a household (Hill 22). Household work was directed towards the “subsistence and maintenance of its members” as opposed to making a profit (Hill 24). As members of a household, women were financially dependent on men, who still held all property rights (Hill 122). So Moll aims to elevate herself financially and, in the process, simultaneously challenges her gender role because she demonstrates financial prowess. The occupational and legal status of women during the eighteenth century suggests that women were not considered to be skilled in keeping track of their own finances.

Moll, as an entrepreneur, also challenges her gender role because she is unemotional; she makes decisions based on their financial outcome only. This trait differentiates Moll from a female stereotype that deems women as the sex dominated by their feelings. John Mullan’s essay “Sentimental novels” discusses a category of eighteenth-century literature that displays an excess of emotions. Sentimental novels included male characters, but the portrayal of the “sentimental man” was a new idea; sentimental male characters were an attempt to create a “new kind of ‘hero’” (243). Meanwhile, the female protagonists in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and



*Clarissa* (1748) are actually “reduced to weakness or illness by their sensitivities” (249). Mullan argues that these female characters embody the “fashionable” nervous disorders of the eighteenth century such as the “English Malady.” He also alludes to Elizabeth Griffith’s *Genuine Letters between Henry and Frances* (1757), in which one correspondent claims she suffers from a “fatal Delicacy” that makes her the “weakest of the weakest sex” (Mullan 249). Evidently, women living in Moll’s time were believed to be *victims* of their feelings. Mullan shows that both fictional and real women in the eighteenth century were thought to be unable to cope with what they believed to be heightened emotions. Even though Mullan’s examples of “nervous” women—in Richardson and Griffith—occur a few decades after *Moll Flanders*, the link between women and “nerves” actually predates the mid eighteenth century. Thomas Willis argued in the 1660s, that nerves were “to be held responsible for sensory impressions, and consequently for knowledge” (Barker 3). Locke, a student of Willis, emphasized this idea in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke developed the idea of sensational psychology: a theory that suggests all human reflection depends on external input. Barker explains, “the potential for women in sensational psychology was short circuited” (3) because women were assumed to have weaker nerves and thus had less potential for reflection.

In contrast to this picture of eighteenth-century women, Moll is not weakened by her feelings at all; she distances herself emotionally and makes decisions based on her chances to be the most financially successful. When the Nurse tells Moll that her sewing won’t provide enough money to feed and clothe herself, Moll replies that she will not eat and “will work harder” (13). Moll is willing to sacrifice herself for her independence, but other women laugh at her to desire to be a “gentlewoman” (13). So while Moll defies gender roles with her determination to be financially independent, it is still an absurd notion to other women who are less inclined to

change their financial situation. Typically, a woman who was born into domestic service, manufacturing, or agricultural labor, stayed there; the more fortunate women had the opportunity to become teachers, nurses, or writers (O'Brien 10). Moll is not entering a masculine profession as a seamstress, which falls into the category of feminine work. But Moll transitions from female servitude to female entrepreneurship and works to be financially independent within the confines of an economic system limited by gender roles. In other words, Moll does not appear more masculine because she is a seamstress, but rather she appears more masculine because she *chooses* to be a seamstress. Moll is assertive, determined, and proactive; these are all traits that differ from a woman's presumed passive and submissive role in the eighteenth century.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, illuminates contemporary perceptions and attitudes towards women living in eighteenth-century Britain; it also helps demonstrate how Moll is, in fact, a revolutionary character for a novel published in 1721. Wollstonecraft explains that women were expected to assume submissive roles in society:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man. (6)

Wollstonecraft explains that women contribute to their own subservient roles; grown women raise their girls to believe that marriage is the only future for a young girl. The cycle creates new generations of obedient women who are concerned with "puerile" matters. Wollstonecraft's use of the word "puerile" conveys her discontent with the current role women play in society; Wollstonecraft suggests that women are contributors to their own subordination because they do

not choose to act differently. In addition to meaning “trivial,” puerile also connotes childishness. Thus Moll is abnormal because, even at a young age, she is not childlike. Instead, she has self-reliance and determination—traits that Wollstonecraft shows to be uncommon for women living in the eighteenth century. Every time Moll demonstrates independence, determination, and self-reliance, she is less like the women Wollstonecraft condemns in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Moll’s hard work eventually pays off; it grants her the opportunity to live with a wealthy family. Moll’s persistent determination to become a “gentlewoman” (13) impresses her Nurse and her Nurse tells the Mayor. The Mayor tells his wife and daughters and they are so entertained—it created “Mirth among them” (13)—by the idea of Moll, that they visit her. Moll’s visitors begin to pay her for her needlework and grow fond of her unique personality. When the Nurse dies, a friend of the Mayoress takes Moll in. The family drama and love interests that Moll encounters here are handled in an uncharacteristically pragmatic way for a young female character. Moll, a teenage girl, falls in love with the older brother of the household. Meanwhile, the younger brother loves Moll and proposes marriage to her. Moll explains her conflict:

I was now in the a dreadful Condition indeed, and now I repented heartily my easiness with the eldest Brother, not from any Reflection of Conscience, but from a view of the Happiness I might have enjoy’d, and now made impossible; for tho’ I had no great Scruples of Conscience *as I have said* to struggle with, could not think of being a Whore to one Brother, and a Wife to the other... (28)

From a young age, women were taught to “obtain for them the protection of man” (Wollstonecraft 6). Moll could easily marry the younger brother to save her own reputation and

achieve financial security; however she is conflicted because she believes that she would be happier with the elder brother. Moll reveals how her emotions could cause her to deny the younger brother and cause her to lose financial security. Moll eventually ignores her emotions, however, and marries the younger brother. But first, instead of jumping into the safest situation—immediately seeking marriage to the younger brother— Moll takes advantage of her situation in two ways: she obtains an education and saves money from her lover before she eventually marries the younger brother.

First, Moll gets an education. Just as young Moll knew that she had to leave the gypsies and knew that she did not want to be a servant, she also knows that she should get an education because it will assure her a better future. Defoe continues the credit trope, showing that Moll invests in herself; an education will make Moll more desirable to suitors, give her more employment opportunities, and lead to her independence. Moll writes:

I had all the Advantages for my Education that could be imagin'd; the Lady had Masters home to the House to teach her Daughters to Dance, and to speak French, and to Write, and others to teach them musick, and as I was always with them, I learn'd as fast as they. (18)

Moll realizes that an education is an “advantage” that will help her in the future (18). Moll learns to write, which qualifies her for work outside of housework or sewing. Moll would not have learned to write if she did not work hard at it; she “learn’d as fast” as the others and demonstrates diligence (18). Her education—dance, French, writing, music—is not the same as one a man would receive. Rather, it is designed to create the perfect future wife. Moll is educated to fit into a domestic female gender role, but she subverts this intention in the future when she marries multiple times. Moll eventually reveals a utilitarian attitude towards marriage when she says “I

was resolv'd now to be Married, or Nothing, and to be well Married, or not at all" (50). Moll realizes that marriage is her means of controlling her future; she does not have to stay with one person and she does not have to be condemned to a life of domesticity. Moll's education might have been intended to bring a cultured woman into society; however, Moll does not use her skills that way.

Defoe demonstrates an evolution in his thoughts on women's education from the time he wrote his essay, "On the Education of Women" in 1719 to the time he wrote *Moll Flanders* in 1722. In "On the Education," Defoe argues that women ought to be educated—he writes that it is a "most barbarous custom" to deny a woman an education (1)—but does not call for women to receive the same education as men receive. While the essay promotes educating women, it only marks the beginning of a change in attitudes towards female gender roles. As shown in *Moll Flanders*, Defoe always believed that women are not "Stewards of our houses, Cooks, and Slaves" ("On the Education" 3). Moll refuses to submit to this subservient role early on when she wants to be a "gentlewoman" no matter what (13). In the essay, however, Defoe believes that women should be taught subjects "suitable to their genius and quality" (2). These include music, dancing, French, Italian, and history ("On Education" 2). This is an almost identical education to the one Moll receives. In "On the Education of Women," Defoe reasons that women who can entertain, communicate, and judge world events for themselves are more desirable companions for men (2). The essay illuminates Moll's complex role of confronting eighteenth-century attitudes towards women; Moll challenges her gender role, but must do so in a society structured to benefit men. Defoe's essay on women's education reveals that patriarchal bias is evident in the eighteenth century. Moreover, *Moll Flanders* suggests an evolution in Defoe's thoughts on the subject of women's education because Moll Flanders receives an education tailored for women,

but she can clearly handle subjects outside of the arts. For example, Moll possesses math skills that help her deal with her money. With Moll, Defoe suggests that women can and should know practical subjects such as math, because math is critical to being financially independent.

Moll takes advantage of living in a middle class family by collecting money from the elder brother because she realizes that, as a woman, money is the only way she can assure her independence. Moll says, “I was more confounded with the Money than I was before with the Love, and began to be so elevated, that I scarce knew the Ground I stood on” (22). The word “confounded” conveys Moll’s bewitched state: she is completely infatuated, obsessed, and perplexed by the money she receives. Moll is not in love with a man, but rather she is in love with her new fortune. Defoe juxtaposes Moll’s love for the brother with her love for money to show that Moll prefers money to men. This is perhaps, because she does not need the latter when she has the former. During a century in which the property rights of widows and married women actually declined (O’Brien 9), it is apparent why Moll relishes her newly acquired fortune—she has a newfound sense of power. The brother’s sister explains Moll’s infatuation with money quite simply when she talks about the marriage market: “the Market is against our Sex just now; and if a young woman have Beauty, Birth, Breeding, Wit, Sense, Manners, Modesty, and all these to an Extream; yet if she have not Money, she’s no Body” (Defoe 20). The sister’s statement offers another female perspective on marriage in the eighteenth century besides Moll’s. The sister, even though she is born into money and does not have to worry about her future, knows the difficulties women face when they do not have money. With this second outlook, it becomes even clearer that Moll is infatuated by money because she feels more independent than she did before. Finally, when Moll actually ventures into markets outside of the marriage market, she demonstrates even greater progress.

Moll also expresses an ethereal feeling that she gets from money when she feels “elevated” from the “ground” (22). This is an unworldly experience because Moll feels like she is transcending gravity and becoming closer to the heavens. Moll’s physical elevation is a metaphor for the pleasure Moll feels from a heightened economic and social status. Moll also counts her “Guineas over and over a thousand times a Day” (24). These feelings—of romantic love and religious transcendence—are not usually associated with money and most would consider this action immoral, especially for women. Wollstonecraft wrote about the expectations placed on woman to be morally good: “Connected with man as daughters, wives, and mothers, their character may be estimated by their manner of fulfilling those simple duties” (7). Moll rejects moral standards for women because she values money over her relationships. This immorality, when looked at from an economic standpoint, seems necessary. Moll does not define herself by her role in a man’s life, but rather by her newfound independence.

Moll evades standards of morality when she places money above love; however, she speaks in hindsight with shame and regret for her amoral younger self: “I had a most unbounded Stock of Vanity and Pride, and but very little Stock of Vertue” (Defoe 23). There is a dissonance between what young Moll must do to survive versus how she feels about it as an adult. Defoe suggests that doing what is economically profitable may be immoral. Lois Chaber believes that this is Defoe’s way of condemning capitalism—that Defoe is criticizing the “world of trade and commerce in which he himself had failed to prosper” by illustrating Moll’s vices (212). It is true that Moll’s preoccupation with money is always stronger than her moral certitude and this results in her deception of others and her crimes; however, this does not mean that Defoe is criticizing capitalism. Defoe suggests that economics and morality are not related—that economics is an amoral occupation. For example, when Moll receives gold in exchange for sex, she is

unconcerned about her morality. She says, “whether he intended to Marry me, or not to Marry me, seem’d no Matter of no great Consequence to me” (23). Moll’s priority is gold; she only has time to worry about morality when she is older and settled into her fortune at the end of her life. Moll says that marriage is “no matter” to her—she has no moral conscious telling her to get married to the man she had sex with. On the other hand, Moll does not denounce marriage altogether; she is not *immoral*. Thus Defoe is not criticizing capitalism with vice as Chaber argues, but rather showing that the two—economics and morality—are unrelated.

Moll disregards morality in order to be financially successful and this is represented by her attitude toward marriage after her first husband dies: “I had been trick’d by that Cheat call’d LOVE, but the Game was over; I was resolv’d now to be Married, or Nothing, and to be well Married, or not at all” (Defoe 51). The words Moll associates with love—“trick’d,” “cheat,” and “game”—all suggest that love is something that deceives people. Moll’s attitude towards love creates a unique attitude towards marriage. Moll regards marriage as a business opportunity and goes about seeking a husband as if she were playing a game. Moll purposely seeks fortune when she marries the man who turns out to be her brother. Moll explains how she went about “passing for a Fortune without Money, and cheating a Man into Marrying me” (69). Moll uses the word “cheat” again to show that she is not playing by the rules—or social codes that dictate who a woman can marry. Marriage in the eighteenth century played an important role in the “transmission and accumulation of property” (Pollak 148). Moll plays with the rules of this tradition by marrying a wealthy man who believes that she, too, has a fortune. In this way, she is like an investor who takes a chance on a business opportunity. This is a high-risk investment; she claims that faking her own wealth is “one of the most dangerous Steps a Woman can take” (69). Moll succeeds, however, and strategically deals with the aftermath. She lets her husband down



by revealing that she has no fortune; then she builds him up by giving him a little bit of money each week (69). Moll treats her husband like a child, playing with his expectations so that he is never completely disappointed in her and thereby assumes authority in her marriage. Her investment pays off—only financially though, because the emotional torment of incest is undoubtedly a loss when considering her wellbeing as a whole.

When Moll and her husband move to the Virginia colony in America, Moll meets her mother and learns that she is not the only capitalist in her family—she is not the only person to turn misfortune into opportunity and make a fortune through work as opposed to an inheritance. According to Lois Chaber, America in *Moll Flanders* is an idyllic combination of “England’s agrarian past with the capitalist dream of unlimited mobility and growth” (222). In other words, Moll’s determined search for economic prosperity is better suited to the unsettled American landscape where land offers wealth without rigid social structures that emphasize kinship and inherited status. In America, Moll thrives; she is “the happiest creature alive” (70). She is reunited with her mother who was sent from Newgate as an indentured servant. Moll’s mother explains: “Some of the best Men in this Country are burnt in the Hand, and they are not ashamed to own to it” (Defoe 71). The burn marks on the hands of American countrymen serve as reminders of the criminal past that they once escaped. Moll’s mother reveals her own burn mark to illustrate that her criminal past exists, but no longer defines her. Defoe idealizes this progressive climate in which anyone can reinvent him or herself. This is evident when Moll describes Virginia to one of her future husbands:

I let him into the nature of the Product of the Earth, how the Ground was Cur’d and Prepared, and what the usual increase of it was; and demonstrated to him,

that in a very few Years, with such a beginning, we should be as certain of being Rich, as we were now certain of being Poor. (125)

Defoe symbolizes economic opportunity with the limitless opportunities of vacant American land. Moll explains that in America, there is a “quantity of Land” that is either given to settlers or “purchased at so easie a Rate that is was not worth naming” (124). American land is abundant and cheap; it gives everyone an investment opportunity. Defoe suggests that, in America, it is easier for the capitalist to succeed, because America has the natural resources to yield a profit for an investor. Defoe exaggerates this point in *Moll Flanders*, where Moll begins and ends her adult life in America. Additionally, Moll could have happily stayed in America at the beginning of her life, were it not for the revelation that her husband is also her brother. It took something as extreme as incest to send Moll away from the economic opportunities of the American colonies.

Despite her disgust, Moll exits her incestuous relationship with the tact of a businessperson. She runs to get a “Pen, Ink, and Paper”—the materials of a formal agreement (82). She has her husband write down, consent, and sign to various conditions that relieve his wife of any blame. Moll’s efforts to end her marriage are much like her efforts used to procure her husband. When she married him, she had him agree to never inquire about her fortune and finally revealed the truth when he could not do anything about it. Now that she has to end her marriage, Moll is extremely careful about telling her husband that she is his sister. Moll’s meticulous planning is, again, much like a strategy used to win a game. She appeals to her husband’s conscience when she says, “I beg you to promise me you will receive it with Composure and a Presence of Mind suitable to a Man of Sense” (83). Moll draws out her conditions and reminds her husband of the honorable way for a man to receive bad news before

she actually delivers it. Ultimately, Moll exhibits business acumen and control over her husband because of her ability to develop a plan and execute it.

According to Karen O'Brien, it is unusual for a woman to have authority in her marriage in the eighteenth century. O'Brien considers Francis Hutcheson's *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755) as one of the first texts of the Enlightenment to discuss women specifically. Hutcheson argued against the "usually asserted role that a man had dominion over his household" (qtd. in O'Brien 73). Hutcheson believed that a husband and wife were partners in marriage. According to O'Brien, Hutcheson's "unusually egalitarian account of rights within marriage must also have seemed, in its time, like a call for reform" (73). While Hutcheson called for an unusual degree of equality within marriage, Moll demonstrates authority, which would have been even more revolutionary than equality. Moll does not openly exhibit her control over husband, but she lets him believe that *he* is in control. So Moll does not explicitly reverse gender roles, but she begins to challenge them as she exhibits control over her husband.

After living in Virginia, Moll travels back to England where she meets her lover at Bath and becomes pregnant. Before now, Moll has had other children—all of whom she left with no real apparent emotional struggle. This is unusual when considering that women were expected to "operate first and foremost as members of a family unit" (Pollak 148). The reason for Moll's apparent disregard for her previous children is economic; Moll could leave her children because she had somewhere to leave them; she wanted to leave her children because she could easily remarry without them. Pollak explains that Moll acts as an "independent agent for her own benefit" as she circulates "outside the constraints of marriage and familial obligation" (149). Now that Moll has a child with a man who is not her husband, she finds it harder to avoid her

“familial obligation” because she has no one to leave her child with. Moll uses her unfortunate position to her advantage, however, when she collects money from the child’s father:

As he had furnish’d me very sufficiently with Money for the extraordinary Expenses of my Lying Inn, I had every thing very handsome about me; but did not affect to be Gay or Extravagant neither; besides, knowing my own Circumstances, and knowing the World as I had done, that such kind of things do not often last long, I took care to lay up as much Money as I could for a wet Day, as I call’d it; making him believe it was all spent upon the extraordinary appearance of things in my Lying in (Defoe 95)

Moll deceives and takes money from the man at Bath much like she took money from the older brother at the beginning of the novel. Moll saves her money while she can because she knows that one day—on a “wet Day”—she will not have her source of money anymore. Moll is not in complete financial control in these situations where she must depend on men; however, Moll knows how to take advantage of men who are obligated to her in some way.

Moll also demonstrates her adaptability as investor with physical disguises; her ability to change physically represents her ability to be the person best suited to take advantage of any given situation. For instance, she disguises herself as a “servant Maid in a Round Cap and Straw Hat” (97) to visit her lover’s house. Moll’s physical disguise symbolizes Moll’s ability to alter herself to fit into any situation and to profit from any opportunity. Moll tricked her brother-husband into believing she had a fortune by dressing like a gentlewoman; now she tricks her Bath lover’s household into giving her information about the health of her money source. This is how Moll finds out her Bath lover is dying and, with him, so too is her fortune: “It was very well I had play’d the good Housewife, and secur’d or saved something while he was alive, for that

now I had no view of *my own living* before me” (97). Moll uses a physical disguise as a maid to procure information about the future of her disguise as “the good Housewife.” Furthermore, Moll’s use of the word “play’d” reveals that Moll is in control and she knows how to alter her personality for any given situation. Moll changes her personalities and appearances, showing that she does not actually have to be what she pretends to be. Again, Moll is like an investor who believes that she can turn a profit using limited resources. She proves, through her successful disguises, that her biggest resource is herself. Moll’s versatility is similar to that of Mr. Spectator in Addison’s *Spectator* No. 69. In No. 69, Mr. Spectator has the ability to blend in among different groups at the Royal Exchange:

I am infinitely delighted in mixing with these several Ministers of Commerce, as they are distinguished by their different Walks and different Languages:

Sometimes I am justled among a Body of *Armenians*; Sometimes I am lost in a Crowd of *Jews*; and sometimes make one in a Groupe of *Dutchmen*. I am a *Dane*, *Swede*, or *Frenchman* at different times; or rather fancy my self like the old Philosopher, who upon being asked what Countryman he was, replied, That he was a Citizen of the World.

Mr. Spectator, like Moll, is a “Citizen of the World” (Addison); he can disguise himself to fit in with any crowd. Mr. Spectator illustrates diversity by alluding to the various ethnicities present at the Exchange: Armenians, Jews, Dutchman, Danes, Swedes, and Frenchman. There is no limit to Mr. Spectator’s guises—he changes something as fixed as ethnicity. Consequently, it seems as if anything is possible at the Royal Exchange. The Royal Exchange, the commercial center of London at the time, is a symbol of the free market and trade that characterizes capitalism. Mr. Spectator and Moll Flanders both suggest that it is easier to transform oneself in a free market.

There is a difference, however, between the two characters' attitudes to altering their appearances; while Mr. Spectator finds pleasure in adapting to his surroundings, it is *necessary* for Moll to change herself. Moll changes her appearance so that she can make money to survive, whereas Mr. Spectator simply takes pleasure in cultural diversity of a commercial trading center. Both authors suggest that capitalism allows people to change; however, Defoe makes a stronger statement about the effects of such an economy on an impoverished person such as Moll.

In order to be able to adapt to any situation, Moll finds it easier to be childless. The Bath lover has a miraculous recovery and Moll takes advantage of this opportunity to rid herself of the financial burden of having a child. She expresses some emotional distress when handing over her child to her Bath lover: "It was death to me to part with the Child" (100). Her use of the word "Death," however, seems like an exaggeration and contradiction of the happiness she expresses as a single woman. Moll moves on rather quickly when she relishes her newfound freedom. She says, "I was now a single Person again, as I may call myself, I was loos'd from all the Obligations of either Wedlock or Mistressship in the World" (101). Along with "Wedlock" and "Mistressship," Moll might also say that she is released from the obligation of motherhood. Moll is "loos'd," which suggests that she felt constrained by her obligations to other people. Those obligations kept her from altering her aforementioned disguises and personas to achieve financial success. As a "single Person," Moll will be free to change herself into whoever she wants to be. Lois Chaber explains that Moll is "unique among pre-twentieth century heroines in resisting reduction to marriage or death" (213). Furthermore, she survives "with unusual autonomy" because she escapes "from the eternal feminine cycle of reproduction" (Chaber 213). Moll is unique because she evades historical paths for female characters in literature —marriage and motherhood—to establish her own independence. Instead of embracing reproduction, Moll enters

a “social cycle of production” (Chaber 213); Moll is more focused on inventing herself than on being a mother.

Moll manufactures different personalities and disguises to achieve her goals, and uses this strategy to pursue the banker. For example, Moll leads the banker to believe that she has money. She says, “I came the next evening accordingly, and brought my Maid with me, to *let him see* that I kept a Maid” (110). Moll understands the importance of appearances. By merely appearing wealthy, Moll is already on the track to becoming wealthy. She invests in something small—like a maid—for a greater return, such as the banker’s trust. With the banker episode, Moll reveals how her outward appearance mirrors her financial objectives. When she enters the banker’s home she “rejoyc’d” because she “look’d upon it all as my own” (111). Moll is not wealthy, but she looks and acts wealthy; she knows how to take advantage of her current situation. It pays off too, when Moll achieves control over the banker. Moll says, “ I play’d with this Lover, as an Angler does with a Trout: I found I had him fast on the Hook” (112). Moll’s tone conveys control and superiority. Just as Moll “play’d” the brothers, her brother husband, and her Bath lover, Moll similarly plays the banker. Her analogy places her in control; she is the fisherman who uses men, the “trout,” to her disposal. This is ironic because Moll is an orphan—born in Newgate prison and raised by gypsies. Now, she can take advantage of wealthy men because she *appears* to be wealthy. Moll, however, does not stay with the banker because he is not legally divorced; this is a good financial decision because Moll cannot marry him and obtain his assets in the future. Moll decides to move on and find a better opportunity.

Moll thinks she finds a better marriage opportunity when she meets Jemy, a man who shares Moll’s lack of money but also shares her wily pursuit of fortune. Moll believes that she is cheating a man of fortune: “in all appearance this Brother was a match worth my lissening to,

and the least his Estate was valued at was a 1000 *l.* a year” (113). The word “appearance” reiterates the fact that both Moll and Jemy only *appear* to be wealthy; both are trying to take advantage of the other. Moll believes that Jemy is worth no less than 1000 *l.* a year. Moll is still precise when it comes to amounts of money, even though this particular amount will prove to be nonexistent. Defoe uses a dichotomy between appearance and substance to demonstrate the ambiguity of money itself. According to Mary Poovey, there was general public distrust towards paper money in eighteenth-century London. There was a gap between money’s “material form” and the “value it supposedly represented” (Poovey 62). In other words, paper money had even less intrinsic value than coins. Moll and Jemy are like paper money—they create the illusion that they are worth more than they are. This illusion has proven a successful strategy for Moll in the past; however, she realizes that her hoax will fail when partnered with Jemy’s hoax. Thus, Moll and Jemy’s representational values—like paper money—have their limits; at least one of them needs a real fortune in order to live together. Their failed relationship is much like what Poovey calls the “problematic of representation” (62)—when there is slippage in the money-value relationship and monetary issues arise. Despite their love for one another, Moll and Jemy’s relationship fails because they do not have enough money. Out of all her husbands and love interests, Jemy is Moll’s true love—as a highwayman, he is a match to her deceit and trickery. Jemy cannot go to London for mysterious reasons—presumably because of criminal charges against him—and Moll goes back to London to try to make a fortune again. She chooses money over love when she says, “I was not willing to be without Money whatever might happen” (Defoe 119).

Before Moll can move to London and marry the banker, she must find a way to hide a surprise pregnancy from her affair with Jemy. Moll’s unborn child becomes a financial burden,



hindering her lucrative marriage to the banker. Moll hints at this when she says, “I would have been glad to miscarry, but I cou’d never be brought to entertain so much as the thought of endeavoring to Miscarry” (127). Moll does not want the child, but she will not get an abortion. It is unusual for Moll to let morality affect her decisions; she usually does what is most financially profitable. But Moll is hardly guided by a moral compass here; she still chooses to hide her pregnancy and she gives her baby away when it is born. She chooses an affordable route over the most morally correct one. She enters into the care of a woman—“Mother Midnight” (128)—who runs a business that houses and takes care of women with unwanted pregnancies. Mother Midnight gives Moll an “Account of Expenses” that resembles a “Bill of Fare” (129). The sensitive issue of a surprise pregnancy out of wedlock is desensitized when everything Moll needs is laid out on a menu: “Child-bed Linnen,” “a nurse for a Month,” and a “Minister to Christen the Child” are listed next to prices (130). Pregnancy and childbirth become just another business transaction for Moll—similar to the way in which marriage, an event typically characterized with emotion, is only a financial opportunity. The emotional aspect of having a child becomes less important than the economic consequences. While Moll expresses some emotional distress when leaving her child behind, she still does it. She does what she has to do so that she can marry the banker and obtain her fortune. Eventually, the banker dies and Moll loses her money source. As an older woman her marriage prospects dwindle, and she must devise another way to make money.

Moll enters a life of crime out of necessity; however, she stays there because she can successfully build her fortune by stealing. Moll utilizes the traits that helped her make money earlier in life—such as independence and adaptability—to become a thief. In *Restoration Rake Heroes*, Harold Weber argues, “Moll’s career is a tribute to her ability to survive and even thrive

in a social world that would doom her to servitude or extinction in spite of the social injustice under which women live..." (194). Weber suggests that Moll is driven to crime because she lives in a world of "social injustice." Moll has less financial opportunities as a female born into poverty and she deals with it in the only way she can as a middle-aged woman—she starts to steal. Moll utilizes her personality traits that are uncharacteristic for a female in eighteenth-century London and more characteristic of "the capitalist." Defoe of course is not suggesting that capitalism condones crime; he is simply pointing out the social flaws of an economy that grants men more privileges than women. Moll must invest in herself—capitalize on her abilities—to survive. For instance Moll works alone, relying on her intuition to lead her successfully in and out of acts of thievery. Moll explains why she prefers to steal on her own: "I got out of it with more Dexterity than when I was entangled with the Dull Measures of other People" who were "more rash and impatient than I" (Defoe 174). In addition to being uniquely independent, Moll is also calm in stressful situations; others put her at risk because they are more "rash" and "impatient." This trait opposes the aforementioned notion of "nervous disorders"—or the idea that women were biologically inclined to be more emotional than men. Moll may be stealing for her living, but she still demonstrates the characteristics of an entrepreneur as she does what she needs to do to survive.

Moll is eventually imprisoned for her crimes, and her return to her birthplace at Newgate Prison reminds the reader of Moll's unfortunate circumstances at birth. Defoe thereby emphasizes just how difficult it is for Moll—an orphan born into poverty—to change her future. Moll describes Newgate as a "horrid Place" where "so many of my Comrades had been lock'd up" (215). Newgate is also where her mother "suffered so deeply" (215). Moll's fellow prisoners seem like regular people who are hardly worthy of their death sentences. They are her

“Comrades” and her kin; Defoe invokes sympathy for the prisoners by suggesting that most are victims of poverty just like Moll. Moll says, “I had Money in my Pocket, tho’ they had none” (216). Unlike the other prisoners, Moll can escape what seems like her only birthright—a prison sentence—because she has money. Moll escapes Newgate because she can pay her way to America, where she finally becomes a successful entrepreneur.

In America, Moll runs her own farm and is finally financially independent.

Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of Rights* explains that contemporary women living in Britain were stripped of self sufficiency and consequently dedicated their time to trivial matters: “How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect, supported by their own industry” (12).

Wollstonecraft believes that women should have professions; she suggests that women could “regulate farms.” Moll, as a farm owner, is exactly what Wollstonecraft calls for in her decree against the injustices faced by women in eighteenth-century London. Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* shows what can happen when a woman dedicates her life to becoming financially independent as Wollstonecraft suggests—Moll defies gender roles and eventually demonstrates authority over men. Moll’s authority is best seen by her return to her relationship with Jemy. Moll encourages Jemy, who she meets again in jail, to obtain a transport to America. Moll pays for their comfortable treatment on the ship as well as the resources they need to start a farm together. Jemy, referring to their previous marriage, tells Moll “I think I have married a Fortune, and a very good Fortune too...” (266). Jemy is literally and figuratively indebted to Moll: she pays for his future and also gives him guidance. Jemy tells Moll, “Though hast twice sav’d my Life, from hence forward it shall be all employ’d for you, and I’ll always take your advice” (244). Gender roles are reversed at the end of the novel when Jemy—a man—is dependent on Moll—a woman.

Defoe suggests that financial independence is a means to altering the submissive, dependent gender role women held in eighteenth-century London.

Moll Flanders—a woman focused on elevating herself financially—simultaneously challenges a woman’s assumed submissive role in eighteenth-century English society. Though born an orphan to a mother detained in Newgate Prison, Moll successfully achieves financial independence. Moll does not intentionally try to confront gender roles, but her pursuit of financial freedom requires a certain refusal to accept her female gender role. Her abilities to remain independent, unemotional in stressful situations, and to alter her personality as well as physical appearance, allow her to take advantage of an economy that was booming from the exchange of good and services. Eighteenth-century London is a “Bull Market” for someone like Moll to achieve financial success and, in the process, change attitudes towards the female gender role.

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