

St. John Fisher College

Fisher Digital Publications

English Senior Seminar Papers

2012

A Look at Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders: Turn the page and celebrate the new roles of women in eighteenth-century England

Ryan Kramer

St. John Fisher College, ruk08010@sjfc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/english_seniorseminar



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Publication Information

Kramer, Ryan, "A Look at Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders: Turn the page and celebrate the new roles of women in eighteenth-century England" (2012). *English Senior Seminar Papers*. Paper 3.

https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/english_seniorseminar/3

Please note that the Publication Information provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/english_seniorseminar/3 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

A Look at Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*: Turn the page and celebrate the new roles of women in eighteenth-century England

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Throughout Daniel Defoe's novel *Moll Flanders*, the title character devotes her entire life to achieving wealth and social status. It is clear that Moll achieves her desires of being a gentlewoman, yet her identity is constantly changing throughout the novel. She is affected by every person and experience she comes across questioning whether or not her lifestyle and decisions were the right ones, and often debate Defoe's ambiguous description of his title character that represents a woman different than any other woman in the traditional norms of eighteenth-century England. In this society, men ran everything because they were seen as superior to women in everyday life. Women lived through their male partner, and marriage was the only way for them to hold any control in society. Comparing the illustration of Defoe's Moll to Michèle Crampe-Casnabet's description of women roles during the Eighteenth-Century in *A History of Women in the West- Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*, I argue that Defoe uses Moll's character to celebrate a change in the traditional role women played in the society by creating her to be a rebel against the society norm. In doing this, he creates a story of an ambiguous character that struggles to understand whether she is following the traditional norms of society, or developing a model of a life for women to follow and live by. Crampe-Casnabet explains that men and women were not equal at this time even though each account for half of the human race population. She said this "is in fact ambiguous because, oddly enough, it was not reciprocal: men were never said to constitute the other half of the species. A subtle sophism was at work: women were a "half" without an "other half." The female half existed only in relation to the male half, which was its ground and defining reference" (317-318). Ironically enough, Defoe builds Moll to be a character that holds a man's traditional role in society. She considers herself to be superior to all, and views men as being the "other half" that women control in any way they like. Through manipulation, marriage and struggle to keep social rank Moll is depicted to control her own position in society, and never fails to fall to the superiority of male dominance.

Disciplines

English Language and Literature

Comments

Paper from Dr. Deborah Uman's English Senior Seminar course, Fall 2012.

Ryan Kramer
English 420
Dr. Uman
Paper

A Look at Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*:
Turn the page and celebrate the new roles of women in eighteenth-century England

Throughout Daniel Defoe's novel *Moll Flanders*, the title character devotes her entire life to achieving wealth and social status. It is clear that Moll achieves her desires of being a gentlewoman, yet her identity is constantly changing throughout the novel. She is affected by every person and experience she comes across questioning whether or not her lifestyle and decisions were the right ones, and often debate Defoe's ambiguous description of his title character that represents a woman different than any other woman in the traditional norms of eighteenth-century England. In this society, men ran everything because they were seen as superior to women in everyday life. Women lived through their male partner, and marriage was the only way for them to hold any control in society. Comparing the illustration of Defoe's Moll to Michèle Crampe-Casnabet's description of women roles during the Eighteenth-Century in *A History of Women in the West- Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*, I argue that Defoe uses Moll's character to celebrate a change in the traditional role women played in the society by creating her to be a rebel against the society norm. In doing this, he creates a story of an ambiguous character that struggles to understand whether she is following the traditional norms of society, or developing a model of a life for women to follow and live by. Crampe-Casnabet explains that men and women were not equal at this time even though each account for half of the human race population. She said this "is in fact ambiguous because, oddly enough, it was not reciprocal: men were never said to constitute the other half of the species. A subtle

sophism was at work: women were a “half” without an “other half.” The female half existed only in relation to the male half, which was its ground and defining reference” (317-318).

Ironically enough, Defoe builds Moll to be a character that holds a man’s traditional role in society. She considers herself to be superior to all, and views men as being the “other half” that women control in any way they like. Through manipulation, marriage and struggle to keep social rank Moll is depicted to control her own position in society, and never fails to fall to the superiority of male dominance.

Crampe-Casnabet’s term “subtle sophism” not only expresses her belief that it was impossible to consider men and women two halves that equal one whole because men were overly portrayed as being superior to women, but could suggest a way to describe Defoe’s formation of Moll to be a replica of a woman already in society. In a subtle way Defoe possibly creates his character to share the story of a real life woman. Maximillian Novak believes Moll “was imaginatively constructed from several women criminals of the time, particularly two known by the names of Moll King and Callico Sarah. Since Defoe was visiting his friend, the publisher Mist, in Newgate at the same time these two ladies were there, he would have had numerous opportunities to converse with them.” If this is true, Defoe may have used Moll to represent a new group of women in society; a group that tries succeeding in life on their own by their own means. “Moll King managed to survive from five to eight sentences of transportation without being hanged, and if some critics have discovered in Moll Flander's life a mythic, symbolic sense of human endurance, they might well feel justified” (Novak 352). It is very possible that Defoe uses these two real-life criminals to create his story. I believe he takes common practices of women during this time and develops a larger character in Moll, a character that is very different from how women were supposed to be like at this time. Moll is a mix

between the traditional woman in society and the outlaw woman who found herself in jail within weeks for going against the norm. It was rare for women to go against the norm as Crampe-Casnabet states “Of course the most important discourse on the nature of woman stemmed from the mediations of men” (324-325). I suggest that Defoe writes this novel to celebrate this idea of a woman going against the traditional norm, and through Moll can really put a male perspective on how a woman should conduct themselves in society. It is interesting to see that Defoe, a male, writes through a female character. This agrees with Crampe-Casnabet’s ideas that everything about a woman is “stemmed from the mediations of men”. As a result of a man writing about woman who carries out a nontraditional role in society, readers are able to look at the character of Moll and understand she is meant to be celebrated, not condemned.

The language throughout the novel further suggests that Defoe writes to make the reader decide what is right from wrong in experiences dealing with Moll’s control on society. He sets the tone for this type of language when he shares in his preface that this book “Is suggested there cannot be the same life, the same brightness and beauty, in relating the penitent part, as in the criminal part: if because there is not the same taste and relish in the reading, and indeed it is too true that the difference lyes not in the real worth of the subject so much as in the gust and palate of the reader” (40). Here Defoe is referencing the two extreme outcomes Moll feels from the experiences that occur throughout the novel. Through her relationship with the Nurse and in her education she develops a religious background to her life structure. There are times throughout the text where she goes back and shows remorse for what she has done, while there are other experiences where she feels no remorse and turns to criminal thoughts and actions. Both experiences I will talk more in depth on later. Each experience adds to the struggles Moll has with understanding exactly who she is and what she can ultimately control. Her control is what

allows readers to see Defoe's attempt to celebrate Moll as a woman living her life against the traditional norms of society. E.M. Forster in his article *A Novel of Character* shares that "Whatever she does gives us (the reader) a slight shock—not the jolt of disillusionment, but the thrill that proceeds from a living being. We laugh at her, but without bitterness or superiority. She is neither hypocrite nor fool" (343). This idea proves that Moll's character is in control of herself. Although she is going against the norm she is still able to conduct herself in a way that all readers can accept. Calling Moll neither a hypocrite or a fool proves of Defoe's ability to play both sides. He writes a novel about a woman stretching the boundaries of going against the norm, but there are still parts in the text where he limits her control.

Moll's control over the story and other characters is limited right from the opening lines of the novel when she does not give herself a true name. Telling the story through Moll's voice demonstrates the initial belief that women are equal to men, which was not the case during this time period. Moll lives her life in ways that better suit her than the man she is with. On the other hand, this is not the life she always lived. Moll grew up with no immediate family. Her mother was a convicted felon, and her father is never named. In a time period where father's ultimately chose their daughter's destiny, Moll chose her own. Her first real mother figure was the Nurse. She describes their relationship by saying, "I talk'd to her almost every day of working hard; I did nothing but work and cry all day, which griev'd the good kind woman so much, that at last she began to be concern'd for me, for she lov'd me very well" (48). When Moll suggests to the Nurse that she wants to become a gentlewoman, the Nurse goes against self judgment and allows her to do it. This is the first time Moll shows control of her own destiny. She is able to weasel her way out of going to the service like every other girl her age and begins learning to become a gentlewoman. When the character of the Nurse dies, Moll is now left with

full control of her own life. Even though she is brought in by the Colchester family, she is in the driver's seat of what she wants to and will do in her life. She uses the education she receives from the family to better herself for the real world she soon would jump into on her own. Their education "was supposed to prepare [them] to assume her "natural" role as wife and mother" (Crampe-Casnabet 337). Defoe shows Moll to respect the "natural" role education played for women when Moll speaks of her education she receives from both the Nurse and Mayor's family by saying:

I had, as I have said above, all the advantages of education that I could have had, if I had been as much a gentlewoman as they were, with whom I liv'd, and in some things, I had the advantage of my ladies, tho' they were my superiors; but they were all the gifts of nature, and which all their fortunes could not furnish. First, I was apparently handsomer than any of them. Secondly, I was better shap'd, and thirdly, I sung better, by which I mean, I had a better voice; in all which you will I hope allow me to say, I do not speak my own conceit of myself but the opinion of all that knew the family. (55)

It is evident that Moll's education is nothing more than being able to look presentable and suitable to others, a thought similar to Crampe-Casnabet's description of a woman's education during this time. Moll mentions that she has "a better voice" and is "handsomer than any of them" which suggests that her abilities to appeal to men were strong. It is her physical characteristics that make her reputation as a woman superior to the woman around her. Moll, however, has no interest in being a wife or mother. She continuously marries and has children, but never feels emotionally connected or obligated to any of them.

Control is measured in Moll's life depending on security and stability of status. She is always looking for security and stability in marriage but never performs "her duties as wife, mother, and housekeeper" which were traditional roles of woman during the time period. (Crampe-Casnabet 339) This is proven with her first marriage to Robin. Moll accepts money from his elder brother, who remains nameless, to marry the younger brother, Robin, even though her infatuation is for the older sibling. It is true to say that Moll only marries Robin because the elder brother wants her to. She is in fact in love with the older sibling, yet he wants nothing to do with her past the ideas of sexual intercourse. This makes Moll think about what marriage really is. When Robin dies she makes it known that she cares more about her financial status than her partner dying when she says "I had saved of the money he formerly gave me, and about as much more by my husband, left me a widow with about 1200 £. in my pocket" (Defoe 89). William Krier argues this is only the start of Moll depending on the masculine character in the novel. He questions whether Moll feared that she had no power at all which led her to "place herself in the power of others" (400). He suggests that Moll never bows down to the power of the male figure; rather she uses them to increase her own value in society. This relates to the idea of finding security to receive significant gains. In this case Moll uses Robin to marry into a higher class and ultimately becomes wealthier. Once her husband passes she is in control of her power because she has her money and is free to do as she pleases. Jacques Sohier explains "when she specializes in marriages or in being a mistress, she never loses sight of her security, of course, but also of her financial interest, and she always acts to preserve or if possible to enhance her stock" (9). A key term used here is "security". Moll continuously looks for security in her life, and during this time period it is men who held this power. The only way women could share this power is through marriage. In searching for this security, Moll was searching for

control because she knew if she had security it meant she had control as well. This is how Moll can be looked at as a character to celebrate a change in how women were portrayed during the eighteenth-century because she becomes in control of who she is with at all times and whether or not she stays with them. The idea of marriage playing the role of the man controlling the woman did not exist. Moll continuously proves that she marries for the money and not for the love. She says “I had been trick’d once by *that cheat call’d LOVE*, but the game was over, I was resolv’d now to be married, or nothing, and to well married, or not at all” (90). This line proves Moll’s perspective on marriage is controversial for the time period. Crampe-Casnabet says a woman had the “desires to please by the necessity of her nature, then she exists only through being looked at by men” (327). Moll’s desires were to please herself. She did not look to any other character to please but her own. Labeling herself as a gentlewoman suggests Moll knows that she exists only through men, but her attitude and actions towards life forces the reader to understand she really thinks she can control her life in any way she likes.

Moll is a character of the new evolving woman of the time period. She continuously marries men to have a steady source of income, security, and higher social class. David Blewett argues in his article "Changing Attitudes Toward Marriage in the Time of Defoe: The Case of *Moll Flanders*" that Daniel Defoe wrote *Moll Flanders* to show how marriage in society was changing. Blewett states that “Moll’s subsequent marriage career is an extended matrimonial whoredom which exhibits her mistaken and corrupt notion of marriage” (85). He continues to suggest that Defoe was trying to use Moll to represent an evolving woman in society. Rather than growing up and marrying who they either loved or their father chose for them, women were starting to marry because of money. His idea of a matrimonial whoredom was a term from Defoe to show that a woman was marrying for all the wrong reasons (87). Moll views marriage

as a way to be stable and to control her place in society. It is evident that Moll marries for the wrong reasons throughout the novel. She admits after she falls in love and is heartbroken the first time that she will live from then on using “thus my pride, not my principle, my money, not my virtue” (91). Notice the terms “pride” and “money”. Women during this time period usually had neither unless they were married. She put aside the traditional principles and virtues of every woman in society and began to live a life she only could control, not a man. This goes against Crampe-Casnabet’s description of Rousseau’s argument that “the female mind does not form concepts, and female reason is not a theoretical reason” (329). In this case Defoe demonstrates Moll forming her own concept that she does not marry men for love because men break her heart. Again instead of insulting women’s intelligence, Defoe celebrates it by proving that Moll is right for making these types of decisions. She becomes a model for every woman in society to follow. To call her a whore is not fair, unless you tie in that she is intelligent as well. She uses her great looks and charm to manipulate men into giving her their riches. Yes, she may be sleeping around and being with a different guy every year, but she is doing it because she wants to and she can. She does not pick just any guy on the street; rather Moll goes only after the men who are able to play the role of financial security for her.

Her control is completely documented through her relationships she has with men, and it is evident that Defoe celebrates the idea Moll becomes simply a prostitute throughout the novel because she manipulates men to marry her so she can benefit from their fortunes. Moll’s only focus when she marries a gentleman is the size of his fortune. If the fortune met her desires, they would marry. If his fortune fell short of her expectations, she would find someone richer. As Crampe-Casnabet asks, “Did women really ask to be *declared* equal? To judge by what males wrote, women did not ask for equality because it was not to their advantage” (318). This is

similar thoughts of every woman during this time period and how Defoe describes Moll to feel. After her first husband passes away she is “left loose to the world” (Defoe 89). For a woman to be able to be “loose” in the society was nontraditional. This is another way of saying Moll is free to be with any guy, in any way, at any time, however she pleases. Moll does not ask any person to do what she does; she just does it because she feels she can. Defoe does not condemn Moll for moving quickly or trying to start new, rather he creates a new blank slate for her every time. I argue this is Defoe’s attempt to show the vast differences between the traditional and nontraditional ways women were portrayed during the time period. In Moll’s early years she is considered traditional growing up in a good religious family, and marrying into money. When Robin dies she is forced into making her own decisions; something very different than the challenges traditional women had. Moll never looks for love rather she looks for men who can keep her a higher social rank.

The idea of creating a new blank slate is a way for Defoe to give Moll control in the structure of her life. Every time something is not going the way she wants she is able to pick herself up and move instantly. William Krier argues that Moll indeed “has control of her destiny, she can act directly in her own behalf, but to do so exclusively would be to insult and often to exploit the good faith of others” (410). I agree with Krier’s idea here that Moll controls what she is doing and acts on her own behalf because looking at her relationships with male characters during the course of the novel, she often finds ways to use them for nothing more than security in society and for her own selfish control. On the other hand, at no time does she ever lose her own individual power. Moll does not allow any man to tie her down; rather she uses men to better her own control in social rank, wealth, and her own reputation in society. Krier’s argument does not accept Defoe’s idea of a blank slate because Moll never lets any

character stop her from doing anything as she pleases. For example, when her draper husband becomes a fugitive on the run she says “Upon these apprehensions the first thing I did, was to go quite out of my knowledge, and go by another name: this I did effectually, for I went into the *Mint* too, took lodgings in a very private place, drest me up in the habit of a widow, and call’d myself *Mrs. Flanders*” (Defoe 94). Moll simply goes to the *Mint* to start over. She changes her name and moves on with her life. While she is there she becomes aware that the world around her is out to limit her control and power. Defoe describes this new beginning to be a place where “the women had lost the privilege of saying NO” (97). This is a description of eighteenth-century England where society is being run by male dominance. Although Moll is characterized as being a rebel throughout the novel and does not follow the traditional roles women play, she does find herself to be in these male dominated societies. She proves that her charm outlasts any man’s power, because she is constantly manipulating men. Her source of power is in her looks and personality. Even though a “Man was characterized by strength and reason ... woman’s distinguishing traits were immutable yet capable of modulation depending on circumstances” Moll benefits from her charm and beauty she learns in living with the Colchester family. (Crampe-Casnabet 336) The important term to notice here is “circumstances”. Moll lives her life full of different circumstances. Each circumstance shapes and builds her control as a woman in society. They deal with the approach she has towards marriage and her ability to begin new slates over and over again. They also deal with her being an obedient citizen in society versus a criminal on the run.

Defoe controls the way Moll’s character is portrayed by giving her freedom and power to make her own decisions. Howard L. Koonce argues in his article “Moll’s Muddle: Defoe’s use of Irony in *Moll Flanders*” that Defoe purposely produces the character of Moll to have a mess of

a lifestyle. He disagrees with Ian Watt's argument that *Moll Flanders* fails "to coalesce into any such structural unity" (Koonce 377). He discusses that Defoe does a good job of creating a process where all of Moll's adventures are "by means of one or more of the following methods, her guilt is acknowledged only to be diverted so that the unacknowledged spring of her destiny is allowed room for another movement" (Koonce 382). This is not always a true assumption from the novel because even though Defoe allows Moll to have never ending blank slates, he does create a downfall for her. She is caught in the middle of making the decision to find another man to take care of her, or control her own destiny by joining the comrades and becoming a thief. When she is left with no man to secure and stabilize her, her control is shattered. She cannot understand what to do next. Moll shares:

In this distress I had no assistant, no friend to comfort or advise me, I sat and cried and tormented my self night and day; wringing my hands, and sometimes raving like a distracted woman; and indeed I have often wonder'd it had not affected my reason, for I had the vapours to such a degree, that my understanding was sometimes quite lost in fancies and imaginations. (Defoe 202-203)

At this point, Moll, who usually is a strong character, is all of a sudden weak. She is not able to commit to her self being the one who controls her own life, and struggles to move on without the help of a man. This relates Moll to the traditional woman at the time that turns to a man for support and guidance in her life. Instead, she turns to her comrades for that stability and changes the power of control in the novel to a complete female perspective.

Moll uses the comrades to give her a sense of place in society. She did not have any man to support her, and she was not willing to give up the control she held for her own life. She uses this group as a means for survival. Srividhya Swaminathan argues that Defoe "represents a

female support network among his “minor” character who successfully cope with unstable circumstances arising in the novel; and that his picture of lower-class society suggests that for woman, homosocial networks are more important than heterosexual coupling” (Swaminathan 187). This suggests that Moll needs women more than men in this circumstance to keep her control in society. She is always doing what she wants, and because no man is there to help her in the way she would like, these women are there to influence her in a different direction. She now controls her own destiny stealing to earn money and keep her higher class reputation, because remember class and reputation are the only things that really matter to her. In agreeing with Swaminathan’s argument I fail to support what Crampe-Casnabet suggests that “The female half existed only in relation to the male half, which was its ground and defining reference” (318). In this case Moll has no influence by a male character. The female half is actually considered the ground and defining reference in her life. She is fully committed to living her life with the comrades and doing so with no help from any man.

Moll continues to take control of her own life by living a life she chooses. When she begins to steal she becomes very dark. She begins to regret the person she is and refers her actions to the Devil. Her character begins to shape more into a rebel as she increasingly gets better and better at stealing. Moll says “my new partner in wickedness *and* I went on together so long, without being ever detected, that we not only grew bold, but we grew rich, and we had at one time one and twenty gold watches in our hands” (213). This suggests women really did not need men to be successful at this time. Moll and her comrade were able to become rich by stealing. Although it was against the norm of society, Defoe again does not condemn Moll for being a thief. He illustrates several of the criminal acts Moll commits like stealing the bundle of bread, or stealing from the child. To show some remorse for her actions Defoe writes in Moll’s

words that, "I say I confess the inhumanity of this action mov'd me very much, and made me relent exceedingly, and tears stood in my eyes upon that subject: but with all my sense of its being cruel and inhuman, I cou'd never find in my heart to make any restitution: the reflection wore off, and I began quickly to forget the circumstances that attended the taking them" (217).

Even in this case Moll is completely content with controlling wealth over her happiness.

Granting that she does understand she is doing wrong, she likes the fact she is in control of what she is doing. It makes her happier to know that it is her, rather than a man, who is supporting her. Even better she is supporting herself better than any man had ever done before. Moll is able to succeed and increase in status without being married to a man, which, again, is different than traditional norms at this time. Now instead of just controlling the man who represents security to her, Moll is able to control security for herself.

I suggest Defoe lets Moll's control go so far because he wants to prove she can be looked at as a model for woman during this time period. It is evident that she is starting to feel heat from the police for her wrongdoings, and several of her comrades are starting to get arrested and killed for their criminal acts. Moll shares, "One of the greatest dangers I was now in, was that I was too well known among the trade, and some of them whose hatred was owing rather to envy, than any injury I had done them began to be angry, that I should always escape when they were always catch'd and hurried to *Newgate*" (223). *Newgate* was the prison in England at the time. It was the place where Moll was born and a place that she references much throughout the text. Her ending up being arrested and taken there allows the reader to see Defoe's deconstructive language. Throughout the whole novel, he shares Moll's excellence for being in complete control of her life. She is able to do things that other women would never be able to do at the time, yet in the end she ends up just like the average woman. She is put into jail for going

against society's norm and committing a crime. Defoe builds her up to be invincible, but it is proven she can be touched.

Even though Moll is arrested and put into Newgate, Defoe does not take her control away. Through his first person point of view the reader can see that Moll is plotting to get herself out of jail. It is already evident throughout the rest of the novel every time Moll gets in trouble she starts over and is given a new slate by Defoe. Changing identities or disguising one's self was a common practice for women on the run during this time period. It was not unlikely to know a woman who had multiple aliases. This goes back to Novak's idea that Moll uses real life women to develop the character of Moll. This is no different for Moll as she goes by the names Moll Flanders, Mrs. Betty, Mrs. Flanders, and the Gentlewomen throughout the text suggesting she too had many aliases. In Newgate she is known as the famous Moll Flanders. Looking at records from the Old Bailey, the central criminal court in London, one can see a comparison to *Moll Flanders*. These short descriptions of real trials that occurred during this time period were not only written for officials, but for the common eye of the public. This selection shows the unusual convictions and judicial flaws that were common in society, many like the offenses of Moll and her "comrades". It also proves of the control many women had on their lives and their abilities to start new. At this time, allowing criminals, especially women, to find ways to be innocent or receive a lesser charge was an everyday practice.

When Moll is arrested and sent to trial she states, "There would be a bill preferr'd to the grand jury against me, and that I should be certainly try'd for my life at the *Old Bailey*" (282). Moll's language towards the criminal court is critical in the novel as she refers to it as a place where people needed to think, and "to think is one real advance from Hell to Heaven; all that hellish harden'd state and temper of soul, which I have said so much of before, is but a

deprivation of thought he that is restor'd to his power of thinking, is restor'd to himself" (282).

The thinking she refers to is a way to beat the system, like so many people in Old Bailey records did. They are able to escape the conviction and run away from authorities. It is a place where she loses her power. She is not able to just get up and go away as she pleases. It is not up to her to start a new blank slate. This is a way for Defoe to limit Moll's power and control on the life she lives. For once, she has to realize what she is doing is wrong. One trial from the section of Old Bailey records reads:

472. MARY HILL otherwise CHAPEL , SARAH KING otherwise called SARAH CLAXTON , otherwise called SARAH BLUNDERS , and WILLIAM RICHARDSON were indicted, for feloniously stealing on the 21st day of June last, one piece of silk called Tobine, value 10 l. one other piece of silk, called Peruvian Tissue, value 7 l. and one other piece of silk called Carmelite Lutstring, value 18 l. the property of Joseph Moore , privily in his shop . ("July 1783")

It is important to look at the numerous names presented in this document and relate them to the character of Moll. Although Moll goes by so many aliases, it is proven she continues to live her life. This is much different than a lot of women who have done similar unlawful acts like her. Most of them are hanged or sent to prison for years at a time. Right on the first page in the novel Moll shares with the reader that "some of my worst comrades, who are out of the way of doing me hard, having gone out of the world by the steps and the string, as I often expected to go" (45). It is evident that Moll expects to be killed for her actions, but Defoe continues to keep her alive to tell her story. This again demonstrates difference between Moll and the rest of the women during the time the novel is written. There is no point where Moll has no control over her life at all.

Moll's control now occurs in her ability to plead her way out of her conviction. If you go and look at some Old Bailey records you can notice in the selections many criminals either say they did not do the crime or say nothing at all. It seems that while in prison awaiting trial there is a time where the criminal finds a way to come to grips with the sentence he or she is about to receive. This would refer to the time of "thinking" Moll mentions to in the text. In the novel Moll seems to try ways to talk her way out of being found guilty. She spends many pages bringing to mind everything that has happened in her life, and all the options she would accept from her unlawful acts. Defoe mentioning these options proves that Moll still has control of her destiny in her mind. However, in the novel the keeper calls Moll "an old offender" and repeatedly refers to her as *Mrs. Flanders*. When he tells her that the chances of her becoming free is limited, Moll describes the feeling as being "a stab into the very vitals of one under such a burthen as I was oppress'd with before, and I cou'd not speak to him a word good or bad, for a great while, but at last I burst out into tears" (283). Moll refers to her heart being broken when she says "a burthen as I was oppress'd with before." She has lived her whole life doing as she pleased, and this is the first time Moll is described as being on the same level as other women in the novel. Throughout the whole text Moll is doing everything and anything she likes. At the beginning of the novel she considers herself to be better suitable than the Mayor's daughters. She is luckier than her comrades who have been caught many times before she has. This is the first time since Moll was born and sent out in the world by herself with no parent or sense of direction that there is no place in the social rank for her. All the control that Moll's character has possessed throughout Defoe's piece seems to have totally vanished. She shares this moment with the reader by expressing:

It was now, that for the first time I felt any real signs of repentance; I now began to look back upon my past life with abhorrence, and having a kind of view into the other side of time, the things of life, as I believe they do with every body at such a time, began to look with a different aspect, and quite another shape, than they did before; the greatest and best things, the views of nothing in my thoughts, but what was so infinitely superior to what I had known in life, that it appear'd to me to be the greatest stupidity in nature to lay any weight upon any thing tho' the most valuable in this world. (287)

I argue that her power as a character has not vanished; rather I feel that she is taking this experience to explain her worth in society. She refers to her mistakes of stealing to the “greatest stupidity in nature” but also refers to herself as the “most valuable in this world”. Here Defoe is showing Moll having no remorse for anything she has done other than affecting the image of self. Moll describes her control as being “infinitely superior” proving that through everything Moll lives the life she chose. She attempts to “look with a different aspect” and “view in the other side” but she just cannot. Her control is all she ever asks for and she can easily live with that way. This relates to my argument that Defoe celebrates the idea of Moll being different. Instead of making her feel bad for what she has done, he shows her to be proud of it and be pleased. He formulates it as being a perfect life to live and one that no matter what happens will always be superior to the person next to her.

In Moll's relationship with Jemy, Defoe completes my argument that Moll has superior control over society. This relationship is what Krier calls a “contrast” to every other relationship Moll has in the novel. (400) I disagree with Krier because I feel this relationship emphasizes Defoe's approach to creating a character that is larger than the traditional woman at the time.

Jemy comes around twice in the novel. The first time he and Moll fall in love. Their relationship ends because they both lie about their social status and fortunes. As a result, she says “here I *told him* I would live with him now till all my money was spent, but would not let him spend a shilling of his own... and I desir’d he would let me be master in that thing only, and he should govern in every thing else” (Defoe 173). In this quote Jemy is handling all the money, but not able to do anything that Moll does not agree with. She desires to be the master of the household to prove her superiority over him and proves Defoe’s attempt to disagree with the male dominated society in England. Later Moll says, “we parted at last, tho’ with the utmost reluctance on my side, and indeed he took his leave very unwillingly too, but necessity oblig’d him, for his reasons were very good why he would not come to *London*” (Defoe 175). Jemy’s whole plan was to go to England and run away from Moll to find ways to make money, then ultimately find her again and be happy. Moll’s reluctance shows that Jemy held some control over her, but in the end she is able to move on. It is not a case where she lost control at any time, but is one where her control was definitely limited. Moll’s “utmost reluctance” rids her of having any guilt on the situation, and allows her to begin a new slate. This example goes against Crampe-Casnabet’s description that women were not an equal half to men. It is evident that Jemy and Moll look at each other equally. Moll shows more emotional connection with Jemy than any other character, suggesting that Moll is looking for more than just wealth and security. This makes sense because she shares with the reader before that she “was resolv’d now to be married, or nothing, and to well married, or not at all” meaning that Jemy could be a person that allows her to be “well married”. (90) Throughout the text’s entirety Moll is never considered well married; however, because of the circumstances between Jemy and her, Moll moves on once again. In this relationship, she describes herself to being the master of the relationship, but

allows Jemy to carry on the male duty of being the head of the financials. Again, this proves that Defoe flips the gender roles in society.

The second time Jemy comes around he and Moll are both convicted felons that are transported to America. In America, they are able to start a new blank slate. This is the first time that Moll starts a blank slate together with someone, which proves that she is willing to give up a little bit of her control. Unlike traditional families in England, Moll, the woman, is the one supporting the family. She is heading a plantation and makes amends with her son, who also heads a plantation. Melissa Mowry describes this scene by saying Moll “is able to unveil her extraordinary wealth—the result of her former ill-gotten gains, her current stewardship of the plantation in Maryland, and the income she receives from Humphry’s (her son) management of the plantation in Virginia” (Mowry 108). Moll is again in control of the life around her. Jemy even refers to being with her as an experience where “I think I have married a fortune, and a very good fortune too” (Defoe 333). It is important to notice that Moll’s role in society is only accepted in America. There is never anyone in England that refers to her as a good fortune. I suggest that this is Defoe’s way of saying what Moll did throughout the novel is okay for any women to do, as long as they do not play the superior role in England. Every relationship Moll is a part of in England, although she never loses any control, is still in the hands of the man. This is evident with the idea of starting a new blank slate because Defoe gives her the power of leaving the man if he doesn’t support her. Ideally enough Moll would love to control her own expenses, like she did when she was stealing, but in cases like these she has no control over if the man can support her.

The idea that Moll never loses control on her life counteracts Crampe-Casnabet’s description that “Man was characterized by strength and reason and woman by charm, which

was the source of her power” (336). Defoe characterizes Moll to be full of strength and reason as well as have charm. He celebrates the idea that a woman can succeed without falling to the superiority of the male dominated eighteenth-century England society. John O’Brien uses John Locke’s idea of “Man of credit” in his article “The Character of Credit: Defoe’s “Lady Credit,” “The Fortunate Mistress” and relates it to the character of Moll to argue that women were often the ones who represented the people who were credited by others in society. John Locke admits that we also assent too many things only on the basis of their “probability,” and for such knowledge we depend upon the good offices of another person who, by virtue of his greater acquaintance with the subject, is a “Man of credit” (O’Brien 603). Throughout Moll’s life she strongly relies on others whether it is her husbands, her comrades, or even the devil. The “probability” of her success in life depends on her status of social rank. If she is married to a man making money or allowing her to be of an upper class it is okay. If she isn’t then Defoe creates a blank new slate and allows her to move on and finds a new “Man of credit”. This is proven with Moll’s relationship with Jemy. Although she loves this man, she cannot be with him at first because their fortunes do not match up.

Daniel Defoe is the true “Man of credit” for Moll. He uses Moll’s character to celebrate a change in the traditional role women played in the society by creating her to be a rebel against the society norm. Through her he is able to show both sides of how women could be portrayed during eighteenth-century England. On one side, Moll is a weak, lonely woman searching for a man to support her, and needs the “other half” in order to keep her social rank and reputation in society. On the other side she is strong character that proves time after time that she can succeed in life on her own by going against the traditional norms of society and being a woman that can be looked at by all people during this time period as a model for future change in gender roles.

This is evident throughout the entire novel by how Defoe is able to show that even though Moll has her challenges she is able to keep one thing constant in her life, her control over self.

Works Cited

- Blewett, David. "Changing Attitudes Toward Marriage In The Time Of Defoe: The Case Of *Moll Flanders*." *Huntington Library Quarterly*: 44.2 (1981): 77-88. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Nov. 2012.
- Crampe-Casnabet, **Michèle**. "A Sampling of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy." *A History of Women in the West- Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*. Ed. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993. 315-347. Print.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Moll Flanders*. Ed. Paul A. Scanlon. Orchard Park: Broadview Editions, 2005. Print.
- Forster, E M. "Moll Flanders- Daniel Defoe." *The Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Edward H. Kelly. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973. 343. Print.
- "July 1783, trial of MARY HILL otherwise CHAPEL SARAH KING otherwise called SARAH CLAXTON , otherwise called SARAH BLUNDERS WILLIAM RICHARDSON ." *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*. N.p., 2012. Web. 5 Nov. 2012.
- Koonce, Howard L. "Moll's Muddle: Defoe's Use of Irony in *Moll Flanders*." *ELH* 30.4 (1963): 377-394. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 11 Oct. 2012.
- Krier, William J. "A Courtesy Which Grants Integrity: A Literal Reading of *Moll Flanders*." *ELH* 38.3 (1971): 397-410. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2012.
- Mowry, Melissa. "Women, Work, Rearguard Politics, and Defoe's *Moll Flanders*." *Eighteenth Century: Theory & Interpretation (Texas Tech University Press)* 49.2 (2008): 97-116. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 19 Oct. 2012.

Novak, Maximillian E. "Defoe's 'Indifferent Monitor': The Complexity of *Moll Flanders*."

Eighteenth-Century Studies 3. (1970): 351-365. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Nov. 2012.

O'Brien, John F. "The Character of Credit: Defoe's "Lady Credit," "The Fortunate Mistress",

and the Resources of Inconsistency in Early- Eighteenth Century Britain." *ELH* 63.3

(1996): 603-631. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Oct. 2012.

Sohier, Jacques. "*Moll Flanders* and the Rise of the Complete Gentlewoman-Tradeswoman."

Eighteenth-Century Novel 2. (2002): 1-21. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 9

Nov. 2012.

Swaminathan, Srividhya. "Defoe's Alternative Conduct Manual: Survival Strategies and Female

Networks in *Moll Flanders*." *Eighteenth Century Fiction* 15.2 (2003): 185. *Academic*

Search Complete. Web. 19 Oct. 2012.

