

## **Love and Money in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders***

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### **Abstract**

*The essay discusses one woman's relationship to early capitalism in Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders (1722). Defoe uses Moll as an exemplum of a woman who is looking for security through money, and has opportunities to acquire money only through marriage, selling her body, and stealing. Moll marries many times in an attempt to find good settlements and money, and does so without regard for mutual affection. By being a mistress, by whoring, through marriage, and ultimately by stealing, Moll seeks out not only money but the respectability that can be purchased through money. Moll is not obsessively greedy or a hard capitalist, but simply a woman who seeks the security of money and does so with a clear picture of her possible fate in the patriarchal system.*

### **Analysis**

Five years after he wrote *Moll Flanders*, Daniel Defoe wrote in his essay "Conjugal Lewdness or, Matrimonial Whoredom" (1727) that "He or She who, with that slight and superficial Affection, Ventures into the Matrimonial Vow, are to me little more than legal Prostitutes" (p. 32). *Moll Flanders* certainly supports this judgment. Moll marries many times in her search for good settlements and money, and without regard for mutual affection. Defoe, as author, shows how her five marriages thus end quickly or unfortunately with desertion, death, and the discovery of incest. Shirlene Mason suggests that Defoe is critical of Moll's determination to ignore the laws of divorce and marry over and over at her own whim, and she is thus punished for her matrimonial whoredom.

In *Defoe and the Nature of Man*, Maximillian E. Novak points out that Defoe is critical of eighteenth-century English marriage law. By allowing Moll to defy the bounds of legal marriage, Novak suggests that Defoe is sympathetic to the position of women in eighteenth-century society, as he seems to agree with the idea that when a woman is deserted by her husband, she may seek to remarry as a way to settle her economic problems. In the novel, Defoe illustrates one woman's relationship to early capitalism, taking Moll as an exemplum of a woman who is looking for security through money, and has opportunities to acquire money only through marriage, selling her body, and stealing. Moll's many marriages for money suggest that women cannot be self-sufficient in a capitalist society, but must rely on men for their sense of security.

In general, *Moll Flanders* is straightforward and is set out in three parts. The first part describes Moll's childhood and first love affairs; the second part sketches her attempts to find domestic and economic security through marriage; and the third part illustrates her career as a thief. During her first affair, with a rich young man in Colchester, she is innocent enough to believe that her beauty can cause him to fall in love with her, although she is a servant in his house. However, her desire for love is overtaken by her desire for money when after he takes advantage of her, he gives her five guineas. 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" (p. 20). When she receives a hundred guineas, she "made no more Resistance to him, but let him do just what he pleas'd; and as often as he pleas'd" (p. 24). At this early point in her career, Moll does not think of the money as a bribe but as an evidence of the young man's love for her and as a confirmation of his good faith. She is naive and does not realize that he sees her as his mistress not his wife.

Thomas Grant Olsen argues that Moll's "relationship with the elder brother is a kind of incest because of her figurative family position, and to have a relationship with the younger brother is—in Moll's terms—to commit 'Adultery and Incest'" (474). Compared to her biological brother, these two brothers are closer to Moll. Indeed, she has spent many years living in the family as "one of their own children" (27). Though close with the two brothers, Moll is a servant in their household. In eighteenth-century society, a servant girl was put into a precarious position if "the head of such households" (Davidoff and Hall p. 329) made advances.

She was the master's property, and would have to think hard about resisting and risking her job. The choices for girls and women were such that one might become homeless and possibly be forced into prostitution in order to survive. Ironically, it is by not resisting the young man's advances, that Moll finds herself a prostitute. But she does not see herself this way and accepts the boy's advances because she has an affection for him. Thus when Moll realizes she will never have the young man as her husband, she is upset and becomes ill for several weeks because she has lost all her expectations of marrying well and marrying for love. Before the age of twenty, Moll's romantic hopes are dashed. Her attitude toward marriage becomes practical and cold, and her subsequent marriages are a series of examples of matrimonial whoredom.

In eighteenth-century England, people were very conscious of their social positions, and marriages between the wealthy and the poor were not common (Heyck p. 47-64). Marriages of convenience were the norm. A marriage of convenience is one in which each party is marrying for some reason other than love. Quite often it is to improve one's social status or for financial gain. For example, a young man who has a title but no money might marry a young lady with money but no title to upgrade his social position or increase his wealth. Therefore, Moll's first lover, an elder brother set to inherit his father's estate, has an attitude toward marriage that was quite typical at that time. He seeks out a woman with money and social status. As the sister of the elder brother notes, "for 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" (p. 17).

Thus when the younger brother, Robin, announces his love for Moll, everyone in the house, including Moll, thinks the boy is mad to marry her solely for love. Moll has no dowry, no social position, and no money earning estate. Moll accepts the proposal, but her first marriage would be condemned by Defoe, who, in "Conjugal Lewdness" writes, "to marry one Woman and love another, to marry one Man and be in love with another...is a Kind of civil, legal Adultery, nay, it makes the Man or Woman be committing adultery in their Hearts every Day of their lives; and it may be well called a Matrimonial Whoredom" (p. 181). Although she is in love with the elder brother in the house where she lives, Moll agrees to marry his younger brother when she realizes that the elder brother himself has no intention of marrying her. But Moll does not love Robin and she longs for his brother even after her marriage: "I never was in Bed with my Husband, but I wish'd my self in the Arms of his Brother; and tho' his Brother never offer'd me the least Kindness that way, after our Marriage, but carried it just as a Brother ought to do; yet, it was impossible for me to do so to him: In short, I committed Adultery and Incest with him every Day in my Desires" (p. 47).

After Robin's death, Moll is saddened but not shattered, and she is glad that her two children are taken off of her hands by her husband's parents. Indeed, as Miram Lerenbaum writes in "A Woman on her Own Account," it was not uncommon to see corpses of abandoned infants lying on the streets in the eighteenth century, and perpetrators were usually forgiven with light sentence (Lerenbaum p. 43). Moll's decision to leave her children in the care of the rich, doting, and settled grandparents can be seen as a sign of responsibility rather than irresponsibility. The second part of the novel begins after Moll's first husband dies. After Robin's death, Moll decides to move to London because she sees it as a marriage market. She intends to use her inherited money and physical attractiveness to bargain her way into a good marriage. She says, "Thus my Pride, not my Principle, my Money, not my Virtue, kept me Honest" (p. 48). After her affair of the heart with Robin's brother, Moll decides that to love without the security of marriage is a risky undertaking, and love itself is a con: "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 be well Married or not at all" (p. 48).

Having decided to dissociate love from marriage and simply be well married, Moll impulsively marries a "Gentleman-Tradesman" (p. 48) for neither love nor money, but for her "Fancy to a Gentleman" (p. 48). However, her desire to become a gentlewoman through marrying a gentleman-tradesman was "betray'd" and "hurried on to Ruin," for the so-called "Gentleman-Tradesman," says Moll, "used me very handsomely, and with good Manners upon all Occasions, even to the last, only spent all I had, and left me to Rob the Creditors for something to Subsist on" (p. 50). In order to avoid her husband's creditors, Moll is forced to go to the Mint, which housed the poor and the criminal of the town. Having married for the fancy of gentility alone, and not for love, Moll is once again punished for her matrimonial whoredom.

Notably, Moll's aspiration to be a "Gentlewoman" (p. 10) means no more to her than "to be able to get my Bread by my own Work . . . to be able to Work for myself, and get enough to keep me without that terrible Bur-bear going to Service, whereas they meant to live Great, Rich, and High, and I know not what" (p. 11-12). Her desire to become a gentlewoman is motivated by her horror of "going to Service" (p. 12), for becoming a maid in that period meant the end of any possibility of freedom or independence.

At the age of eight, Moll desired to support herself by her needlework, without knowing that earnings from needlework would not be enough to support her (p. 13). As a child Moll admired the “Gentlewoman” or “Madam” next door, who “mended Lace, and wash’d the Ladies Lac’d-heads” not knowing that she is “a Person of ill Fame,” having “two or three Bastards” (p. 12). Defoe implies that society forces women to act in an anti-social way. In eighteenth-century society, the only way for single women to survive was through sex and connivery; unable to live honestly on the wages of a seamstress or a maid, women were often forced to turn into whores and thieves. Following her stint as a gentlewoman, and after her emergence from the Mint poorhouse, Moll resolves to seek marriage for security and money, realizing that marriage itself was not as good a safeguard as money. She declares that, “Money was the thing; the Portion was neither crooked or Monstrous, but the Money was always agreeable, whatever Wife was” (p. 54). Moll thus becomes a fortune-hunter: “Marriage were here the Consequences of politick Schemes for forming Interests, and carrying on Business, and that Love had no Share, or but very little in the Matter” (p. 53).

Born without a father (a symbol of the patriarchal system), Moll has no one to watch out for her and give her financial support. However, once she has the money to keep her independence she “kept true to this Notion, that a Woman should never be kept for a Mistress, that had Money to keep her self” (p. 48). As Moll’s experience with her first lover made clear, a poor woman is assumed to be a “Dear Whore” (p. 31) who can be transferred rather casually among men. This experience leads her to believe that marriage is not the source of security, money is. Unfortunately, although she decides to be cold-hearted and calculating and marry only for money, her luck with husbands continues to not be good. Having excluded love and gentility from consideration, Moll next marries a wealthy plantation owner who has an estate in Virginia. She finds herself without love in a country of which she is not fond, enveloped in an incestuous and destructive alliance. Clearly, Defoe, as author, does not support a marriage without love. In Defoe’s terms, Moll is a matrimonial whore, one who uses the institution of marriage improperly for profit (“Conjugal,” p. 32). As Moll says when she discovers that she has married her own brother, “it was certain that my Life was very uneasie to me; for I liv’d, as I have said, but in the worst sort of Whoredom, and as I cou’d expect no Good of it, so really no good Issue came of it, and all my seeming Prosperity wore off and ended in Misery and Destruction” (p. 71). However, according to Ellen Pollak, Moll’s incest causes “the ultimate threat to patriarchal authority—a refusal...of the goods to go to the market” (p. 16). Hence, incest disrupts the traditional patriarchal system with its social order and marriage market.

Leaving America behind, Moll begins an affair with a gentleman at Bath, but this is a return to life as a mistress of a wealthy gentleman. She comes to believe in a fantasy with a rich gentleman that recalls her first love affair. When the gentleman brings out a drawer, “in which there was a great deal of Money in Gold, I believe near 200 Guineas” (p. 88), Moll seems to have become nothing more than a whore dreaming of the life of a gentlewoman. However, this relationship based on money and profit offers neither the security of marriage nor the joy of love. Eventually, she is abandoned by her lover. There is one marriage, however, that is different from all the rest. Her marriage to Jemmy begins as a now typical case of matrimonial scheming by both Jemmy and Moll, but Moll is attracted to him and falls in love with him. In describing Jemmy’s proposal to her, Moll uses the same rhetoric she earlier used in describing her seduction by the first lover: “This was such Language indeed as I had not been us’d to, and I was here beaten out of all my Measures.... In short, my Eyes were dazl’d, I had now lost my Power of saying No, and to cut the Story short, I consented to be married” (p. 112). This is reminiscent of her assertion that if her first young lover had spoken to her of marriage, she would have had “no Room, as well as no Power to have said No” (p. 20).

These are the only two relationships that Moll has that are based not simply on money, but also on love. When Jemmy’s wealth and the “glittering show of a great Estate, and of fine Things” (p. 113) prove to be nothing more than a carefully prepared show used to trick Moll into marrying him, Moll resolves to stay with him because “if he could propose any probable method of living, I would do any thing that became me on my part, and that I would live as close as narrow as he cou’d desire” (p. 116-17). Thus, when Jemmy leaves, Moll is destroyed. She “fell into a vehement Fit of crying, every now and then, calling him by his Name, which was *James, O Jemmy!* said Moll, *come back, come back, I’ll give you all I have; I’ll beg, I’ll starve with you*” (p. 120). Though Moll is prepared to welcome penury for Jemmy’s sake, Jemmy leaves, and Moll decides to resume her relationship with the married banker, “who lay so hard at me to come to him and Marry him” (p. 137). Moll’s relationship with the banker can be seen in parallel to her relationship with her first husband, Robin: both marriages are based on money, not love, and both last five years and produce two children. Moll lives with the banker “with the utmost Tranquility” (p. 147), until “a sudden Blow from an almost invisible Hand, blasted all my Happiness, and turn’d me out into the World in a Condition the reverse of all that had been before it” (p. 147).

As with the younger brother, Moll is soon widowed, a position she had feared: "I foresaw the Blow, and was extremely oppress'd in my Mind, for I saw evidently that if he died I was undone" (p. 148). Her financial predicament following the banker's death leads Moll to regret thinking that marriage to the banker could secure her from want. Moll says,

But my Case was indeed Deplorable, for I was left perfectly Friendless and Helpless, and the Loss my Husband had sustain'd had reduc'd his Circumstances so low, that tho' indeed I was not in Debt, yet I could easily foresee that what was left would not support me long; that while it wasted daily for Subsistence, I had no way to encrease it one Shilling, so that it would be soon all spent, and then I saw nothing before me but the utmost Distress. (p. 148)

After living two years in her "dismal condition" (p. 148), and slowly selling off her possessions and moving to cheaper quarters, all she can see is the "inevitable approach of Misery and Want" (p. 149). Despite her willingness to consider another marriage, Moll is dissuaded by a practical impediment: "it was past the flourishing time with me when I might expect to be courted for a Mistress; that agreeable part had declin'd some time, and the Ruins only appear'd of what had been; and that which was worse than all was this, that I was the most dejected, disconsolate Creature alive" (p. 148).

Now "eight-and-forty" (p. 148), she is past the time of childbearing, and realizing that her sexual appeal and reproductive capacity are in decline, she finds herself in desperate economic circumstances. Considering her "low Condition" (p. 154), Moll realizes that her options are only to go out to service or be a seamstress again at untenable wages. She notes that "I would gladly have turn'd my Hand to any honest Employment if I could have got it" (p. 154) and "gladly I would have got my Bread by the help of my Needle if I cou'd have got Work, but that was very hard to do for one that had no manner of Acquaintance in the World" (p. 155). Moll realizes that society limits women's means to make money. She finds herself in desperate want of money, and, seeing no other choice before her, Moll turns to committing criminal acts to settle her economic problems.

Defoe uses Moll to exemplify variations on the eighteenth-century abandoned woman. Moll's pursuit of wealth is not to be seen as a quest for riches, but rather a desire to feel secure. Further, her choices are practical, made because she has a clear picture of her fate should she not act. She knows that she is not safe in the eighteenth-century capitalist economy.

In the eighteenth-century, there were no social services for deserted or widowed wives. In a number of reports of deaths by starvation in eighteenth-century London,

it is significant that all the victims should have been women; there can be little doubt that the hardships of the age bore with especial weight upon them. Social conditions tended to produce a high proportion of widows, deserted wives, and unmarried mothers, while women's occupations were overstocked, ill-paid and irregular. (Lerenbaum p. 41)

There had once been a time in which women could hold important positions in the workforce. However, that time had past. Without licenses and apprenticeship opportunities, it was nearly impossible to enter a professional and respectable workforce with a promising wage. Like Defoe, Wollstonecraft thought that one of the most serious hardships society imposed on women was the inability for woman to get and keep money. This meant that their working opportunities in the marketplace were not many and generally insufficient. Therefore, no matter how hard they worked, they were not able to make enough money to support themselves (Chapter IX). Having committed herself to thieving, Moll, in a thoroughly businesslike manner, runs her career enthusiastically so as to gain the greatest reward with the least risk, even searching out a trustworthy pawnbroker who will not take advantage of her gender (p. 156). Moll becomes an "apt Pupil" of a "School-Mistress" in thievery, and proves her skills as "dexterous" as "art" (p. 157) for she had been good with her hands since the age of ten when she was the assistant to her first nurse in Colchester. As she says, "I was very nimble at my Work, and had a good Hand with my Needle, though I was very Young" (p. 13).

In *Moll Flanders*, there is a lot of what Marx calls "the language of commodities" (p. 52) as it is used to connect marriages, capitalism, and crimes. Moll's decision to become a thief arises from her realizing that in the marriage "market" (p. 54) her "stock" (p. 61) of beauty and cash had dwindled quickly. Further, after becoming a thief, Moll notes that "I was now at a loss for a 'Market' for my 'goods'" (p. 153), and seeks a "pawnbroker" and a "market" for her "goods" (p. 156) in the "trade" (p. 156) of thievery. Her teacher then commends her charges as "industrious" (p. 157). When explaining about her compulsive thievery, she says that, "every hit look'd towards another" (p. 162). The economic motive plays a large role in this career. She is fond of counting her possessions and collecting money. Moll's compulsive desire to make money can be seen as arising out of her early poverty and her fear of slipping back into it. In her career as a thief, all she cares about is making a profit from her business.

It is through accumulating wealth and controlling her fortune that she obtains a sense of security. As a thief, Moll measures people and her relationship to them solely by how much money she can get from them: "As for me, my Business was his Money, and what I could make of him" (p. 177). Her new career gives her some compensation for the loss of her roles as wife and mother, which have been denied to her through societal and biological age restrictions. It is through thieving, then, that she receives intellectual and emotional satisfaction. For all the years Moll sought security through a husband, it is through her own wits and talents that Moll finally finds a certain degree of financial security. Giving Moll the ability to make money and increase her wealth through her own efforts, Defoe implies that certainly it is money, not husbands or institutions that allow women to survive in society. Though it is by immoral and illegal means, Moll survives and escapes from the cycle of biological reproduction into the cycle of capital production.

Men in *Moll Flanders* consistently fail to give Moll what she wants and needs, and it is through three motherly figures that Moll grows. There is her biological mother, her "nurse" (p. 12) and her "governess" (p. 179). Aging and sexually unattached, these mother figures are expelled from the cycle of biological production. They thus have the chance to develop their selves and their careers without the pressures of sexuality and child-bearing. Their careers range from farming and cottage industries to high-powered bureaucratic management, and suggest that women can succeed and be financially independent in a variety of settings. They do this inside a patriarchal society that seeks to deny women their adulthood. In eighteenth-century society, it is considered normal for a woman to seek out a man to manage her money and tell her what to do, to think, and to be. Even the good bank clerk says to Moll, "Why do you not get a head Steward, Madam, that may take you and your Money together into keeping, and then you would have the trouble taken off of your Hands" (p. 104).

Seeking a life other than the one that patriarchy society has determined for her, Moll discovers that immorality and criminal activities bring her more money, security, and respectability than any traditional feminine occupation could. However, society cannot support Moll's success and though a successful thief, Moll finds herself back at her birthplace, Newgate prison, a symbol of patriarchal power and authority (Faller p. 5) where she will be forced to find yet another way to be both a woman and have a sense of security in society. While seeing her Lancashire husband entering Newgate, Moll feels a sense of guilt and responsibility toward her past and says that, "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" (p. 225). Newgate serves as a place of punishment and a turning point for Moll: "How many poor People have I made Miserable? How many desperate Wretches have I sent to the Devil" (p. 219). Moll also feels a sense of responsibility for Jemmy's fate: "I was overwhelm'd with grief for him; my own Case gave me no disturbance compar'd to this, and I loaded my self with Reproaches on his Account" (p. 220). It is in Newgate that Moll finds some hope and resigns herself to "transport" where she will "begin the World upon a new Foundation" (p. 237) and will "live as new People in a new World" (p. 238).

Defoe punishes his heroine for her marital whoredom, her criminal acts, and her immorality. However, he allows for her redemption. At the end of the novel, love not only brings about Moll and Jemmy's reunion, but also brings them property and regeneration: "we had very good Success, for having a flourishing Stock to begin with, as I *have said*; and this being now increas'd by the Addition of a Hundred and fifty pound *Sterling* in Money, we enlarg'd our Number of Servants, built us a very good House, and cur'd every year a great deal of land" (p. 266). With a marriage based on duty and affection, not money or gentility, Moll finds that she can have all the things that her years of false marriages have denied her. Moreover, her life is finally regularized. With the death of her brother, Moll can publicize her marriage with Jemmy and is forgiven by her son, who says that Moll's marriage to her brother and his father is "a Mistake impossible to be prevented" (p. 268). Moll also declares that she has, through marriage, become a "gentlewoman" at last, for Jemmy is portrayed as having "the Appearance of an extraordinary fine Gentleman" (p. 112) and "was bred a Gentleman" (p. 117).

It cannot be denied that Moll makes money with her Virginian inheritance. The property in America provides her with a kind of rebirth. Early on in the novel, Moll discovered that immorality and criminal activities would bring her more money, security, and respectability than any traditional feminine occupation could. She had said that money is what gave her courage and security because "with money in the pocket one is at home anywhere" (p. 139). However, society cannot support Moll's success as a thief. Hence, she is destined to go back to her birthplace, Newgate, to be reborn again. Moll marries many times in an attempt to find good settlements and money, and does so without regard for mutual affection. By being a mistress, by whoring, through marriage, and ultimately by stealing, Moll seeks out not only money but the respectability that can be purchased through money. Sympathetic with the plight of women in the eighteenth-century, Defoe lets Moll have yet another chance to live. Moll becomes an exemplum of a woman who is looking for security through money, and has opportunities to acquire money only through marriage, selling her body, and stealing.

Money is the embodiment of capitalism and mercantilism; however, Moll is not obsessively greedy or a hard capitalist, but simply a woman who seeks the security of money and does so with a clear picture of her possible fate in the English patriarchal system. As Melissa J. Ganz notes, by portraying Moll's vulnerability and insecurity in English society and her experiences in America, Defoe implicitly suggests that English marriage law needs to be changed. Defoe presents a vision of improved conjugal life in the new world of America, and Moll gains power and autonomy in her reunion with Jemmy. Moll's inheritance improves her financial condition and enables her to find economic security. Further, the reunion with Jemmy in the New World addresses the issue of the illegal marriage, and Moll can assert her identity as Jemmy's wife. Having Moll and Jemmy united in America is a symbol of limitless possibilities and new beginnings, and this is how Defoe reveals his dissatisfaction towards English marriage law. After settling down in America, Moll can renew her life for the final time, finding not only the security she so desperately longed for, but love and the lasting title of gentlewoman.

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