

**Women in Fiction: Beauty vs. Intelligence**

**Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders***

**By**

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**Abstract**

Beginning with the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible and throughout ensuing fiction, the role of women has been most prominent. William Dean Howells asserts, in his *Heroines of Fiction* (1901), that the greatness of any piece of fiction depends on the importance of its women, and that realistic fiction succeeded better than any former romance (p. 113) in this respect.

This paper's purpose is to study a series of fascinating women who enlivened the fictional worlds in which they lived, beginning with Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, showing the role of these women in their respective stories. It seems that male writers' emphasis is more on physical beauty than intelligence while in female novelists' writing the emphasis falls more on intelligence.

Despite the fact that writers (especially female ones) find some difficulty, and sometimes fail, in the depiction of a character from the opposite sex, Defoe seems to succeed wonderfully in creating his Moll Flanders; "of all his heroes and heroines Moll Flanders is the most attractive." (Sutherland, XII) Born in Newgate Prison and bred in poverty, she learns at a very early age what advantage there is to be made out of her dazzling beauty. Putting this to good use, she leads a life of abandonment and pleasure, impelled by her own ambition to be a lady and live like one.

*Moll Flanders* (1722), a tale of prostitution, incest, bigamy, larceny, and lust is, at the same time, a great work of literature. Defoe tells his fascinating story with

humour and understanding which leave the reader with the impression that in spite of her sinful life, Moll Flanders is in many ways an adorable and good-hearted woman, and Defoe is “one of her many lovers.” (Sutherland, V)

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#### **Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders***

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man. (*Genesis*, 2:23)

So, Adam was delighted to find such a fair creature as a spouse, for God saw that “for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.” (*Genesis*, 2:20) It did not take him long to regret this, for she was tempted by the serpent through the human wishful desire for immortality: “Ye shall not purely die.” (Genesis, 3:4) She tasted the forbidden fruit, and, in her turn, tempted Adam to do likewise; this incurred the wrath of God. Adam apologized miserably: “The woman whom though gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” (*Genesis*, 3:12); consequently, being outcast by God, Adam changed her name to “Eve, because she was the mother of all living.” (*Genesis*, 3:20) One wonders whether the serpent could have succeeded had it resorted to Adam first.

Women must have suffered from despise and harassment for this felony, and had to wait the advent of Mary, the mother of Christ, to restore the love and respect due to women as mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters which they enjoyed ever since. The story of Adam and Eve, according to the Glorious Qur’an, differs in pinpointing the responsibility for this fall; both of them were tempted

simultaneously, and both responded positively to the temptation of Satan. So, both were equally responsible, and this should have been a very suitable basis for misapplied equality between the sexes.

20: Then Satan whispered to them that he might manifest unto them that which was hidden from them of their shame, and he said: Your Lord forbade you from this tree only lest ye should become angels or become of the immortals.

.....

22. Thus did he lead them on the guile. (Al-'Araf, Sura XII)

This is the first story in human history, related in the Bible, the Old Testament, Genesis (2-3); according to D.H. Lawrence, "The novel is the book of life. In this sense, the Bible is a great confused novel." (Enright, 289) To Lawrence, loss of innocence and, consequently, paradise, was well-compensated for by sex; Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers*, kisses Clara, the sexually responsive mate, and says, laughing:

You like your little bit of guiltiness, I believe...I believe Eve enjoyed it, when she went cowering out of Paradise. (*Sons and Lovers*, 382)

Many lessons and morals can be inferred from this story, not least of them are the tragic wish for immortality and power, and life as a tragedy, a feeling which runs as an undercurrent beneath the most delightful and extremely happy episodes, even if it is only "A red, red rose."

But a more viable and indispensable moral is the role of women, in fact and fiction; no one can contradict the fact that the story of Adam does not acquire its

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share of interest and attraction, till Eve arrives on stage, for better or for worse, “till death do us part.” William Dean Howells’ *Heroines of Fiction*, is a classic study of the most famous heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennet, Emma, and Hester Prynne. At the beginning of his chapter on “A Heroine of Bulwer’s,” he maintains:

Many proofs of the fact that a novel is great or not, as its women are important or unimportant might be alleged. There are exceptions to the rule, but they are among novels of ages and countries different from ours. As we approach our own time, women in fiction become more and more interesting, and the skill with which they are portrayed is more and more a test of mastery.(113)

Howells(1837-1920), an American major novelist who influenced Henry James among others, wrote numerous romances, works of travel, criticism, reminiscence, and several dramas, was an artist and, consequently, was able to recognize the importance of the role of women in fiction. No wonder that his admirer and disciple, Henry James (1843-1916), was keen on creating a galaxy of women who are immortal in their seductive beauty and irresistible attraction, such as Madame De Vionnet. (*The Ambassadors*, 1903)

Ladies in romances might be expected to be superbly beautiful and exceedingly charming, for, in a romance, everything is exaggerated to incredulity: beauty, valour, loyalty, etc. W.D. Howells asserts the opposite: “By this test [of mastery in portrayal of women] the romantic novel shows its inferiority, if by no other;” he elaborates:

We have only to compare the work of Richardson, Goldsmith, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, Thackeray, George Eliot, Mr. Thomas Hardy, Mr. George

Moore, Mr. Henry James, Harold Fredrick, Mr. George W. Cable, Miss Mary E. Wilkins, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and the other realistic or *real- ascent* novelists with that of the romanticists, in order to see how vast this inferiority is... These masters have presented women livingly, winningly, convincingly as no master of romance has. (*Heroines*, 113)

The absence of Defoe is conspicuous in this list of the masters of realistic fiction, despite the fact that he depicted at least too memorable heroines: Moll Flanders and Roxana; Howells overlooked him, because “he was,

frankly of the day before we began to dwell in decencies, before women began to read novels so much that the novel had to change the subject, or so limit its discussion that it came to the same thing... He is a greater, a more modern artist than either of [Richardson and Fielding]; but because of his matter, and not his manner or motive, his heroines must remain under lock and key, and cannot be so much as named in mixed company. (*Heroines*, 3)

The exception is, of course, “his immortal romance, *Robinson Crusoe* which is “open to all comers, of every age and sex, and it is a thousand pities... that it has no heroines.” (*Heroines*, 3)

Howells published his book in 1901, when the world was still living the quiet that preceded the storm of change; by now, Defoe’s modernity faces no challenge or protest; in April, 1965, *Pageant*, published a moderately erotic feature with the title: “Kim (Novak) Daughter of Tom (Jones) Bares All- A Melodrama in Words and Pictures:”

The two most famous characters of bawdy 18<sup>th</sup> century novels were Tom Jones and Moll Flanders. It's a toss-up as to who was the greatest rake. Since Tom was brought to the screen so successfully, it's only fair that Moll get equal time. She does in a new paramount romp titled *The Amorous Adventures of Moll Flanders*. Kim Novak plays the swashbuckler with such wild tongue-in-check abandon that she out-Toms Tom Jones.

Moll is a disarming English vixen who mirrors a scandalous age. As a poor li'l orphan girl obsessed by ambitions to better her lot, Moll knew that the way to rich respectability lay through the bedroom. (pp. 60-63)

The pictures are, of course, of semi-naked (or semi-clad) Kim Novak; the choice of this beautiful actress is very significant, for Moll's beauty is the catalysis that makes her tactics and stratagems succeed. But, despite the fact that she sometimes calls herself "whore", Moll is not a prostitute; neither does she strive to win "respectability...through the bedroom." One wonders what would have been Defoe's reaction to the erotically sensational scenes (including, of course, stark naked bathing in a pond); if Defoe is taken at his own word, his intention in writing this history was to promote morality, not embellish depravity:

...this book is recommended to the reader, as a work from every part of which something may be learned, and some just and religious inference is of instruction, if he pleases to make use of it. ("Author's Preface", *Moll Flanders*, 11)

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If Defoe's basic intention was to instruct, he did not undervalue the other aim of all literature, which is to delight; once a reader begins to read this book, it would be extremely difficult to leave it till it is finished. Suspense and expectation are valid in adding interest to the story, but it is the style which is deceptively simple and exquisitely clear that delights by its ingenuity. It is art behind the style that makes it look "artless", as Pope says: "True ease in writing comes from art, not chance/ As those who move easiest who have learnt to dance." (*Essay on Criticism*, 362-3) To Howells, the "best thing in the expression of any sort of modernity is a voluntary naturalness, an instructed simplicity," and, consequently, there was no writer, at the time of writing his book, *Heroines in Fiction*, who was "more modern than Defoe in these essentials, though Defoe wrote two hundred and fifty years ago." He elaborates:

[Defoe] wrote the clearest, purest English, the most lifelike English, and his novels are of a self-evident and most convincing fidelity to life. (*Heroines*, 2)

The corollary to this is that Defoe was as modern as any nineteenth-century writer in his style and art, but of another age in mortality, so he did not deal with his heroines who must be put under "lock and key", according to Howells. (*Heroines*,3)

If W. D. Howells found the proscription of Defoe's heroines quite explicable morally, there is no reason now to keep them in exile, especially when Kim Novak felt proud to act the role of Moll Flanders:

Of moll, Kim says seriously: "She always led with her heart. I'm playing her more with my instincts than with my



intellect.” Funny, the producers figured it that way, too  
(*Pageant*, 56)

Kim’s emphasis was on Moll Flanders’ instincts more than her intellect, and there she might not be extremely correct, for Moll’s intellect is as effectual as her beauty; that is why she is not defeated, caught, or punished soon. She survives all her accomplices and acquaintances who envy her for her astuteness and luck. But the important point is that Kim is a woman with a good share of intellect, so when she approved of Moll’s character, that is extremely important. It means that Defoe’s depiction of this character is viable and convincing, especially to women; this is one of the most important limitations of creative writers in fiction— it is not a very rare phenomenon for a writer to fail in some aspects of his creation of a character of the “other sex”. It seems quite logical for Jane Austen to write *Emma*, and for Dickens to write *Dombey and Son*, but for Defoe to create the character of *Roxana* or Richardson that of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, it might need some detailed scrutiny to corroborate the validity of their creations. (Allen, 175)

But Virginia Woolf’s testimony, as a woman novelist, is important; her admiration of Defoe’s depiction of the characters of Roxana and Moll Flanders is great: “*Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*... stand among the few great English novels which we can call indisputably great.” (Quoted in Watt, 97) Ian Watt, in his *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), quotes John Peale Bishop as seeing *Moll Flanders* as “one of the great English novels, perhaps the greatest,” (123) and Bonamy Dobrée claiming it to be “an astonishing incomparable masterpiece.” (132) Watt believes that “*Moll Flanders*...is... a tribute to Defoe’s vitality as a writer,” (134) but that E. M. Forester’s and Virginia Woolf’s tributes to Defoe were elicited by “Defoe’s formal artlessness [which] seemed more piquant than ever” in the face of the

nineteen twenties' mechanical craftsmanship of Arnold Bennet and Galsworthy. (Watt, 138) Moll Flanders' character to Watt is "undeniably feminine in tone" but "essentially masculine;" for,

Moll accepts none of the disabilities of her sex, and indeed one cannot but feel that Virginia Woolf's admiration for her was largely due to admiration of a heroine who so fully realized one of the ideals of feminism: freedom from any involuntary involvement in the feminine role. (Watt, 118)

If this is true and that "Defoe's identification with Moll Flanders was so complete that, despite a few feminine traits, he created personality that was in essence his own," (Watt, 119) Moll Flanders proves to have 'many feminine traits', for,

she has a keen eye for fine clothes and clean linen, and shows a wifely concern for the creature comforts of her males. Further, the early pages of the book undoubtedly present a young girl with a lifelike clarity, and later there are many touches of a rough cockney humour that is undeniably feminine in tone. (Watt, 117-8)

Defoe's contribution is that he "created his own personal genre, which stands wholly alone in the history of literature, as befits the creator of Robinson Crusoe;" (Watt, 136) moreover, "very few writers have created for themselves both a new subject and a new literary form to embody it." (Watt, 139) Moll Flanders, according to E.M. Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel* (p.61), is a novel of character; the plot's whole burden is thrown on the heroine, and she really succeeds in supporting it triumphantly. But Defoe's crucial difficulty is with his

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point of view, and the stumbling block is not really the narrator's expression of herself in the mundane language she is inured to: for,

when a woman debauched from her youth, nay, even being the offspring of debauchery and vice, comes to give an account of all her vicious practices, and even to descend to the particular occasions and circumstances by which she first became wicked, and of all the progressions of crime which she ran through in threescore years, an author must be hard put to it to wrap it up so clean as not to give room, especially for vicious readers, to turn it to his disadvantage. (*Moll Flanders*, 9)\*

Defoe copes with this so successfully that she emerges as a “good Puritan who, despite a few necessary and regrettable compromises, has, in the main and in defiance of illustrious precedent, lived in a world of pitch and not been

\*From here on, *MF*.

defiled.”(Watt, 118)

But there are lapses in recounting episodes where the heroine is supposed to be absent; Defoe simply slurs over these episodes, leading some critics to indict him for a “lack of co-ordination between the different aspects of his narrative purpose.” (Watt, 123) The conference of the mother with her son, Robin, and his sisters, when she tries to find out

whether he is in earnest and serious in his plan to marry Mrs. Betty (Moll), is a good instance. It begins with Moll, sick and in bed; the mother, satisfied with her (Moll's) assurances of having no schemes to marry her younger son, leaves after kissing her and bidding her to take good care of her health. She goes down where

she found the brother and the sisters together by the ears; they were angry even to passion, at his upbraiding them with their being homely, and having never had any sweethearts, never having been asked the question, their being so forward as almost to ask first, and the like. He rallied them with Mrs. Betty; how pretty, how good tempered, how she sang better than they did, and danced better, and how much handsomer she was. (*MF*, 48)

The conference ends when the eldest brother and sister are delegated to ask Mrs. Betty why she refuses the younger brother; they find her in her sick bed, and nothing is mentioned about overhearing or eaves-dropping on the part of Moll. So, who reports the proceedings of this stormy conference?

But the more complicated issue is Moll's beauty: it is really a very embarrassing thing for her to describe, and she had to report indirectly what others say in her absence or

presence. She, despite her pride, does not spare any effort in learning "everything that

they [have] been taught themselves," (*MF*, 25) but she already knows their opinion of her:

in some things I had the advantage of my ladies, though they were my superiors, viz., that mine 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 shaped, and thirdly, I sang better, by which I mean, I had a better voice; in all which you will, I hope,

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allow me to say, I do not speak my own conceit, but the opinion of all that knew the family. (*MF*, 24)

Novelists as creators play God with their creations; they do support Emerson's theory of "compensation": nobody is granted everything and no one is destitute of every desirable trait. Rich women might give all their fortune to be compensated with beauty; well off people might miss very much the good health some poor people enjoy. So, the ladies of this respectable family envy this foundling her elegance and beauty; Moll's ambition to be a respected lady is fuelled by her vanity; it is, at the same time, her greatest consolation and compensation:

I had with all these [accomplishments] the common vanity of my sex, viz., that being taken for very handsome, or if you please, for a great beauty. I very well knew it, and had as good an opinion of myself, as anybody else could have of me, and particularly I loved to hear anybody speak of it, which happened often, and was a great satisfaction to me. (*MF*, 24)

Moll Flanders soon finds that beauty which is a veritable boon, could be turned into a bane of destruction: "But that which I was too vain of, was my ruin, or rather my vanity was the cause of it." (*MF*, 24)

Moll corroborates this reputation with bits and pieces of testimony, some of which cause her to yield to seduction; big brother flatters her vanity with admiration and her dire need for money. Moll describes him as "a gay gentleman that knew the town as well as the country," who does not "pay too dear for his pleasures" and knows "well how to catch a woman in his net, as a partridge when he [goes] a setting." (*MF*, 25) He flatters her on every occasion, telling her "how agreeable, how well-carriaged," she is, and this makes "her so well pleased to

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hear.” Moreover, he does not scruple to repeat this in his sisters’ presence; once she chances to meet him in his sister’s room, he exclaims: “Don’t your cheeks burn, Mrs. Betty?” She blushes and curtsies; he adds insolently to his sister:

a great many fine things have been said of Mrs. Betty, I assure you: and particularly, that she is the handsomest young woman in Colchester, and, in short, they begin to toast her health in the town. (*MF*, 25)

This ignites a heated argument on beauty versus fortune, among brothers and sisters where the latters are degraded by the formers for their lack of beauty; the younger brother retorts, when his sister miserably says: “you suppose I have the money and want beauty; but as times go now, the first will do, so I have the better of my neighbours:”

Well... but your neighbours may be even with you; for beauty will steal a husband sometimes in spite of money; and when the maid chances to be handsomer than the mistress, she oftentimes makes as good a market, and rides in a coach before her. (*MF*, 26)

At this juncture, Moll leaves, but still overhears an “abundance of fine things said of [her], which prompt[s her] vanity.” (*MF*, 26)

The elder brother is fully-experienced in matters of love and life, in town and country, so he adds the temptation of money to sweeten his flattery, and, subsequently, his seduction of this poor, innocent ‘li’l’ orphan. He has already won her affection by re-iterating how passionately he was in love with her, “and if she could love him again, and would make him happy, [she] could be the saving of his life, and many such fine things.” (*MF*, 28) To this he adds “a gentleman’s word”

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of a vaguely promised marriage, and after kissing her “a great while” “violently”, he departs (hearing someone coming upstairs), putting five guineas in her penurious hands. She ruminates:

I was not myself, to have such a gentleman talk to me of being in love with me, and of my being such a charming creature, as he told me I was, these were things I knew not how to bear, my vanity was elevated to the last degree. (*MF*, 27)

Moll confesses: “I was more confounded with the money than I was before with the love; and began to be so elevated, that I scarce knew that ground I stood on,” (*MF*, 29) but she gives her first advice for posterity:

I am the more particular in this, that if it comes to be read by any innocent young body, they may learn from it to guard themselves against the mischiefs which attend an early knowledge of their own beauty; if a young woman once thinks herself handsome, she never doubts the truth of any man that tells her he is in love with her; for if she believes herself charming enough to captivate him, it is natural to expect the effects of it. (*MF*, 29)

Instead of marrying Moll, the elder brother cajoles her to marry the younger, Robin, to her chagrin, for she is really attached to him as her first love; she beseeches him: “I had much rather,...be your whore than your brother’s wife.” (*MF*, 43) When she finds that he is determined that she marry his brother, she hesitates, contemplating her future as a beggar; she is horrified by the prospect:

of being turned out to the wide world, a mere cast-off whore, for it was no less, and perhaps exposed as such; with little to

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provide for myself; with no friend, no acquaintance in the whole world, out of that town, and there I could not pretend to stay. (*MF*, 58-59)

Moll Flanders learns her first lesson in the deceitful selfishness and treachery of astute gentleman; for big brother cajoles his younger brother and persuades him that he has done him service in making their mother consent, without resorting to their father. She muses with painful frustration; for this,

though true, was not indeed done to serve him, but to serve himself; but thus diligently did he cheat him, and had the thanks of a faithful friend for shifting his whore into his brother's arms for a wife. So naturally do men give up honour and justice and even Christianity to secure themselves. (*MF*, 60)

Big brother renders another, indispensable service to Moll, the bride, on her wedding- night, to cover-up her loss of virginity; and the tactic is very simple; Moll relates what happens: she has “the satisfaction of a drunken bedfellow the first night.”

How he did it I know not, but I concluded that he certainly contrived it, that his brother might be able to make no adjustment of the difference between a maid and a married woman, nor did he ever entertain any notion of it, or disturb his thoughts about it. (*MF*,59)

He turns up to be “a very good husband” to Moll for five years, during which they have two children (later taken by their grandparents), but does not inherit much



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from him, so her “circumstances were not great, nor was [she] mended by the match.” (*MF*, 60)

Now, that she is free, and with a handsomely saved amount of £ 1100 in her pocket, she begins her pilgrim’s progress in life which has started in Newgate and almost ends there, but for the intercession, on her behalf, which releases her into transportation to Virginia’s plantations. Moll’s longest journey (in life) begins when she is still at the orphanage, aspiring to be a gentlewoman, like the one she has already heard of, called “madam”, to the consternation of her nurse who exclaims prophetically: “Poor child, you may soon be such a gentlewoman as that, for she is a person of ill-fame and has had two bastards.” (*MF*, 20) She becomes known for this ambition which is treated as a joke, especially by the Mayor’s daughters:

I was often visited by these young ladies and sometimes they brought others with them; so that I was known by it almost all over the town. (*MF*, 20)

But she becomes really known by her manners and beauty when she is about ten, for she

began to look womanish, for I was mighty grave, very mannerly, and as I had often heard the ladies say I was pretty, and would be very handsome, you may be sure it made me not a little proud: however, that pride had no ill effect upon me yet. (*MF*, 20)

at twelve she becomes, according to her notion, a gentlewoman, for she has not only found herself “clothes, and paid [her] her nurse for [her] keeping, but got money in [her] pocket too.” (*MF*, 21) After the death of her “very husband,” the

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“so honest a gentleman,” free, she resumes her progress, a pretty widow, but with some experience and wisdom of the ways of the world: she is now

left loose to the world and being still young and handsome, as everybody said to me, and I assure you I thought myself so, and with a tolerable fortune in my pocket, I put no small value upon myself. (*MF*, 61)

The mistress of the lodge (landlady) where she resides introduces to a life of gaiety:

she brought me into a world of wild company, and ever brought home several persons, such as she liked well enough to gratify, to see her pretty widow. (*MF*, 61)

She is dazed by this world of “such as called themselves lovers”, but, instead of being drawn into this world of her landlady who is “not so much mistress of her virtue,” (*MF*, 61) she now looks for a suitable spouse: “a woman should never be kept for a mistress, that had money to make herself a wife.” (*MF*, 62) Now, with a fair store of experience of life, and having a taste of the treachery of men, she believes:

The case was altered with me, I had money in my pocket, and had nothing to say to [suitors]. I had been tricked by that cheat called love, but the game was over. I was now resolved to be married or nothing, and to be well married or not at all. (*MF*, 62)

Equipped with a good share of beauty and elegance, a fair amount of money and experience, and disillusioned by the failure of her first love, she does not stumble into snares or trips easily again. Yet, in her “fancy for a gentleman” she marries a

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draper, who is a “rake, gentleman, shopkeeper, and beggar altogether.” (*MF*, 62)  
She owns her gross folly:

I was hurried on (by my fancy to a gentleman) to ruin myself in the grossest manner that ever a woman did; for my new husband, coming to a lump of money at once, fell into such a profusion of expense, that all I had, and all he had, would not have held it out above one year. (*MF*, 62-3)

This spendthrift husband breaks soon, is sent into Spunging House, being unable to provide for a heavy bail, sends for her to come to him; in his crisis of bankruptcy, this husband proves to be a veritable gentleman, though a penniless one. During their interviews:

He said some very handsome things to me indeed at parting; for I told you [readers] he was a gentleman and that was all the benefit I had of his being so; that he used me very handsomely, even to the last, only spent all I had and left me to rob the creditors for something to subsist on. (*MF*, 64)

He absconds, robs what he could, and flees to France, leaving Moll “a widow bewitched” for she has “a husband and no husband”, so she could not remarry, though she knows well enough that he “would never see England anymore, if he lived fifty years.” (*MF*, 65)

Because of her fears lest the commissioners be informed of where she is and thus be taken away, Mrs. Betty changes her name and assumes a new identity:

Upon these apprehensions the first thing I did was to go out of my knowledge, and go about by another name. This I did effectually, for I went into the Mint too, took lodgings in

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a very private place, dressed me up in the habit of a widow,  
and called myself Mrs. Flanders. (*MF*, 65)

The “pretty widow”, in her new identity and habit, is free again, but her marital status is equivocal; her landlady hints at a probable offer of a marriage, and she (the landlady), soon marries to her own advantage.

Moll’s experience in life becomes better, for she comes round to the concept of her former sister-in-law (Robin’s sister) of the importance of fortune for a lady to marry well. Accordingly:

beauty, wit, manners, sense, good humour, good behaviour,  
education, virtue, piety, or any other qualification, whether  
of body or mind, had no power to recommend: that money  
only made a woman agreeable. (*MF*, 68)

She, consequently, rounds up the traits and characteristics favoured by men in a mistress, a whore, or a wife, succinctly, showing her admirable understanding of her society:

men chose mistresses indeed by the gust of their affection,  
and it was requisite for a whore to be handsome, well-  
shaped, have a good mien, and a graceful behaviour; but that  
for a wife, no deformity would shock the fancy, no ill  
qualities the judgment; the money was the thing; the portion  
was neither crooked nor monstrous, but the money was  
always agreeable, whatever the wife was. (*MF*, 68)

From now on she is going to shift for herself better, not to be outwitted easily; but, in looking for a proper spouse in a society where women outnumbered men, for “the wars and the sea, and trade, and other incidents have carried the men so much

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away that there was no proportion between the number of sexes;” (*MF*, 74) she faces a tragedy despite her disagreement with this fact. She believes, instead:

that the age was so wicked, and the sex so debauched, that in short, the number of such men as an honest woman ought to meddle with is small indeed; and it is but here and there that a man is to be found who is fit for an honest woman to venture upon. (*MF*, 74-5)

Moll ventures upon such a man with the help of her friend, the wife of a sea-captain (remember, no names are revealed, for this is a private history), who helps by spreading the rumour of her being a lady with a fortune of no less than 1,500£ (when a pound was a pound):

I picked out my man without much difficulty by the judgment I made of his way of courting me; I had let him run on with his protestations that he loved me above all the world; that if I would make him happy, that was enough; all which I knew was upon the supposition that I was very rich, though I never told him a word of it myself. (*MF*, 78)

The courtship is a delightful duel of wits, during which they exchange quotations of love poetry, which begins with his “You I love, and you alone.” It ends with her ironic confession of the truth: “I’m poor: let’s see how kind you’ll prove.” He proves to be truly kind, for fate has already declared that this marriage be consummated: there seems to be a very strange attraction between them; it is the attraction of having the same blood and heredity unknown to both:

This was a sad truth to me, whether he believed me or not, I could not tell; I supposed then that he did not. However he

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flew to me; took me in his arms, and kissing me very eagerly, and with the greatest passion imaginable he held me fast. (*MF*, 70)

They continue their “poetical scribble”, not knowing that it is really the scribble of fate, which has decreed them to play the role of tragic hero and heroine in an incestuous marriage, like Oedipus and his own mother, now between brother and sister, separated from early childhood (Moll is born in Newgate, after which her mother is transported to Virginia). This curious magnetism induces consent:

I was inclined to go on with him...for he was the best-humoured merry sort of a fellow that I ever met with; and I often reflected how doubly criminal it was to deceive such a man, but that necessity which pressed me to a settlement suitable to my condition was my authority for it, and certainly his affection to me and the goodness of his temper, however they might argue against using him ill, yet they strongly argued to me that he would better take the disappointment [when he finds out the truth] than some fiery tempered wretch, who might have nothing to recommend him but those passions which would serve only to make a woman miserable. (*MF*, 79)

Ironically, they live quite compatibly on their plantation in Virginia, begetting three children, till one day it dawns upon Moll that her mother-in-law is really her own mother; for, the latter in relating the story of her miserable life, tells Moll how she was transported after giving birth to a daughter. The shock of recognition is not less tragic than Oedipus's who insists on investigating his origin, despite the protest of his mother/wife; she sobs:

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Let anyone judge what must be the anguish of my mind, when I came to reflect that this was certainly no more or less than my own mother, and that I had now two children, and was big with another, by my own brother, and lay still with him every night.

I was now the most unhappy of all women in the world. O! had the story never been told me, all had been well; it had been no crime to have lain with my husband if I had known nothing of it. (*MF*, 87)

Jocasta, Oedipus's mother/wife hangs herself on discovering the truth, and he blinds himself with her golden brooches so that "those eyes no more should see/ The wrongs he suffered, and the wrongs he did."(Whitfield, 24) Here, it is the brother/ husband who tries to hang himself two times unsuccessfully, becoming blind with grief and age; Moll returns to England to resume her life there with a new zeal.

Moll, on her stunned recognition of her own mother, horrifies her with circumstantial details: "then I told her my own story, and my name, and assured her by such other tokens as she could not deny, that I was no other nor more or less than her own child." (*MF*, 93) Moll says: "It is impossible to express the astonishment [mother] was in;" her mother takes her by the neck, kisses her, and cries vehemently over her shoulder. After a long silence, she breaks out:

Unhappy child! What miserable chance could bring thee hither? And in the arms of my son too! Dreadful girl!...why we are all undone! Married to thy own brother! Three children, and two alive, all of the same flesh and blood! My son and my daughter lying together as husband and wife! All

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confusion and distraction, miserable family! What will become of us? (*MF*, 93)

Despite this harrowing tragedy, she returns to England with a new zest for life and determination to survive; but she still keeps her beauty and manners, even after she reaches menopause, at which she is supposed to lose some of her appeal.

Before menopause, which arrives at age forty-eight to Moll, she has several liaisons, awful and promiscuous, gets a progeny which she disposes of somehow; she hints at her beauty when she becomes forty-two:

I was near twenty years older, and did not look the better of my age, nor for my rambles to Virginia and back again; and though I omitted nothing that might set me out to advantage, except painting, for that I never stooped to, yet there would always be some difference seen between five-and-twenty and two-and-forty. (*MF*, 122)

At this time Moll is proposed to, by a banker who is married and has “a wife and no wife...she is a wife and no wife; you don’t know what am I [a cuckold] or what she is [a whore]” (*MF*, 129), when she does not consent readily, he tells her passionately:

you shall be the woman or I will not be divorced at all; I owe it to your unlooked for kindness if to nothing else, but I have other reasons too. (*MF*, 131)

So, at forty two, not as appealing as at twenty-five, yet she captivates this modest gentleman who proves to be later a good, considerable husband:

I lived with this husband in the utmost tranquillity; he was a quiet, sensible, sober man, virtuous, modest, sincere and in his business diligent and just... his income was



sufficient to a plentiful way of living in the ordinary way....  
I chose now to live retired, frugal, and within ourselves. I kept no company, made no visits, minded my family, and obliged my husband; and this kind of life became a pleasure to me. (*MF*, 178)

This pleasure is discontinued in five years, for this “virtuous, modest, sincere” husband dies leaving:

two children by him and no more, for it began to be time for me to leave bearing children, for I was now eight and forty, and I suppose if he had lived I should have had no more. (*MF*, 179)

Eric W. Johnson, in his *Love and Sex in Plain Language*; explains that usually between the age of forty-five and fifty-five a woman goes through a process called menopause or change of life; during this period, her ovaries discharge no more eggs and menstruation ceases. It does not mean the end of her sexual life- “only that she can bear no more children.” (P.12) It is a reminder of the approaching end, and, more seriously, of waning beauty and sex appeal. Havelock Ellis, in *Psychology of Sex*, elaborates:

Although slight emotional and physical disturbances are almost invariable at this period, many women, even those of unstable nervous disposition, pass through that stage of transition with no serious trouble, though a few are liable to some degree of breakdown, physical or mental. (pp. 268-9)

Because Moll faces two crises almost simultaneously, she is liable, especially in her contemporary society, to this breakdown; with no one in the world except her

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husband, and with no significant inheritance from this late husband, she has to worry much for her unpromising future. She cogitates miserably:

I was now left in a dismal and disconsolate case indeed, and in several things worse than ever. First it was past the flourishing time with me when I might expect to be courted for a mistress; that agreeable part had declined some time, and the ruins only appeared of what had been; and that which was worse than all was this, that I was the most dejected, disconsolate creature alive. (*MF*, 179)

Widowhood and menopause are quite incompatible, but comprise a double-edged distress that breaks the heart of a bereaved woman; a living husband might have been a sort of consolation to Moll in this crucial stage in her life. But this dejection and disconsolation do not last long; although she veers now gradually to the art of larceny and outstrips others in her skill as a pickpocket, she does not lose much of her fascination and sex appeal. In fact, this attractiveness of a winsome face and aura of respectability as a lady, help her much in her new career. Ellis quotes W. J. Fielding's remark on menopause:

Nor is there any reason why women, normally constituted, should lose their sexual charms at this time. As a matter of fact, many women are more attractive at fifty than they were at twenty-five, and if their personality has been developed and enriched by the passing years, they may be more charming at sixty than they were at thirty. (p. 270)

After two years she spends in dejected raving for the loss of her husband, she resorts to her former landlady whom she calls governess and, sometimes, mother. An ex-convict who has been transported to Virginia and managed to re-enter

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England with bribery, the maternal governess runs a house of dubious and ill-reputation, in which abortion and prostitution are the main activities, in addition to dedicated instruction in stealing. Moll Flanders, who thinks she is no more “a pretty widow”, ruminates:

I now began to think this necessary woman might help me a little in my low condition to some business, for I would have gladly have turned my hand to any honest employment if I could have got it; but honest business did not come within reach. If I had been younger, perhaps she might have helped me, but my thoughts were off of that kind of livelihood, as being quite out of the way after fifty which was my case as I told her. (*MF*, 187)

In fact, opportunities for honest work do come her way, but she is too intelligent to drudge all day long for a meagre income; with the temptation of “the diligent devil who resolved I would continue in his service,” and who “continually tempted me to go out and take a walk...to see if anything would offer in the old way,” (*MF*, 187) and the governess who invites her to reside at her house, exhorts her to “go out again and try [her] fortune [for] it might be that [she] might meet another piece of plate.” (*MF*, 190) Moreover, she offers Moll a chance of having an accomplished tutor: “I could help you to a school-mistress that shall make you as dexterous as herself;” a very tempting offer but Moll, still a novice, is flustered:

I trembled at the proposal, for hitherto, I had had no confederates, nor any acquaintance among that tribe; but she conquered all my modesty and all my fears; and in a little time, by the help of this confederate, I grew as impudent a

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thief, and as dexterous, as ever Moll Cut-Purse was, though if fame does not belie her, not half so handsome. (*MF*, 190)

She gradually develops into an efficient, but still handsome, “Moll Cut-Purse”, yet she is “no ordinary criminal: everything, even thieving, can be well or badly done, and the Moll Flanders that Defoe has imagined develops into a highly proficient thief...she clearly wins from him the admiration that we always give to intelligence and skill.” (Sutherland, VII) Moll’s intelligence and skill, sustained by her lingering beauty, help her survive longer than any of her colleagues, and they:

began to be angry that I should always escape when they were caught and hurried to Newgate. Those were they that gave me the name of Moll Flanders; for it was no more of affinity with my real name, or with any of the names I had ever gone by, than black is of kin to white. (*MF*, 201-2)

These miserable, envious thieves who vow to impeach her (*MF*, 202) are too jealous to confess that they are not “half-handsome” as Moll; when the governess decides to disguise her as a man, Moll says: “I was tall and personable, but a little too smooth-faced for a man.” (*MF*, 202) With a still winsome face and elegant dress (sometimes gorgeously dressed), Moll is able to get away with it recurrently, evading danger. Gabriel Jaffé, in *Promiscuity* (1966), relates the story of “a certain lady who succeeded in passing numerous dud cheques and was not caught for a long time because none of the men who had served her in shops or banks could identify her face,” for she “had worn a very low-cut blouse!” (p.23)

Johnson, after expatiating on menopause and its corollary, adds that a woman “can still enjoy sex; in fact, she may enjoy it even more now that there is no possibility of her becoming pregnant.” (p. 12) Moll corroborates this by attracting

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a respectable gentleman “extremely well-dressed, and very rich” (*MF*, 211) at the Bartholomew Fair during “a merry time of the year:” (*MF*, 210)

he told me that he was charmed with my company, and asked me if I durst trust myself in a coach with him; he told me he was a man of honour, and would not offer anything to me unbecoming him. (*MF*,211)

He keeps his word of honour for some time during which they roam in the “Spring Garden, at Knightsbridge”, then he takes her to a house of an acquaintance where he is accorded a room with a bed upstairs:

at first I seemed to be unwilling to go up, but after a few words I yielded to that too, being indeed willing to see the end of it, and in hopes to make something of it later....

Here he began to be a little freer with me than he had promised; and I by little and little yielded to everything, so that in a word, he did what he pleased with me; I need say no more. (*MF*, 211)

Moll makes “something of it later”; being drunk he falls asleep in his carriage; she proves to be an intelligent and dexterous cut-purse by taking “this opportunity to search him to a nicety.” She robs his gold watch, a silk purse of gold, “a fine full bottom periwig”, silver fringed gloves, sword, and a fine snuff box “and gently opening the coach door,” she stands ready to jump and while the coach is going on, she jumps out when the coach stops to let another coach pass, beyond Temple Bar. Moll Flanders’ retrospective ideas on this incident are really quite intriguing: the adventure was unlooked for and undesigned, yet:

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I was not so past the merry part of life to forget how to behave, when a fop so blinded by his appetite should not know an old woman from a young. I did not indeed look so old as I was by ten or twelve year, yet I was not a young wench of seventeen, and it was easy enough to distinguish.  
(*MF*, 212)

Though this fop's mind is fogged and blinded by lust and drink, he was not so blind as to overlook the lingering beauty of this personable lady. The crux of the problem here is the point of view of the story: she is so modest as to undervalue her own charm, and one wishes he had been given an opportunity to see her through the eyes of this very rich fop of a gentleman. Yet, later, when he finds that the governess knows where she is, he begs her to let him meet her again, (p.220) which she does not recommend. She has been enjoying the magic of her beauty as a queen since childhood. She relates:

I was... about ten years old, began to look a little womanish, for I was mighty grave, very mannerly, and as I had often heard the ladies say I was pretty, and would be very handsome, you may be sure it made me not a little proud.  
(*MF*, 20)

A beauty that erupts early, even before puberty, can hardly extinguish soon after menopause; but Moll is wise enough not to set so much store on her slowly waning appeal. She is going soon to snatch back a long-lost husband in Newgate and haul him to Virginia.

Moll as a character is as fascinating as she is contradictory; she is kaleidoscopic in her changing moods: she swings like a pendulum between sin and repentance, determination and tenderness, crime and regret for wrong-doing; she is a mixture

of good and bad, generosity and meanness, strength and weakness. Sutherland sums up her as a character:

Simply as a human animal Moll is an impressive specimen, and the deepest impression made Defoe's story is the abundant vitality of a woman living by her wits in the jungle of eighteenth-century London. (pp. VII-VIII)

After stealing everything of value from this fop of a gentleman, she, as she does after each burglary, regrets her sinful action, thinks of repentance, but soon acquiesces to the next temptation. She feels sorry for this buoyant and exuberant gentleman; he is really to be pitied, for

he seemed to be a good sort of a man in himself; a gentleman that had no harm in his design; a man of sense, and of a fine behaviour, a comely, handsome person, a sober and solid countenance, a charming, beautiful face, and everything that could be agreeable;....

As for me, my business was his money, and what I could make of him, and after that if I could have found out any way to have done it, I would have sent him safe home to his house, and to his family. (*MF*, 213)

E. Anthony James, in *Daniel Defoe's Many Voices* (1972), believes that there had been misleading debate of the question of irony in Defoe's presentation of Moll Flanders, for the modern reader cannot fail to notice Moll's too obvious rationalizations and her pious observations as opposed to her actual practices as ironic "and thus views her as wilfully dishonest with herself or at least self-deceived." (p. 201) James Sutherland, on the other hand, views these obvious

contradictions in Mol's character as a source of fascination, for this is an intrinsic trait in the English character:

Most people remain, like the English weather, unpredictable; they have their cold days in summer, and their warm days in winter, and a period of apparently unrelenting rains may suddenly give way to the kindest of blue skies.

...

Does [Moll] contradict herself? Very well, she contradicts herself. She is large, she contains multitudes. (p. XV)

Moll's "governess", "mother" as she often calls her, is as contradictory in her reactions as Moll herself, for she is so affected by the story of this stooge of a gentleman that she is "hardly able to forbear tears, to think how such a gentleman run a daily risk of being undone, every time a glass of wine [gets] to his head." But,

As to the purchase I got and how entirely [Moll] stripped him, she told [her] it pleased her wonderfully. "Nay, child," says she, "the usage may, for aught I know, do more to reform him, than all the sermons that ever he will hear in his life," and if the remainder of the story be true, so it did. (*MF*, 214)

Thus, quite wonderfully, Moll, governess, and their accomplices alleviate their uneasy consciences and lull their scruples; the pattern is recurrent since the first theft of a bundle from an apothecary's shop in Leadenhall Street. (*MF*, 181-2)

The governess's diplomacy leads her to return the booty, piece by piece, being rewarded quite liberally for each; but the gentleman insists on meeting Moll Flanders, and after some hesitation, both Moll and the governess decide to arrange



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a visit. Moll dresses herself to “all the advantage possible... and for the first time use[s] a little art,”

for the first time, for I had never yielded to the baseness of paint before, having always had vanity enough to believe I had no need of it. (*MF*, 221)

One can sense the onslaught of obsession of a declining beauty, but the magnetism is not lost completely, for he appears, on seeing her, “exceedingly pleased...and entered on a long discourse with [her] upon the old affair.” (*MF*, 221) Moreover, he compliments her “upon being so particularly agreeable to him, and the like” till he is tempted “to do the thing again.” So, it is not merely drink that rouses him, but her undying fascination makes “the lewd part wear in” and the “wicked past” follows. (*MF*, 223)

The end of Moll Flanders, of course, like any other offender, is at Newgate, and not for the most serious crime of her life; there, she begins to ruminate over her past life while waiting for death by hanging which was the end of every burglar. She summarises her own career and her feelings for God, hell, and heaven:

my course of life for forty years had been a horrid complication of wickedness; whoredom, adultery, incest, lying, theft; in a word everything but murder and treason had been my practice from the age of eighteen or thereabouts, to threescore; and now I was engulfed in the misery of punishment; and had an infamous death at the door, and yet I had no sense of my condition, no thought of Heaven or Hell, at least, that went any further than a bare flying touch, like the stitch or pain that gives a hint and goes off. (*MF*,262)

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The temptation to take Moll at her own word is irresistible, for this is the kind of confession that would be taken as the ultimate and absolute proof to indict a criminal in English law, and Moll is no exception.

But the portrait of this lady is as alluringly complicated as Shakespeare's Cleopatra in being a sparkling jewel of many facets (including incest), and while Cleopatra commits suicide, Moll evades death by transportation to Virginia with her husband; she clings to life tenaciously. Always homesick for England she returns to it with her husband:

We are now grown old. I am come back to England, being almost seventy years of age, my husband sixty-eight, having performed much more than the limited terms of my transportation. And now notwithstanding all the fatigues, and all the miseries we have both gone through, we are both in good heart and health....we resolve to spend the remainder of our years in sincere patience for the wicked lives we have lived. (*MF*, 219)

These are the concluding words of a lady, alias Moll Flanders, "well-known in the Records or Registers at Newgate, and in the Old Bailey" who believes that the circumstances of her environment bring her "into a course of life, scandalous in itself, and which in its ordinary course tended to the swift destruction of both soul and body." (*MF*, 14-15) Sutherland, while he admires Moll Flanders as a character, disagrees:

for Defoe, she is a moral agent... Moll may be the unhappy victim of circumstances, the fact remains that at each turning-point in her story she is free to choose between good and evil. Defoe never lets us forget (because he never lets Moll forget)

that she is ultimately responsible for whatever she does. If the modern reader is ready to forgive her, that may be a tribute to his charity, or perhaps an indication of his indifference to moral issues. (p. XVI)

It is really a tribute to Defoe's art behind his seemingly artless feat of fiction, for "Defoe tells his rollicking story with humour and understanding which leave the reader with the impression that in spite of her sinful life, Moll Flanders was in many ways a lovable and good-hearted creature." Thus, the writer of the blurb on the back cover of the Boudoir Books edition of *Moll Flanders* (London, n.d.) says of the lady who proves to be the mistress of her creator's and the reader's hearts, for she blends beauty with intelligence admirably.

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