

DANIEL DEFOE

# Moll Flanders

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# Moll Flanders

INTRODUCTION BY

G. A. AITKEN



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## INTRODUCTION

DEFOE seems to have published only one pamphlet during 1721, though he was no doubt busy writing books, which were to appear in the following year. The first edition of *Moll Flanders* is dated 1721, but it was not issued by the publishers, Chetwood and others, until 27 January, 1722. Its popularity is shown by the appearance of a "second edition, corrected" (printed for John Brotherton) in July, and of a third edition, again published by Chetwood, in December. By January 1723, Thomas Edlin, as we learn from an entry at Stationers' Hall, was proprietor of the whole copyright; and in July 1723 an abridged pocket edition was issued by J. Read.

The full title of this remarkable book ran as follows: "The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the famous Moll Flanders, &c., who was born in Newgate, and during a life of continued variety, for threescore years, besides her childhood, was twelve years a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own brother), twelve years a Thief, eight years a transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew rich, lived honest, and died a Penitent. Written from her own Memorandums." To take this last point first, Defoe says that from prudential motives Moll Flanders could not publish her real name; and that the original narrative had been put into new words, and the style a little altered by "the pen employed in finishing her story"; and he admitted that, owing to the number of novels and romances before the public, it would "be hard for a private history to be taken for genuine" where the real names are concealed. "On this account we must be content to leave the reader to pass his own opinion upon the ensuing sheets, and take it just as he pleases."

It will be seen that Defoe's testimony to the authenticity of the narrative is rather half-hearted, and efforts to trace the original of Moll Flanders have been unsuccessful. A

chap-book appeared at Dublin in 1730 called "Fortune's Fickle Distribution: In Three Parts. Containing, First, The Life and Death of Moll Flanders. Secondly, The Life of Jane Hackabout, her Governess. Thirdly, The Life of James MacFaul, Moll Flanders's Lancashire Husband." The compiler of this book made Moll Flanders say that, as she was drawing near her end, she would now give particulars of her birth and parentage. Her grandfather was born at Carrickfergus; her father, James Fitzpatrick, was driven to vice by want, and subsequently met Moll's mother, Mary Flanders, in Whetstone Park. He took to highway robbery, and was executed. As for the close of Moll Flanders's life, we are told that she and her husband settled ultimately in Galway, and bought property there. On 30 March, 1722, she made a will, in the name of Elizabeth Atkins, her late husband being called William Carroll; and she died on 10 April, 1723, in her seventy-fifth year, being very penitent. She had been attended by Mr. Price, master of the Free School at Galway, and she was buried at St. Nicholas's Church, with much ceremony.

Defoe himself says that the life of Moll Flanders's husband had been written by another hand; but unfortunately for the circumstantial account in the Dublin volume, Mr. J. Digges la Touche, of the Dublin Record Office, who has been good enough to make inquiry, cannot find the alleged Galway will, or any other information respecting a woman of the name given. The Rev. J. F. Berry, of Galway, states that the St. Nicholas registers reach back only to 1790. In the absence of further proof, we must, then, regard the supposed identification of Moll Flanders as imagination; though the story was repeated, many years later—in 1776—in a worthless compilation entitled, "The History of Laetitia Atkins, vulgarly called Moll Flanders. Published by Mr. Daniel Defoe; and from papers found since his decease it appears greatly altered by himself; and from the said papers the present work is produced." At the end of this little book there is the will of Laetitia Atkins, widow of James Carrol, of Galway, dated 30 March, 1722; and we are told that this woman died on 10 December, 1722, in her seventy-fifth year. According to Defoe, however, Moll Flanders was dead when he wrote his preface, at the end of 1721; and the "papers"

used by the editor of this volume are certainly imaginary. But in spite of the difficulties of identification, the idea of Defoe's story was probably taken from the life of some real criminal, and it is quite possible that this person's name will some day be traced. For the present, we must consider the tale merely as a work of fiction; it is evident that the whole book was written by Defoe, and that he did not merely revise the narrative told by the woman herself.

Moll Flanders's mother was transported after conviction of a petty theft, and the baby fell into the hands of the gipsies, who deserted Moll, when she was three years old, at Colchester—a town which was familiar to Defoe. In due time the girl obtained a situation, but was ruined by her mistress's eldest son. An honourable suit by the second son afforded a means of escape from her troubles, and she married this young man. After five years, however, he died, and Moll married a draper of extravagant habits. For a time they lived as gentlefolk and then the draper became bankrupt, absconded to France, and dropped out of his wife's life. Moll Flanders next took lodgings in the Mint, passing for a widow with some means, by which device she was enabled to secure as her husband a sea-captain, with whom she went to Virginia. There she was distressed at discovering that she had married her own half-brother; and she agreed with her husband that she would return to England, when he could pretend she had died, and marry again if he wished.

For some time Moll Flanders lived in Bath, where she made the acquaintance of a man of means whose wife was insane, nursed him in his illness, lived with him, and ultimately became his mistress. He gave her plenty of money, but she secretly took care to lay up as much as she could for a rainy day. In due time this gentleman repented of his conduct, and parted with Moll Flanders, who was now "left desolate and void of counsel." However, she met with a banker's clerk, who wished to marry her, but she put him off on account of a Roman Catholic gentleman in Lancashire, who was stated to be rich. She married this man, only to find that he, like herself, was a fortune-hunter. Both parties had been deceived, and they agreed to separate, the man to return to highway robbery, the woman to go to London, where her child was born at a midwife's, and placed out to

nurse. The bank clerk now came forward again, and was gladly accepted, after "an abominable life of twenty-four years."

Five years of happiness ensued, when Moll's husband died, leaving her, aged forty-eight, with two children by him, and quite friendless. After two years' struggle, she was tempted to steal by the devil: "'Twas like a voice spoken over my shoulder, 'Take the bundle; be quick; do it this moment.'"

She became an expert thief, but after twelve years' good luck she was caught, and in Newgate met the highwayman she had married in Lancashire. She was tried for stealing "two pieces of brocaded silk, the goods of Anthony Johnson, and for breaking open the doors"; and was convicted of the larceny, and sentenced to death. The kindly ministrations of a clergyman "broke into" the woman's very soul, and led to genuine repentance; and the same friend obtained for her a reprieve, the capital sentence being commuted to transportation. Moll Flanders went to Virginia in company with her Lancashire husband; but there she was thrown into much confusion by finding that her brother (whom she had married so long before) was alive, though very feeble, as well as her son.

She moved to Maryland, settled there, and then went back on a visit to the river Potomac, where she made herself known to her son, who received her with affection, and told her that her mother had left to her a plantation which would bring in £100 a year. After a visit of some weeks, Moll Flanders returned to her husband in Maryland, who was now a thoroughly reformed man, and they became prosperous. The death of her brother enabled Moll to acknowledge her Lancashire husband, and to tell him the story of her former marriage. Afterwards they lived very happily, and in due time Moll Flanders, then nearly seventy, visited England, having performed much more than the limited term of her transportation. Her husband afterwards joined her in this country, where, as she wrote in 1683, "we resolve to spend the remainder of our years in sincere penitence for the wicked lives we have lived."

In the preface, Defoe adds that it was stated that Moll lived to be very old, "and was not so extraordinary a penitent as she was at first; it seems only that indeed she always spoke with abhorrence of her former life, and every part of it."

Such are the bald facts of a story which is filled in by Defoe with all his usual skill, so that the minutest details of Moll Flanders's robberies, or of the charges made by the woman—her "governess"—at whose house she lived for a time, are of interest to the reader, and give an air of truthfulness to the whole narrative. The book is one of the most remarkable examples of true realism in the whole range of fiction, and, looking to Zola's popularity, it is not surprising to hear that one of the most successful books of the last season in Paris has been M. Marcel Schwob's translation of this novel. The details, however, belong to the eighteenth century rather than to the seventeenth, as the author represents; and not the least interesting aspect of the book is the excellent view it gives us of the manners of the middle classes under Queen Anne,<sup>1</sup> and of the state of the Mint and of Newgate, with their glaring bribery and corruption.

None of the characters drawn by Defoe surpass that of Moll Flanders in subtlety of delineation; and they who speak of the perfunctory nature of the moral tags entirely miss the point of the book, which has but a superficial resemblance to the old picaresque novels of the school of Head's *English Rogue*, or even to Le Sage's *Gil Blas*. It is true that most of Moll Flanders's intrigues or marriages were brought about by the desire for money, but she was not without passion or generosity, and she had a genuine affection for her Lancashire husband. It must be borne in mind, too, in extenuation of her conduct, that her mother was a criminal; that she had been deserted in her infancy; that she was corrupted in her youth; and that she was led to commit some of her worst actions by the necessity of obtaining money to keep off starvation. If we cannot sympathise with Defoe's heroine, she was certainly sufficiently human to enable us at least to pity her.

"The publishing this account of my life," Defoe makes his

<sup>1</sup> One curious passage is confirmed by an episode in the life of Lady Steele. At Bath, Moll Flanders had a fellow-lodger on the same floor (p. 93), and they often went into each other's bedroom, without sense of impropriety. Mary Scurlock, before she knew Steele, was pestered by a gentleman who brought against her an action for breach of contract of marriage; and one of his allegations was that, being in the same lodgings, she would come to his room, and admit him to hers, late at night. The reply was that this was true, but that they were old acquaintances (*Life of Steele*, 1889, i. 180-1).



heroine say, "is for the sake of the just moral of every part of it, and for instruction, caution, warning, and improvement to every reader." In the preface, Defoe meets at length the charge that the story was of a corrupting nature. Every care had been taken to remove immodest ideas from the narrative: "What is left 'tis hoped will not offend the chastest reader, or the modestest hearer." "To give the history of a wicked life repented of," Defoe continues, "necessarily requires that the wicked part should be made as wicked as the real history of it will bear, to illustrate and give a beauty to the penitent part, which is certainly the best and brightest, if related with equal spirit and life." The warnings that would be drawn by those who knew how to make good use of the story atoned for any lively description of folly and wickedness in the book. The whole relation had been freed from the levity that was in it originally, and applied to virtuous ends; so that no one could justly cast any reproach upon it, or upon the editor's design in publishing it. Every wicked action was rendered unhappy and unfortunate; every villain was brought to an unhappy end, or became penitent; every ill thing mentioned was condemned; every virtuous thing carried its praise along with it. All the heroine's exploits were warnings to honest people; and her ultimate reformation was a story full of instruction to the unfortunate or criminal classes, who would see that nobody could have fallen so low as to be without hope of relief by unwearied industry.

This is Defoe's argument in support of his contention that he was justified in recommending the book to the world; and there is not the slightest reason for doubting his sincerity. It has generally been held, however, and rightly so, that he was mistaken in his view, because such stories are read, not for instruction, but for amusement. But it does not follow that we need censure Defoe. So far as his narrative is coarse, it is in accordance with the common practice of an age in which there was a singular lack of delicacy, accompanied by gross immorality among both rich and poor. It was usual, even among those who were themselves blameless, to speak in startlingly plain language of matters relating to morals; and from certain of his avowedly didactic works, it would seem that Defoe had a peculiar bluntness of perception as regards what is admissible in books intended for general

circulation. As a matter of fact, there are but two passages in *Moll Flanders* in which Defoe dwells upon the heroine's lapses into immorality, and both those incidents are pointed out in the preface, where Defoe indicates the useful lessons to be drawn from them.

No doubt the motives which led to the writing of these stories of criminals were varied. Defoe was interested in all phases of the life he saw around him, and he recognised that the struggles and adventures of a Moll Flanders or Colonel Jack would form a thrilling story, which would command a wide circle of readers. But beyond all this, he saw that the town was flooded with two streams of literature which were undoubtedly harmful. The crimes—notably highway robbery, theft, piracy—which were so prevalent under George the First, gave rise to a number of books and pamphlets in which the criminals were treated as heroes, or the subject was dealt with in a would-be humorous manner, without the slightest attempt at reprobation.<sup>1</sup> By the side of this thieves' literature was a series of novels of intrigue, whose chief interest often consisted in the fact that the scandalous amours which they chronicled were attributed, under thinly veiled names, to real persons. Defoe had had personal experience of Newgate, and was acquainted with all classes of society; and he aimed at reaching the persons who read these books by publishing stories in which they would be interested, but which would show that vice led to ruin instead of to the pleasures represented by those whose methods he followed to some extent for his own purpose.

We have seen Defoe's defence of the course he took; it is certainly the best which has been put forward; and perhaps more apologies than were necessary have been made by his admirers. Defoe never treats questions of morality with levity, and he never makes vice seductive. He would have been shocked at the manner in which the fundamental

<sup>1</sup> Among the miscellaneous pamphlets in Defoe's own library were: *A Warning to Servants, and a Caution to Protestants; or the case of Margaret Clark, lately executed for Firing her Master's House in Southwark*, 1680; *The Trial and Conviction of Mary Butler, for Counterfeiting a Bond of £40,000*, 1699; and *The Trial of Captain John Quelett*, 1705. But it was between 1720 and 1730 that the greatest number of lives of criminals—told in the wrong spirit—appeared; and it was in 1722, it will be remembered, that *Moll Flanders* was published.

principles of morals are questioned, or excuses offered for flagrant sin, by writers of the present day—generally women—who are the successors, under different circumstances, of the Mrs. Manley and the Mrs. Heywood of Defoe's time. It is comforting to know that this "pernicious nonsense"—to borrow a phrase from Mr. Punch—is forgotten in a few weeks or months, however much it has been advertised for a season on account of its impropriety; whereas Defoe's romances will last as long as the English language, and characters like that of Moll Flanders will be types for all time. We may be allowed to regard as apocryphal Borrow's story of the old applewoman and thief on London Bridge who had made this book her Bible, and who argued that stealing could not be wrong because it was practised by the "Blessed Mary" Flanders.

Perhaps the best comment upon the spirit in which Defoe wrote this study of a life of crime is furnished by the fact that only twenty-four days after its appearance he published a substantial volume entitled "Religious Courtship: being Historical Discourses on the necessity of marrying Religious Husbands and Wives only. As also of Husbands and Wives being of the same Opinions in Religion with one another." His enemies, and they were many, did not find any incongruity in these works; and there was none, for both were written by a man of genuine religious feeling.

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	V
AUTHOR'S PREFACE . . . . .	I
THE FORTUNES AND MISFORTUNES OF THE FAMOUS MOLL FLANDERS . . . . .	7

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THE world is so taken up of late with novels and romances, that it will be hard for a private history to be taken for genuine, where the names and other circumstances of the person are concealed; and on this account we must be content to leave the reader to pass his own opinion upon the ensuing sheets, and take it just as he pleases.

The author is here supposed to be writing her own history, and in the very beginning of her account she gives the reasons why she thinks fit to conceal her true name, after which there is no occasion to say any more about that.

It is true that the original of this story is put into new words, and the style of the famous lady we here speak of is a little altered; particularly she is made to tell her own tale in modester words than she told it at first, the copy which came first to hand having been written in language more like one still in Newgate than one grown penitent and humble, as she afterwards pretends to be.

The pen employed in finishing her story, and making it what you now see it to be, has had no little difficulty to put it into a dress fit to be seen, and to make it speak language fit to be read. 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.

All possible care, however, has been taken to give no lewd ideas, no immodest turns in the new dressing up this story; no, not to the worst part of her expressions. To this purpose some of the vicious part of her life, which could not be

modestly told, is quite left out, and several other parts are very much shortened. What is left 'tis hoped will not offend the chastest reader or the modestest hearer; and as the best use is to be made even of the worst story, the moral, 'tis hoped, will keep the reader serious, even where the story might incline him to be otherwise. To give the history of a wicked life repented of, necessarily requires that the wicked part should be made as wicked as the real history of it will bear, to illustrate and give a beauty to the penitent part, which is certainly the best and brightest, if related with equal spirit and life.

It is suggested there cannot be the same life, the same brightness and beauty, in relating the penitent part as in the criminal part. If there is any truth in that suggestion, I must be allowed to say, 'tis because there is not the same taste and relish in the reading; and indeed it is too true that the difference lies not in the real worth of the subject so much as in the gust and palate of the reader.

But as this work is chiefly recommended to those who know how to read it, and how to make the good uses of it which the story all along recommends to them, so it is to be hoped that such readers will be much more pleased with the moral than the fable, with the application than with the relation, and with the end of the writer than with the life of the person written of.

There is in this story abundance of delightful incidents, and all of them usefully applied. There is an agreeable turn artfully given them in the relating, that naturally instructs the reader, either one way or another. The first part of her lewd life with the young gentleman at Colchester has so many happy turns given it to expose the crime, and warn all whose circumstances are adapted to it, of the ruinous end of such things, and the foolish, thoughtless, and abhorred conduct of both the parties, that it abundantly atones for all the lively description she gives of her folly and wickedness.

The repentance of her lover at Bath, and how brought by the just alarm of his fit of sickness to abandon her; the just caution given there against even the lawful intimacies of the dearest friends and how unable they are to preserve the most solemn resolutions of virtue without divine assistance; these are parts which, to a just discernment, will appear to have

more real beauty in them than all the amorous chain of story which introduces it.

In a word, as the whole relation is carefully garbled of all the levity and looseness that was in it, so it is applied, and with the utmost care, to virtuous and religious uses. None can, without being guilty of manifest injustice, cast any reproach upon it, or upon our design in publishing it.

The advocates for the stage have, in all ages, made this the great argument to persuade people that their plays are useful, and that they ought to be allowed in the most civilised and in the most religious government; namely, that they are applied to virtuous purposes, and that, by the most lively representations, they fail not to recommend virtue and generous principles, and to discourage and expose all sorts of vice and corruption of manners; and were it true that they did so, and that they constantly adhered to that rule, as the test of their acting on the theatre, much might be said in their favour.

Throughout the infinite variety of this book, this fundamental is most strictly adhered to; there is not a wicked action in any part of it, but is first or last rendered unhappy and unfortunate; there is not a superlative villain brought upon the stage, but either he is brought to an unhappy end, or brought to be a penitent; there is not an ill thing mentioned but it is condemned, even in the relation, nor a virtuous, just thing but it carries its praise along with it. What can more exactly answer the rule laid down, to recommend even those representations of things which have so many other just objections lying against them? namely, of example of bad company, obscene language, and the like.

Upon this foundation 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 drawn, by which the reader will have something of instruction if he pleases to make use of it.

All the exploits of this lady of fame, in her depredations upon mankind, stand as so many warnings to honest people to beware of them, intimating to them by what methods innocent people are drawn in, plundered, and robbed, and by consequence how to avoid them. Her robbing a little child, dressed fine by the vanity of the mother, to go to the



dancing-school, is a good memento to such people hereafter, as is likewise her picking the gold watch from the young lady's side in the park.

Her getting a parcel from a hare-brained wench at the coaches in St. John's Street; her booty at the fire, and also at Harwich, all give us excellent warning in such cases to be more present to ourselves in sudden surprises of every sort.

Her application to a sober life and industrious management at last, in Virginia, with her transported spouse, is a story fruitful of instruction to all the unfortunate creatures who are obliged to seek their re-establishment abroad, whether by the misery of transportation or other disaster; letting them know that diligence and application have their due encouragement, even in the remotest part of the world, and that no case can be so low, so despicable, or so empty of prospect, but that an unwearied industry will go a great way to deliver us from it, will in time raise the meanest creature to appear again in the world, and give him a new cast for his life.

These are a few of the serious inferences which we are led by the hand to in this book, and these are fully sufficient to justify any man in recommending it to the world, and much more to justify the publication of it.

There are two of the most beautiful parts still behind, which this story gives some idea of, and lets us into the parts of them, but they are either of them too long to be brought into the same volume, and indeed are, as I may call them, whole volumes of themselves, viz.: 1. The life of her governess, as she calls her, who had run through, it seems, in a few years, all the eminent degrees of a gentlewoman, a whore, and a bawd; a midwife and a midwife-keeper, as they are called; a pawnbroker, a child-taker, a receiver of thieves, and of stolen goods; and, in a word, herself a thief, a breeder up of thieves, and the like, and yet at last a penitent.

The second is the life of her transported husband, a highwayman, who, it seems, lived a twelve years' life of successful villainy upon the road, and even at last came off so well as to be a volunteer transport, not a convict; and in whose life there is an incredible variety.

But, as I said, these are things too long to bring in here, so neither can I make a promise of their coming out by themselves.