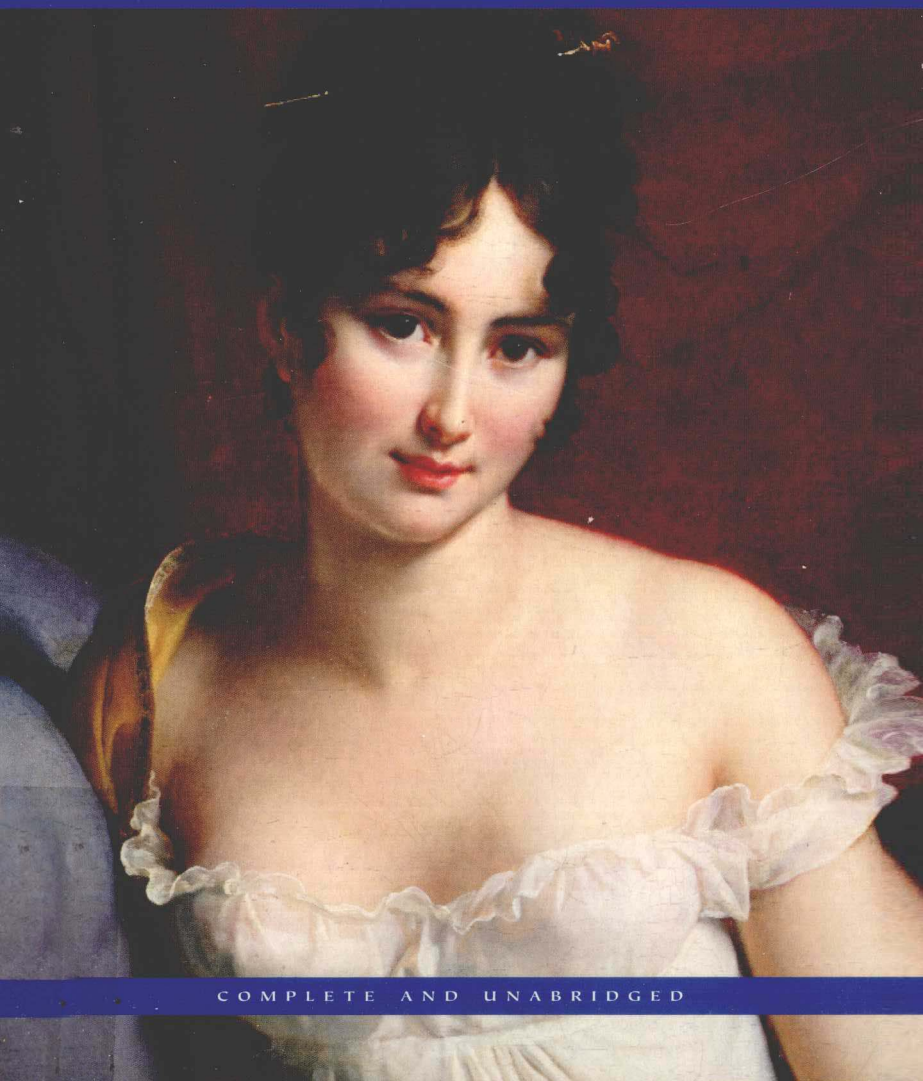


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

# *Moll Flanders*

DANIEL DEFOE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

*The Fortunes and Misfortunes*

# MOLL FLANDERS

*Who was born in Newgate, and during a life  
of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years, besides her  
Childhood, was Twelve Years a Whore, five times a  
Wife (whereof once to her brother)  
Twelve Years a Thief, Eight Years a  
Transported Felon in Virginia, at  
last grew Rich, liv'd Honest*

*and died a Penitent*

*Written from her own Memorandums*

Daniel Defoe

Introduction and Notes by

R. T. JONES



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3

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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## INTRODUCTION

Daniel Defoe, or De Foe, was born in London in 1660. He was brought up as a Presbyterian. Dissenters were excluded by law from the universities, and he was educated at a Dissenting Academy. He went into trade, first in the hosiery business and subsequently dealing in a wide range of products. In 1684 he married Mary Tuffley, who brought him a substantial dowry and supported him through his many subsequent adversities.

He joined the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion in 1685, was taken prisoner and later granted a royal pardon, thus surviving the battle of Sedgemoor and avoiding the murderous justice of Judge Jeffreys. In 1692 his business failed and he spent a period in the Fleet debtors' prison.

In 1697 he published *An Essay upon Projects*, a group of proposals for improving the life of the nation (including an outline of a mutual insurance scheme for merchant seamen); it was the first of over five

hundred books and pamphlets, several of which got him into trouble. For example, his anonymously published pamphlet *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters* (1702) is generally called a satire, and he himself later defended it as 'an Irony', but it might be more accurately described as a forgery: it pretended to be by a member of the Tory party, which was hostile to Dissenters, and it advocated 'that who ever was found at a Conventicle [a nonconformist religious meeting] shou'd be Banished the Nation, and the Preacher be Hang'd'. Some Tories welcomed the idea, their concealed wishes brought out into the open by Defoe's pamphlet. Thus far it achieved its aim; but the authorities were not pleased. Defoe was arrested, found guilty of sedition, and pilloried. The episode brought him to the attention of influential politicians, and during the next ten years he was employed as a government agent, collecting information and promoting the union of the English and Scottish parliaments.

In 1713 he was imprisoned twice, once for his political pamphlets and once for debt; on both occasions he was released by the influence of his patrons in government. In 1715 he was tried for libel, but the proceedings were dropped.

His best-known work of fiction, *Robinson Crusoe*, appeared in 1719; *Captain Singleton* and *Memoirs of a Cavalier* in 1720; *Moll Flanders*, *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Colonel Jack* in 1722; and *Roxana* in 1724. Of his non-fictional work, the most important is *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (3 volumes, 1724-6). He died in 1731, in hiding from his creditors.

*Moll Flanders*, like *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters*, raises puzzling questions about truth and fiction. *The Shortest-Way* pretended to be what it was not in order to trick some of its readers into revealing what they really were; *Moll Flanders* is a fiction that pretends to be a true story, but it is less easy to say why. Leslie Stephen, in *Hours in a Library* (1874-9), says that Defoe 'had the most marvellous power of giving verisimilitude to his fictions; or, in other words . . . he had the most amazing talent on record for telling lies'. He is not talking about the kind of credibility that we normally expect of a novel, the mere absence of improbabilities that allows us to suspend our disbelief while reading. Several of Defoe's works of fiction, he points out, 'have succeeded in passing themselves off for veritable narratives'. In short, Leslie Stephen sees Defoe as a journalist who found it easier to make up his news than to gather it in the approved ways.

The devices that Defoe employs in order to create this illusion of

literal truth are not hard to detect. They include, for instance, leaving some untidy loose ends in the story so that it doesn't seem to have been artistically constructed (several of Moll's children are not accounted for); putting in details that have no obvious relevance (like the blow-by-blow account of her haggling with the Custom-House officer for her share of the reward for informing about contraband Flanders lace, p. 163), to suggest the way the memory of a person recounting things that happened years ago often makes its own unaccountable selection, remembering trivial things and omitting things that could have a more obvious relevance. More generally, and despite the protestations of the Preface, the whole narrative avoids any appearance of a just, merciful, or even tidy, authorial hand shaping Moll's life: Moll is represented as lucky, and the overriding moral law of the world she lives in is that you can never tell how anything will turn out. But one thing that a writer must do if he wants to be believed to be telling the truth when he isn't, is to mix his untruth with a good deal that really is true. What made Defoe's books such convincing lies, if we must call them that, was that they were more true than their predecessors. His *Moll Flanders* was made up, but the England and Virginia that she lives in are factually accurate, as are their cultures and conventions.

This becomes clearer once we begin to ponder the purpose (or purposes) of *Moll Flanders*. What was it for? Defoe gives us Moll's own answer in the book: 'As the publishing this Account of my Life is for the sake of the just Moral of every part of it, and for the Instruction, Caution, Warning and Improvement to every reader . . .' (p. 253) But what does he, or Moll, mean by 'the just Moral of every part of it'? It seems to be mainly a matter of reporting Moll's experience of the ways of the world, and especially her knowledge of the ways of the wicked. By tracing the life-story of the imaginary Moll in the real world, Defoe was able to pass on useful knowledge of the world as he knew it. There could be several reasons for doing this.

It was in the first place a service to the innocent reader, who might not otherwise be able to discover the wickedness of the world without endangering his or her innocence. We may suspect that Defoe had other motives too, but there is no reason to doubt that he seriously wanted to put his knowledge of crime, acquired in the course of his active life in business, in politics and especially in journalism, at the service of his readers, thus enabling the innocent to be on their guard against the deceits of the wicked. As he says in his Preface,

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, plunder'd and robb'd, and by Consequence how to avoid them. [Preface, p. 5]

In fact Defoe makes a point of giving his heroine the same kind intention. After telling us about one of her watch-snatching adventures in which she narrowly escapes capture, she goes on:

... there was indeed a great many concurring Circumstances in this Adventure, which assisted to my Escape; but the chief was, that the Woman whose Watch I had pull'd at was a Fool; that is to say, she was Ignorant of the nature of the Attempt . . . for she, when she felt the pull scream'd out, and push'd herself forward, and put all the People about her into disorder, but said not a Word of her Watch, or of a *Pick-pocket*, for at least two Minutes time, which was time enough for me, and to spare; for as I had cried out behind her, *as I have said*, and bore myself back in the Crowd as she bore forward, there were several People, at least seven or eight, the Throng being Still moving on, that were got between me and her in that time, and then I crying out *a Pick-pocket*, rather sooner than she, or at least as soon, she might as well be the Person suspected as I, and the People were confus'd in their Enquiry; whereas, had she with a Presence of Mind needful on such an Occasion, as soon as she felt the pull, not scream'd out as she did, but turn'd immediately round, and seiz'd the next Body that was behind her, she had infallibly taken me.

This is a Direction not of the kindest Sort to the Fraternity; but 'tis certainly a Key to the Clue of a *Pick-pockets* Motions, and whoever can follow it, will as certainly catch the Thief as he will be sure to miss if he does not. [p. 164-5]

Similarly, after recounting her theft of a Dutchman's trunk in Harwich, and her adventures in getting it away, having it broken open by customs officers and getting its contents safely to London, Moll assures us:

... every Branch of my Story, if duly consider'd, may be useful to honest People, and afford a due Caution to People of some sort or other to Guard against the like Surprizes, and to have their Eyes about them when they have to do with Strangers of any kind, for 'tis very seldom that some Snare or other is not in their way. The Moral indeed of all my History is left to be gather'd by the Senses

and Judgment of the Reader; I am not Qualified to preach to them, let the Experience of one Creature compleatly Wicked, and compleatly Miserable be a Storehouse of useful warning to those that read. [p. 208]

Moll's warnings, it seems, have more to do with the wisdom of the streets and with the advisability of keeping on the right side of the law if one can, and covering one's traces if one can't, than with Christian virtue.

But from time to time she – and Defoe speaking through her – appears to be arming her readers against moral complacency and censoriousness by challenging them to consider whether they can be quite sure that in Moll's circumstances – 'the Poverty which is the sure Bane of Virtue' (p. 146) – they would not have done as Moll did: 'But there are Temptations which it is not in the Power of Human Nature to resist, and few know what would be their Case, if driven to the same Exigences . . .' (p. 146)

Defoe could have made such points with perfect sincerity, for the good of his readers, while at the same time shrewdly calculating that the merchant class – his own class – was rapidly expanding in wealth and in numbers, and that the daughters of these merchants, better educated and enjoying more leisure than their mothers had ever had, constituted a big potential market for works of fiction. The main obstacle to the development of this market was that the parents – mostly puritans like Defoe – would not allow works of fantasy, like the heroic romances of the previous century, to enter their houses: they were lies, and as such belonged to the Devil. The way round the obstacle was to market novels as true life-stories; the most pious parents would see the value of factual instruction, from which their daughters could gain the necessary knowledge of the world and its dangers without leaving the safety of their homes. In seeing this, and in putting it successfully into practice, Defoe went a long way towards inventing the novel as we know it, and wrote some of the first examples of documentary fiction to be found in English.

All this required that the fiction be true, and quite unlike the false fictions of the heroic romances of the seventeenth century. Defoe may have been, as Leslie Stephen argues, a very good liar; but at the same time, ironically, he was one of the first to make the English novel tell the truth.

The title-page of *Moll Flanders* tells us that she 'was born in Newgate, and . . . was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once



to her own brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv'd Honest and died a Penitent'. We may well gather from this that the book was marketed as sensational. In his Preface, Defoe elaborates this prospectus while stressing the difficulty of putting such a story as Moll's 'into a dress fit to be seen':

When a Woman debauch'd from her Youth, nay, even being the Off-spring of Debauchery and Vice, comes to give an Account of all her vicious Practises, and even to descend to the particular Occasions and Circumstances, by which she first became wicked, and of all the progression of Crime which she run through in three-score Year, an Author must be hard put to it to wrap it up so clean, as not to give room, especially for vitious Readers to turn it to his Disadvantage. [p. 3]

So he hands the difficulty over to the reader: '... the Moral 'tis hop'd will keep the Reader serious, even where the Story might incline him to be otherwise'. The problem is a real one; but Defoe could hardly have been unaware that by dwelling on it as he did he was whetting his readers' appetites for the story that would incline them to be frivolous. In fact, though, Moll's story, as she tells it, is rather surprisingly unsensational. Not that a reader is likely to be disappointed; on the contrary, what we get is not less than the title-page offers, but more: the surprise of finding that Moll, 'Twelve Year a Whore' and so on, is not a monster of wickedness but in many respects quite an ordinary, sensible, resourceful, good-hearted woman, who finds herself in predicaments not all of which she could have avoided, looks for ways of making the best of her opportunities and abilities, and, having decided what needs to be done, finds a satisfaction in getting on with it. She rarely complains or blames anybody else for her troubles.

In fact she presents her story in a cool, unexcited tone, as if she were taking an inventory in a bakery. Some readers take this to indicate a lack of emotional depth in Moll. Dorothy Van Ghent, in *The English Novel: Form and Function*, says,

The hypothesis on which *Moll Flanders* is based might be phrased in this way: given a human creature 'conditioned' to react only to material facts, then the world where that person lived might cogently assume the shape that Moll's world assumes – a shape astonishingly without spiritual dimension . . . [p. 34]

More particularly she observes,

What is important in Moll's world of things is the counting, measuring, pricing, weighing, and evaluating of the things in terms of the wealth they represent and the social status they imply for the possessor.

It is certainly true that Moll keeps her accounts carefully, and tells the reader from time to time how she stands financially, and what she has gained or lost through her dealings with one person or another. Describing how the young man of the family with whom she is being brought up tries to seduce her, she recalls: 'Thus I gave up myself to a readiness of being ruined without the least concern, and am a fair *Memento* to all young Women, whose Vanity prevails over their Virtue: Nothing was ever so stupid on both Sides . . . ' (p. 21) But by the end of the paragraph it seems what Moll regrets is not the loss of her virtue but her failure to drive a hard bargain for it:

In short, if he had known me, and how easy the Trifle he aim'd at, was to be had, he would have troubled his Head no farther, but have given me four or five Guineas, and have lain with me the next time he had come at me; and if I had known his Thoughts, and how hard he thought I would be to be gain'd, I might have made my own Terms with him . . . [p. 21]

When, soon afterwards, she tells us of the young man's success, she attributes it equally, and inseparably, to the money he gives her and to the intensity of feeling for her that he expresses - 'My Colour came and went, at the Sight of the Purse, and with the fire of his Proposal together; so that I could not say a Word; and he easily perceiv'd it; so putting the Purse into my Bosom, I made no more Resistance to him . . . ' (p. 23).

It is not surprising that many readers find the book dwelling on money where they had expected emotion, and conclude either that Moll is shown to be mercenary, or that Defoe himself (always a merchant) was mercenary, and could only see a transaction in terms of a business deal.

A good deal of the critical discussion of *Moll Flanders* in recent years has focused on the kinds of irony that may be found in it, and particularly on what happens in passages like this one, where she has been reunited with her long-lost son:

I made him one Present, and it was all I had of value, and that was

one of the gold Watches, of which I mention'd above, that I had two in my Chest, and this I happen'd to have with me, and I gave it him at his third Visit: I told him, I had nothing of any value to bestow but that, and I desir'd he would now and then kiss it for my sake; *I did not indeed tell him* that I had stole it from a Gentlewomans side, at a Meeting-House in London, that's by the way. [p. 261]

Are we invited to see Moll as pointing out the irony of the watch's provenance, or is it Defoe as author who gives us the ironical comment (though it has to be in Moll's voice), perhaps suggesting that even Moll's honest affection for her son is tainted with the stain of her past life? There is a great deal of scope for exploring the book's ironies, because even the Preface, which purports to be written by its editor, need not be read as Defoe's unironical voice – he may well be mocking the heavily moralistic arguments in defence of Moll's narrative. There is another possible gap between the old Moll Flanders who is 'suppos'd to be writing her own History' (Preface, p. 3) and the younger – at first much younger – woman who is the subject of the book; clearly the older narrator is not always in full agreement with her remembered younger self, and in the account of the young Moll's seduction by the power of gold quoted above, there is a nice contrast between two points of view presented simultaneously: that of the older Moll, who sees in retrospect how she could easily have got a higher price for her favours, and that of the remembered young Moll, for whom the money is valued mainly because it is a thrilling expression of the young man's passion. Whether we also have here the implied presence of Defoe, or of the fictional character who is the author of the Preface, hoping that the reader will take the scene 'seriously' rather than frivolously, is another question.

Such a discussion is not likely to reach any definitive answers because we have only conjectural access even to Defoe's intentions, still less to the intentions of his fictitious creations. Besides, irony is a notoriously slippery term, necessarily resistant to definition. This is not to say it is misguided; on the contrary, it may help us to see more clearly how many points of view Defoe is able to incorporate in his apparently simple and direct prose. But it is not at all certain that the most profitable way of discussing this interaction of multiple points of view is in terms of irony. For in order to locate an irony it is necessary not only to find two or more dissimilar, and more or less contradictory, meanings operating (explicitly or implicitly) in the same

section of text; we have also to establish which of them is the 'real' meaning and which is the cover. This need to establish the relative status of the competing accounts and of the judgements that they carry with them makes 'irony' a difficult category to use, and one that is not always appropriate – where, for example, the text indicates an equivalence between dissimilar values, as in the rhythmically matching phrases 'the Sight of the Purse, and . . . the fire of his Proposal.'

It is easy for a modern reader to suppose that there is a mercenary element in Moll's response to her lover's gift, and the word 'mercenary' carries, for us today, a heavy charge of moral disapproval. Money has, during the last century or two, become an uncomfortable topic in discussions of personal relations – as if it were not possible to acknowledge the importance of money as an element in a loving relationship without representing it as a merely financial arrangement. If we can bear in mind that there is no reason why it should always have been so, we can begin to see how Defoe shows financial transactions between Moll and her various associates expressing, and inseparable from, their feelings for each other, and it is surprising how expressive they can be. The world of *Moll Flanders* is not as limited as Dorothy Van Ghent supposed.

Certainly the combination of 'the Sight of the Purse, and . . . the fire of his Proposal' in the extract quoted above suggests a fairly simple, if explosive, interaction between money and passion; and nobody would claim that Moll's 'putting the Purse into my Bosom' expresses any very profound or complex response to her lover; but it does indicate her wary acceptance of him. Later in the book, a relationship between Moll and an unnamed gentleman involves a more delicate question of money.

The two have rooms in the same lodging house in Bath, and for different reasons are separated from their spouses. They have been spending a good deal of time in each other's company, and are on terms of considerable intimacy – 'tho' . . . he had frequently come into my Chamber, even when I was in Bed; and I also into his when he was in Bed, yet he never offered any thing to me farther than a kiss . . . ' (p. 85). Moll receives an adequate but irregular income from abroad; the gentleman is rich. Their landlady thinks Moll should ask the gentleman for money, because he 'engrosses' her, taking up all her time; Moll cannot quite bring herself to ask him, but the landlady gives him a hint that she is in some degree of need.

. . . the next Morning he . . . asked me to come into his Chamber; he was in bed when I came in, and he made me come and sit down

on his Bed side, *for he said* he had something to say to me, which was of some Moment: After some very kind Expressions he ask'd me if I would be very honest to him, and give a sincere Answer to one thing he would desire of me? . . . I promis'd him I would; why then his Request was, he said, to let him see my Purse; I immediately put my hand in my Pocket, *and Laughing at him*, pull'd it out, and there was in it three Guineas and a Half; *then he ask'd me*, if there was all the Money I had? I told him no, *Laughing again*, not by a great deal.

Well then, he said, he would have me promise to go and fetch him all the Money I had, every Farthing: *I told him I would*, and I went into my Chamber and fetch'd him a little private Drawer, where I had about six Guineas more, and some Silver, and threw it all down upon the Bed, and told him there was all my Wealth, honestly to a Shilling: He look'd at it, but did not tell [count] it, and Huddled it all into the Drawer again, and reaching his Pocket, pull'd out a Key, and then bade me open a little Walnut-tree box, he had upon the Table, and bring him such a Drawer, which I did, in which Drawer there was a great deal of Money in Gold, I believe near 200 Guineas, but I knew not how much: He took the Drawer, and taking my Hand, made me put it in and take a whole handful; I was backward at that, but he held my Hand hard in his Hand, and put it into the Drawer, and made me take out as many Guineas almost as I could well take up at once.

When I had done so, he made me put them into my Lap, and took my little Drawer, and pour'd out all my own Money among his, and bade me get gone, and carry it all Home into my own Chamber.

I relate this Story the more particularly because of the good Humour there was in it . . . [pp. 87-8]

The way Moll's friend talks to her about money, and acts out his gift to her, shows his sensitive awareness of the delicacy involved in talking 'sincerely' about this tricky topic while being sufficiently precise about it to understand each other. The passage should surely be read as being about the development of a friendship rather than about a mere financial arrangement. In spite of Moll's sexually precarious position, and in spite of the book's offering itself as sexually scandalous, Defoe shows himself sensitive and practical in treating friendships between women and men.

Returning to my first quotation from Van Ghent, it seems inappropriate to read Moll's world as assuming 'a shape astonishingly

without spiritual dimension. . . .', for everywhere in the book Moll encounters, and responds to, affection – often undeserved, usually unexpected, and undeniably a spiritual dimension although it is human affection rather than divine grace.

As a child, Moll is about as badly placed as she could be. Born in Newgate Prison, she has no parish which would be obliged to maintain her, so the system of obligatory poor relief does not reach her. But the kindness and compassion of various individuals does, and she is humanely treated, brought up and educated by a succession of people. In the household where she is employed the two daughters share their educational advantages with Moll – 'they were as heartily willing to learn me everything that they had been taught themselves, as I could be to take the Learning' (p. 15).

At one period Moll feels the lack of a male adviser whom she could trust completely, and finds one by simply asking her bank; an unequivocal guarantee from a banker she already has reason to trust gives her full confidence. Again she is humanely and honestly treated by one who 'delights to assist People in such Cases, he does it as an act of Charity.' (p. 102)

When Moll marries a man whom she believes to be rich, and who thinks she has a great fortune, there is an opportunity for a fine comic exchange of reproaches when they both realise that they are almost penniless. What Defoe gives us, however, is a touching study of two people who love each other enough to share their misfortune, and defer their parting as long as they can. 'Here *I told him,*' says Moll, 'I would live with him now till all my Money was spent, but would not let him spend a Shilling of his own: We had some kind squabble about that . . . ' (p. 122). (Again money is used to represent Moll's dealings with her friends.)

The deliberately shocking summary of the events of Moll's life given as a subtitle to the book is factually accurate, but gives no hint of the interplay of gravity and playfulness, the delicacy and complexity of intimate conversation between friends, that Defoe conveys. Without this quality, many of the things that happen to Moll, besides many of the things she does, would be nasty and brutish; with it, she claims our admiration, sympathy and respect. Thus:

. . . hold, *says he*, first look here, then he took up the Roll again, and read it, and behold! it was a License for us to be married: Why, *says I*, are you Distracted? why you were fully satisfy'd that

I would comply and yield at first Word, or resolv'd to take no denial; the last is certainly the Case, *said he*; but you may be mistaken, *said I*; no, no, *says he*, how can you think so? I must not be denied, I can't be denied, and with that he fell to Kissing me so violently, I could not get rid of him.

There was a Bed in the Room, and we were walking to and again, eager in the Discourse, at last he takes me by surprize in his Arms, and threw me on the Bed and himself with me, and holding me fast in his Arms, but without the least offer of any Undecency, Courted me to Consent with such repeated Entreaties and Arguments; protesting his Affection and vowing he would not let me go, till I had promised him, that at last I said, why you resolve not to be deny'd indeed, I think: No, no, *says he*, I must not be denyed, I won't be deny'd, I can't be deny'd: Well, well, *said I*, and giving him a slight Kiss, then you shan't be deny'd, *said I*, let me get up.

He was so Transported with my Consent, and the kind manner of it, that I began to think Once, he took it for a Marriage, and would not stay for the Form, but I wrong'd him, for he gave over Kissing me, took me by the Hand, pull'd me up again, and then giving me two or three Kisses again, thank'd me for my kind yielding to him; and was so overcome with the Satisfaction and Joy of it, that I saw Tears stand in his Eyes. [p. 141]

Here, and in many other episodes, Defoe challenges us to look beyond the material facts of a life, and to see in Moll and her friends a rich variety of kinds and degrees of friendship, sustained and managed with delicacy and care. Perhaps this, after all, is the most interesting irony in *Moll Flanders* – an irony at the expense of the reader, who is offered a lesson in tact and affectionate consideration by the example of 'the famous Moll Flanders, who was Born in Newgate, and . . . was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv'd Honest and died a Penitent'.

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