

Defoe's uneasy  
feminism: the  
problem of the 'anti-  
domestic' in moll  
flanders



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In *Moll Flanders*, Daniel Defoe constructs an image of a woman who is resourceful, self-sufficient, shrewd and independent. His Moll came from nothing, born to a mother imprisoned in Newgate, born to this underworld of contained vice and criminality, within but very much on the fringe of acceptable society. From these base beginnings, Moll is able to navigate her way through the ranks of British society, a figure of liminality both traversing and embodying the fluidity of class distinction in an emerging trade economy. In exploiting sexual and martial relationships for the purpose they serve Moll's social-climbing quest, the text reduces the people and encounters that are the romantic focal point in earlier libertine works, to an economic or commodity status that highlights Moll's pragmatism and efficiency. Therefore, Defoe portrays Moll as a proto-feminist character, an individual with ambitious desires who relies on her own abilities to make her mark and attain her goals. This independence and resourcefulness comes at a cost, however, a cost that complicates the early kind of feminist thinking Defoe is fashioning. In demonstrating the qualities that make her a mobile character, unattached, quick-thinking and able to move along the tides of changing circumstances and necessities, Moll contradicts what Nancy Armstrong identifies as the "ideal of womanhood" promoted by popular conduct books of the eighteenth century: that of the domesticated woman. Armstrong argues that this idealized domestic "had to lack the competitive desires and worldly ambitions that consequently belonged - as if by some natural principle - to the male." This challenge to tradition denotes her bold, courageous individualism, but it is also the source of the most heightened moralizing (or morally ambiguous) moments in the novel. It is these moments that suggest there is something suspicious or unsettling about <https://assignbuster.com/defoes-uneasy-feminism-the-problem-of-the-anti-domestic-in-moll-flanders/>

Moll's "feminism," something about her character that is at odds with the prevailing eighteenth-century paradigm of womanhood and moral correctness. An analysis of the ways in which Moll's feminism is constructed, and a comparison of how these character or plot developments at once propound but then also problematize Moll's independence and individualism, such as her ability to recover from calamitous situations or marital failures, her treatment of her children, and her entry into the hardened world of a street-thief, will evidence the uneasy feminism of *Moll Flanders*. Ultimately, it is this significant conflict within the narrative that will suggest Defoe's novel is forwarding a new model of morality, one that attends to the era of an emerging trade economy in England. One of the ways in which Moll's feminism is thematized in *Moll Flanders*, is through her characterization as a level-headed pragmatist keenly aware of, and operating in accordance with, the bottom-line. Moll recognizes the importance of money as the key to unlocking success, happiness and stability in life, and uses her cunning and understanding of these economic truths to advance her particular station. She rises through the ranks in order to achieve the kind of elite, glamorous or, ultimately, comfortable life she desires. For Moll, sexual pleasure is on par if not slightly subservient to her desire for material wealth. For example, in her first affair with the elder brother at Colchester, although she is attracted to him for his libertine qualities (i. e., good looks and rakish charms), Moll is as equally attracted to his money. When he makes her a (false) proposal in order to gain her consent to the affair, he complements his pledge by offering Moll a silk purse of one hundred guineas, assuring her that he will continue to provide like this every year until they are married.

Moll recalls that, in response, her: Colour came and went, at the Sight of the  
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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, but let him just do what he pleas'd (68). Money excites Moll, causing a flush of "colour" to assail her cheeks, violent and intense in the way it appeared and vanished so quickly (the lack of syntactic space between "came" and "went" underscores speed of the physical reaction). The purse (money) is used as a point of sexual contact, and seems to be the factor that woos Moll into submission or acceptance of the "proposal," more so (or in addition to) her lust for the elder brother. Moll is also allured by the glamour of class status, as evidenced by her decision to marry the French draper after the death of her first husband (the romantic and honorable, but dull and un-arousing Robin). Moll confesses that, at that time, she adored the spectacle and celebrity of a lavish lifestyle: "I lov'd the company indeed of Men of Mirth and Wit, Men of Gallantry and Figure, and was often entertain'd with such" (104). She most desires a man of "Gallantry" for the distinction he carries, searching for a husband that was a "Gentleman" and who donned a "Sword" (the ultimate mark of the gallant figure) (104). Her want for man, therefore, is only partially motivated by her sexual yearnings, and her need of man extends only so far as to how they can serve her specific money-seeking purposes. She constructs ruses to fool men into believing she possesses a fortune, this fabrication of a dowry being a manipulation necessary (and thus justified by) her particular marriage and self-interested goals. Before embarking on the conquest that will end in her incestuous marriage to her sea-captain brother, Moll recalls that she "resolv'd therefore; as to the State of my present Circumstances; that it was absolutely Necessary to change my Station, and make a new Appearance in <https://assignbuster.com/defoes-uneasy-feminism-the-problem-of-the-anti-domestic-in-moll-flanders/>

some other Place where I was not known, and even to pass by another name if I found Occasion" (122). For the feminist Moll, therefore, men are (for the most part) simply pawns in the "subtle" social-climbing "game" she both wished and found necessary "to play" (124). However, although still reliant upon the security guaranteed by sizable wealth, what Moll wants for herself and her from her husband varies with age, a sign that she acknowledges the value of her marketable wares (i. e., her beauty and youth). After a series of marriages spanning the course of twenty years, an older (sager) Moll reflects that, at this moment, "she was not now the same Woman" as in her past, for she "did not look the better for [her] age" (181). With her physical worth diminishing, it seems that Moll's ambitions subdue slightly as well, as a realistic reaction to her economic position. It is at this point in the novel that she expresses a desire "to be plac'd in a settled State of Living, and had [she] happen'd to meet with a sober good Husband, [she] should have been as faithful and true a Wife to him as Virtue itself could have form'd" (182). One should also bear in mind that, at this point in the text, Moll is without a husband or marriage prospect, so she is faced with the impending depletion of her security and the "Terror of her approaching Poverty" (182). Her more modest aspirations, therefore, could also be a tactical, sensible response to her changed circumstances. That Moll can adjust her ambitions to correspond with the practical demands of her circumstances, evidences a resourcefulness and hardiness that is another element of her "feminism." This flexibility (without totally compromising her fundamental belief in the importance of money), marks her as an individual with agency and rationality, rarely someone who is so hysterical or emotional that she cannot recover from a personal tragedy. It is Moll's resilience that enables her to

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withstand the hardships of her uncertain situation between husbands, or to bounce back from some of the truly awful, potentially-ruinous events of her lifetime. One such event is her incestuous marriage already mentioned; that is, her union with her husband/brother, the sea captain from Virginia. Once she has settled into comfortable life on the plantation, Moll discovers that her mother-in-law is in fact the biological mother to whom she was born in Newgate, and from whom she was separated. Although this news was shocking to Moll, and brought forth an "Anguish of [her] Mind" (136), she does not devolve into hysterics. Rather, she commits herself to reflect, evaluate, and resolve, "upon the most sedate Consideration" (137), how best to address this dreadful miscarriage of a marital union. The same tactical, shrewd approach that Moll brings to her understanding of, and conduct within, the marriage market, is evidenced in her ability to rationally address and dispatch a truly ridiculous, catastrophic and potentially irreconcilable situation. Her "feminist" qualities, this pragmatism and firm resolution (at first to conceal the revelation from her husband/brother, then to confess when it became too difficult to maintain the marriage pretense), equipped Moll with the ability to survive an incredible hardship, and bounce back from the taint of incest. These positive connotations of the feminism Defoe constructs around his heroine, this ability to easily forget and rebound from tragedy (i. e., not be undone by unmanageable emotions), while productive in that they ensure Moll's survival as she makes her way up the social ladder, come at a "morally-questionable price." Specifically, Moll's individual survival comes at the cost of her traditional domesticity, as illustrated in her treatment and regard for her children. There are several moments in *Moll Flanders* when Moll simply abandons her children — for <https://assignbuster.com/defoes-uneasy-feminism-the-problem-of-the-anti-domestic-in-moll-flanders/>

example, when she finally departs from her bed of incest in Virginia. After the Robin's death, Moll is perfectly satisfied, even relieved, with her children being taken "happily off [her] hands" (102). The language here, "off her hands," implies that at least these (if not all her) children were an encumbrance to Moll, anchoring her to a particular place (Colchester), thereby prohibiting her from freely moving from city to city, from man to man, in pursuit of her fortune. "Off her hands" also suggests that Moll's hands, the instruments of a mother's care, are faulty somehow, incapable of bearing the weight and responsibility of her children. Practical demands and the independence (and solipsism) of individualism would dictate that, indeed, the abandonment of her children was a necessary step for Moll to take, a survival tactic of sorts, in order to support or maintain her enterprising spirit. However, the narrative (or Defoe) questions the "morality" of the compromised "domesticity" by including passages where Moll, curiously, does demonstrate some maternal instinct or regret. After the end of her relationship with the Gentleman from Bath, Moll wonders what will happen to her son, saying "I was greatly perplex'd about my little Boy; it was Death to me to part with the Child, and yet when I considered the Danger of being one time or other left with him to keep without Maintenance to support him, I then resolv'd to leave him where he was" (178). This conflict betrays both an innate affection for the child, and an understanding of circumstance that allows Moll's "moral" choice to be dictated by sober realism. But, in this case, that necessary choice does not seem to completely pardon or justify the blows to domesticity it entails. In St. Jones hospital, Moll's pregnancy before marrying the banker is seen as an inconvenience that must be dispatched. At the same time, however, Moll expresses a strong

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abhorrence for abortion, which the Governess suggests she could induce (228). A little earlier in the text, Moll confesses that she would have been “glad to miscarry,” but could never “entertain so much as a thought of endeavouring to Miscarry, or of taking anything to make [her] Miscarry” (219). And when contemplating her imminent parting with her newborn child, Moll cannot imagine this scenario “without Horror” and says, “I wish all those Women who consent to the disposing their Children out of the way, as it is call’d for Decency sake, would consider that ‘tis only a contriv’d Method for Murther; that is to say, a killing their Children with safety” (233). She then goes on for nearly a page about the importance of the affection for a child “plac’d by Nature” in a mother (234). These incongruities, the moments where the text sometimes permits Moll’s disregard for her children, and then passages where a moral conflict or regret is expressed, merit attention, as they evidence the novel (and Defoe’s) anxieties surrounding Moll’s feminism and ardent individualism. It is almost as though the text, or Defoe as the author and the particular period in which he is writing, demand a self-conscious recognition of the novel’s own questionably moral content. The narrative needs to critique its own feminist impulses. The individualism that encourages the flexibility to move from circumstance to circumstance, might also lead to a shallow disregard of one’s children/motherly duties, a disregard which the practical requirements of upward social mobility cannot entirely excuse. Moll’s entry into the world of London’s criminal underground, that is, her career as a thief, is another focal point or source of the novel’s ambivalence towards feminism. On the one hand, thievery provides Moll with a kind of trade in which she takes delight and from which she gleans a sense of pride. She is a rather clever, skilled and crafty pickpocket. I grew the <https://assignbuster.com/defoes-uneasy-feminism-the-problem-of-the-anti-domestic-in-moll-flanders/>



greatest Artist of my time, and work'd myself out of every Danger with such Dexterity, that when several more of my comrades run themselves into Newgate presently, and by that time they had been Half a Year at the Trade, I had now Practis'd upwards of five Year, and the People at Newgate, did not so much know me; they had heard much of me indeed, and often expected methere, but I always got off, tho' many times in the extremest Danger.

(280) Within this criminal community, Moll is the best (of the worst). She attributes her success to "Dexterity," which implies an elegance in craftsmanship. Similarly, that she mentions the number of years (five) she has remained out of prison, versus the relative narrow time-frame of freedom experienced by her peer lesser-thieves (one-and-a half years), suggests that she believes she possesses an uncanny ability that distinguishes her from the rest (and has guaranteed her protection). She works best on her own, proving that she need not depend on a man for economic sustenance. In fact, when Moll is paired with a male partner, it is he who acts carelessly and with too much emotion. Upon spotting exposed silks through a shop-window, Moll recalls that "this [sight] the young Fellow was so overjoy'd with, that he could not restrain himself...he swore violently to me that he would have it...I dissuaded him a little, but saw there was no remedy, so he run rashly upon it" (282). Here, it seems that the male partner is embodying more feminized qualities, such as impulsivity and fits of excitement, whereas Moll is again portraying the image of someone rational, cautious and practical. As a result of the hysteria by which he is influenced, the male partner is caught stealing and, while both he and Moll are pursued, he is captured while Moll escapes as a result of her cleverness and quick-thinking (dressed a man during this theft, she quickly runs into her

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Governess' house, sheds her disguise, dons her customary clothes, and is able to throw her pursuers off her scent). Moll's success as a pickpocket highlights her ability to fend for herself and "make" her own money. However, it is important to note that this trade, this line of work that she performs so well, is criminal and thus morally questionable. It is an independent career that makes optimal use of Moll's independence and mobility, but it is a career that keeps her out of the home, thrusts her onto the streets, and thus exposes her to vice and immorality. Her thievery again calls into question Moll's "maternal" nature, suggesting its dangerous absence in Moll (a void which immoral self-interest can thus fill) when Moll steals a necklace straight from the person of a young dancing girl. In this moment, Moll admits that she briefly considered killing the child, but was in fact "frighted" by her own momentary thought (257) (a moment of moral recognition that could, again, be the text criticizing the blow to domesticity a burgeoning feminism/individualism might exact).. To say that Defoe has constructed a text that positions feminism as "good" and the loss of domesticity as "bad," is too simple a binary that ignores the dialectical relationship between individualism and kinship roles. Although Moll initially manifests or realizes these individualistic impulses through morally questionable activities — thieving, deception, etc. — this is not to say that Moll Flanders imagines feminism (or compromised domesticity) as leading to bad behavior. Instead, perhaps Defoe is questioning whether a woman in seventeenth or eighteenth-century England could be considered "moral" or "good" if she existed outside the domestic sphere (which Moll does by birth, born to a mother and no mother). Could the eighteenth-century English woman have pluck and tenacity and self-interest, and still be a nice

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domestic? This question points to or in some ways predicts a common critique of capitalism — that it disrupts the family, and fosters or even requires a kind of freedom, mobility and flexibility that conflict with the qualities of traditional, domestic family life. The question, then, would be how a woman could embody the individualistic, mobile and social-climbing traits associated with capitalism, in a patriarchal society that is structured around the woman's role as wife and mother? How can an individual like Moll, who possesses this entrepreneurial spirit, direct her ambitions to productive ends in a society that has not yet defined a productive role for the "anti-domestic"? In earlier libertine texts, the options for women in a sexually commodified society were limited — she was either sold into the marriage market, she prostituted, or she became a nun, altogether avoiding the problem of female sexuality. In this context, virtue, itself a commodity, was the marker of whether a woman was "morally good" (a woman of quality) or "morally bankrupt" (a whore). However, as evidenced by the fact that sex is subservient to material concerns in *Moll Flanders*, or by the way that Moll's virginity is never under scrutiny or critique, it is clear that the moral code in Defoe is not constructed around the ideal of virtue. Instead, the way a woman earns her living outside the domestic sphere, whether through short-cuts, deception, or honest work (an issue raised by the feminism/domesticity question) is the new morality Defoe seems to be forging in his novel. The outlining of the "costs" to domesticity that Moll's feminism seems to incur is perhaps Defoe's critique of the options available to women who want to work; that is, women who desire more than domesticity, a proper gentlewoman's education or companionate marriage.

At the end of the novel, Moll lives happily ever after in a rather traditional

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way. She is released from Newgate, reunites with her true love Jemmy, and is transported back to America - to Virginia, the site of her incestuous marriage, as part of her reduced sentence. What was once the place of a most vile act, a transgression against nature, now becomes a source of happiness and domestic stability for Moll. She marries Jemmy, a former roguish Highwayman whom she reforms (domesticates) into a husband. She successfully collects her inheritance from her deceased mother's estate (the rewarding of an inheritance being a convention in "happy-plot-resolutions"). Her maternal qualities are recognized and celebrated, for she reunites with the son she left behind, a son who demonstrates love and devotion for his mother in spite of her initial abandonment. Moll (or the text) describes the reunion in a tender tone, recalling that her son "came not as a Stranger [to her], but as a Son to a Mother, and indeed as a Son, who had never before known what a Mother of his own was" (417). Moll also comments that she perceived her son to be a "Man of Sense," in this way suggesting that her son was in fact a mirror image of herself, of her "feminist" faculties of reason of rationality. In this case, domesticity and feminism are portrayed as in relation, rather than in opposition to each other. I argue that the reason Moll is able to attain this happy ending despite her "misfortunes" and "questionable morality," the reason why feminism and domesticity seem to fuse with or complement each other, is that Moll discovers a way to make her own money through hard work: she becomes a successful tobacco farmer. This success, unlike her stint as a thief, is the result of an honest trade that requires diligence rather than deception, toil rather than trickery. She, and Defoe, have found an outlet for Moll's shrewdness and practicality that supports a trade economy, results in an "honestly-earned" wealth that

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satisfies Moll's loftier ambitions, and promotes a stable home life of cooperation and devotion.