

# Defoe's Alternative Conduct Manual: Survival Strategies and Female Networks in *Moll Flanders*

Srividhya Swaminathan

Analyses of Defoe's narratives tend to dismiss his secondary characters because they lack well-developed personalities. The extensive cast of women in *Moll Flanders*, for instance, has been ignored largely because twentieth-century critics privilege interiority and psychology, and discount stock or "flat" characters.<sup>1</sup> Ian Watt's *The Rise of Novel* canonized Defoe as the great novelist of self-maximizing individualism, identifying in Moll a "criminal individualism" that "tends to minimise the importance of personal relationships."<sup>2</sup> Though Watt's analysis of *Moll Flanders* has been hotly contested, critics focus on defining the nature of Moll's individualism, tacitly agreeing with Watt's contention that personal relationships are diminished in the novel.<sup>3</sup> This neglect would not be a problem if

1 An exception to this discounting of "flat" characters is Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). In *Moll Flanders*, the main female characters who have merited analysis are "Mother Midnight," the midwife who teaches Moll to steal, Moll's biological mother, and, to a lesser extent, Moll's nurse. For a comprehensive discussion of Mother Midnight and the role of midwives in English society, see Robert Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: AMS Press, 1986). For an analysis of Mother Midnight, Moll's biological mother, and her nurse, see Lois A. Chaber, "The Patriarchal Mirror: Women and Capital in *Moll Flanders*," *PMLA* 97 (1982), 212–26. I would like to thank Kathryn Hume, Clement Hawes, Robert D. Hume, and John T. Harwood for criticism of earlier versions of this essay.

2 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 111.

3 Manuel Schonhorn, *Defoe's Politics: Parliament, Power, Kingship, and "Robinson Crusoe"*

secondary characters merely provided local colour, but the actions of women in particular turn out to be critical to Moll's survival. Ignoring the "minor" female characters has led to odd imbalances in critical readings, notably with respect to feminist criticism. For example, Defoe's "narrative transvestism" has been read as seeking to misrepresent the "sexual other" and thus to co-opt the female voice.<sup>4</sup> Other feminist readings of *Moll Flanders* tend to focus on Defoe's obsession with commerce and economics and their influence on gender relations.<sup>5</sup> While Moll's narrative amply rewards these lines of critical inquiry, such approaches ignore the relationships formed between women: the factor in the story that makes Moll's survival possible.

In this essay I suggest that actions are usually more important than thought to Defoe. Furthermore, I believe that he supplies us with an extremely revealing context for novelistic actions among his non-fiction writings, specifically his conduct manuals. *Moll Flanders* can be read as an alternative conduct manual, one that explores the options available to women in unstable, often desperate circumstances. As an alternative conduct manual, Moll's life teaches her reader more about survival than religion, possibly transcending Defoe's intent in the novel. Critics who read Moll's narrative as a series of relationships with men or as a *solitary* struggle for survival<sup>6</sup> miss the multiple layers of social criticism in the text. I will argue that Defoe uses the novel to depict a broader and less sanitized view of society, thereby illustrating

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Schonhorn's challenge to Watt's thesis emphasizes the residual "monarchist" elements in Defoe's thought rather than a network of supposedly minor characters.

- 4 Madeline Kahn, *Narrative Transvestism: Rhetoric and Gender in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): "I use the term 'narrative transvestism' to refer to this process whereby a male author gains access to a culturally defined female voice and sensibility but runs no risk of being trapped in the devalued female realm. Through narrative transvestism the male author plays out, in the metaphorical body of the text, the ambiguous possibilities of identity and gender" (p. 6).
- 5 The first such feminist analysis was Juliet McMaster, "The Equation of Love and Money in *Moll Flanders*," *Studies in the Novel* 2 (1970), 131-44. See also Chaber; William E. Hummel, "The Gift of My Father's Bounty': Patriarchal Patronization in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 48 (1994), 119-41; Ellen Pollak, "Moll Flanders, Incest, and the Structure of Exchange," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 30 (1989), 3-21; Mona Scheuerman, "An Income of One's Own: Women and Money in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*," *Durham University Journal* 80 (1988), 225-39.
- 6 The most notable essay with this theme is John Richetti's "The Family, Sex, and Marriage in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 15:2 (1982), 19-35.

a conduct for survival in unstable situations; that he represents a female support network among his "minor" characters who successfully cope with unstable circumstances arising in the novel; and that his picture of lower-class society suggests that for women, homosocial networks are more important than heterosexual coupling, and that gender solidarity, when exercised, permits them to circumvent social restrictions on their behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

### Ideals of Conduct and Desperate Situations

Before exploring *Moll Flanders*, we must examine the structure and content of Defoe's conduct manuals in order to understand the context in which his novel may be analysed as an alternative conduct manual. Written in didactic prose, post-Restoration conduct manuals provide religious and secular instruction on proper behaviour and delineate the duties of men and women within the home and within society. While most conduct manuals published in the early eighteenth-century employ a dry tone, Defoe's manuals offer more inventive forms of instruction. *The Family Instructor* (1715), his most popular conduct manual, teaches proper behaviour in a series of dialogues between members of a bourgeois and conspicuously nuclearized family.<sup>8</sup> The manual presents the relationship between parents and children, masters and servants, husbands and wives, in a manner "design'd both to divert and instruct."<sup>9</sup> Defoe creates an "entirely new" format for the conduct manual, a "Religious Play."<sup>10</sup> He

- 7 John Richetti, *Defoe's Narratives: Situations and Structures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Richetti makes a reference to "the invisible league of self-conscious women ... an authentic group manipulating the inauthentic relationships ordinary society offers" (p. 111). He also refers to a "female subculture," but he examines this league/subculture only in reference to Moll's biological mother and Mother Midnight. He does not explore how this organization of women coalesces prior to Moll's residence in Virginia and its crucial role in her survival.
- 8 For a complete history and analysis of this topic, see Paula R. Backscheider, *Daniel Defoe: His Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). "What was original about Defoe's conduct book was his fully realized, even leisurely narration, the individualized characters, the realistic dialogue, and, above all, his analytical interest in relationships" (p. 363). See also *The Ideology of Conduct*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987) and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 9 Daniel Defoe, *The Family Instructor*, ed. Paula Backscheider (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1989), p. iii.
- 10 Carol Houlihan Flynn, "Defoe's Idea of Conduct: Ideological Fictions and Fictional Reality," in *The Ideology of Conduct*. Flynn argues that Defoe "locates one of the central confusions of

introduces the characters and sketches basic personalities for them by identifying their role in the family and what type of Christian they are (e.g., “Negative Christian,” “loose-living Christian”). The dialogues articulate the inner thoughts of the characters, but only in relation to Christian/familial duty. Individual family members discuss no concerns beyond those of spirituality and the dictates of conduct. The focus is further narrowed by the family’s isolation from other members of society (except the servants). Defoe’s intense scrutiny of the middle-class nuclear family “anatomize[s]” their interactions in an artificially restricted atmosphere by devising a limited and “ideal” context in which to model proper conduct.<sup>11</sup>

The family Defoe creates clearly comes from a comfortable and stable socio-economic background. One series of dialogues deals with the relationship of master and servant, indicating affluent, middle-class circumstances. The older son is a profligate spender (not unlike Moll’s first lover), and the older daughter’s going to the theatre and playing cards indicates that she is a woman of leisure. Thus, a crucial component of the “ideal” world involves ensuring that the basic needs of food and shelter are met. I would not contend that Defoe believes financial security is a necessary precursor to spiritual development; however, the comfortable circumstances of this family prompt twenty-first-century readers to make that assumption. As a vehicle for portraying correct religious instruction and conduct, Defoe’s family is relatively free of immediate monetary concerns, and they are members of the “moral” middle class. The dialogues between husband and wife also reveal a stable marriage. The wife dutifully accepts instruction from her husband, and the husband strives to support his wife and family. *The Family Instructor* illustrates Richard A. Barney’s analysis of the revamped patriarchy established by Whiggish Puritanism: “In the public sphere ... Puritanism supported a more liberalized approach to male authority figures, while in the domestic sphere, the rule of the patriarch became at least potentially more emphatic.”<sup>12</sup> Defoe describes a family in which

his century, the contradictory desire for freedom and limitation, for equality and subordination” (p. 73).

11 Christopher Flint, *Family Fictions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Flint claims “that the single most effective means for the period’s own complex theorizing about family relations was prose fiction, largely because of its flexible incorporation of other discourses such as conduct books, philosophical treatises, and demographic studies” (p. 10).

12 Richard A. Barney, *Plots of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 218.

the father is clearly the head of the household and all other members of the family look to him for direction.

*The Family Instructor* subscribes to a rigid definition of gender roles that confines women to the home under the dominion of their husbands. Barney describes Defoe's depiction of "patriarchal authority" as "readily proscribing behavior and meting out punishment" in the family. "It is a government of command and submission, doubly enforced by divine mandate."<sup>13</sup> Thus, the presence of the father is crucial to both the economic and spiritual survival of the family. Women are defined by their relation to the father, and as wives and daughters must submit to his authority. What becomes of the women who lack the financial and moral stability of the "ideal"? Defoe was very aware of the complexities inherent in his society, and *The Family Instructor*, however detailed, could not address all circumstances.

Defoe's novels, which he sets up as true or "historical" accounts, may offer the opportunity to illustrate more realistic social conditions than those which he creates for the family in his conduct manual. Establishing this "historical" validity also lends credence to the moral lesson advanced by his story. The conventions of fiction allow him to depict a broader range of society and to include the lower classes, whose religious faith could be severely tested by the conditions of their existence. Defoe embeds in each novel a moral lesson that can be read as an extension of the instruction he gives in his conduct manuals. In the preface, he recommends *Moll Flanders* 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" (p. 5).<sup>14</sup> He gives Moll's narrative an added authenticity by calling it a "private History," which sets it apart from the more popular "Novels and Romances." This patina of authenticity, which allows him to depict the less savoury aspects of society, excuses his own recounting of the "wicked Part" of Moll's life.

In Defoe's fiction, the bourgeois ethos of the conduct manual collides with the "true-crime" and underworld ambiance of the *Newgate Calendar*—another source for the emerging genre of the novel. Lincoln Faller's *Crime and Defoe* identifies the criminal biogra-

13 Barney, p. 215.

14 Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, ed. Edward Kelly (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973). References are to this edition.

phy as one of Defoe's models for his fictional tales. Defoe's novels are, however, more "provoking" and "capacious" than the criminal biography. "Encouraging strategies of reading far more complicated than anything required by their putative genre, [the novels] can put readers into highly complicated, highly self-conscious, highly abstracted 'reading positions.'"<sup>15</sup> The primary "reading positions" evident in *Moll Flanders* are designed both to titillate and to instruct the reader. Defoe's preface justifies his potentially sensational depiction of the desperate circumstances of lower-class existence by stressing what the reader can learn by negative example.

Marriage and family are the basis of social organization, according to *The Family Instructor* and other such publications, so Defoe's novel answers the question of how a woman copes when she falls outside the purview of marriage and family.<sup>16</sup> Each of Moll's attempts to claim a permanent place in the domestic realm is thwarted, mainly because men prove to be highly unreliable as providers. Each of her five marriages leaves her increasingly poorer, and she seems unconcerned about her children, only one of whom is even named. From birth, Moll continually struggles to maintain herself and fulfil her basic needs, and Defoe's repeated inclusion of accounts keeps the reader apprised of her limited economic resources. She cannot provide for herself through her own labours.<sup>17</sup> Though she desires the life of "gentlewomen," which she defines as an ability to support herself, Moll achieves a *kind* of independence only by stealing. More important, the extent of her independence is complicated by the many crucial alliances she makes with women throughout her life. Her narrative teaches that in an unstable world no woman can survive in isolation from society at large. Moll must establish friendships with a succession of women most of whom are widowed and have to support

15 Lincoln Faller, *Crime and Defoe: A New Kind of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 31.

16 For a discussion of the interaction between the nuclear family and civil society, see Christopher Flint's *Family Fictions* and Gordon J. Schochet's *The Authoritarian Family and Political Attitudes in Seventeenth Century England: Patriarchalism in Political Thought* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1988).

17 Chaber asserts that Moll's many failed marriages are the result of a shift to capitalist social structure in which women are confined to the "domestic cell." She states, "Given the failure of men to allow women property, security, or productivity, no wonder the book's real structure is matriarchal" (p. 219). I expand upon her thesis to include all the secondary female characters as contributors to this matriarchy.

themselves. These women do not have men upon whom they can rely for "guidance." They struggle to exist in a society that confines middle-class women to the domestic realm, while tacitly condoning predatory male behaviour toward women considered unworthy of respect.

In contrast to the ideal of the conduct manual, Moll's narrative portrays neither a stable family life nor secure economic conditions, and she regularly deals with the underworld that shadowed polite society. Defoe is able to portray the darker elements of society in which basic needs such as food and shelter overshadow (at least initially) religious and moral instruction. Ultimately, Defoe comes back to a specific idea of moral and religious conduct, which he believes must prevail even in desperate circumstances. Admiration for Moll's resourceful survival techniques is not intended to overshadow the rewards that came from true repentance at the end of the novel. Authorial intent collides with reader interpretation in the actions of secondary female characters. Defoe extends the moral and religious instruction of the conduct manual to include non-ideal circumstances, but the imaginations of his readers are really excited by the collective ingenuity displayed by the characters in negotiating those circumstances. Thus, Defoe's alternative conduct manual both fulfils and exceeds his desire to complicate the ideal and offer religious instruction. Conduct in underclass circumstances, such as economic and marital instability, becomes a conduct for survival, and *Moll Flanders* suggests that the most successful practitioners of this conduct for survival are women.

An exemplar of survival is Moll's first benefactress, the nurse with whom she is placed as an infant. Left penniless after the death of her husband, the nurse must find a way to support herself and her children. Since the parish refuses to maintain a widow for her lifetime, she earns a living by entering the public realm, that is, in a socially acceptable manner. She earns her "little livelihood" by taking in homeless and orphaned children to educate and train them for service. Moll notes that her nurse once lived in "better circumstances," and these circumstances provide her with the skills to bring up the children "as mannerly as if we had been at the dancing-school" (p. 9). In other words, the nurse's *conduct*, learned while she was a wife, can be put to use in supporting her. She assumes *both* the masculine and feminine role by providing guidance for conduct and spiritual instruction *without* a man to instruct her. The nurse also offers an example of

acceptable encroachment into the public or masculine domain by broadening the domestic rather than stepping out of it. Her example provides a stark contrast to other women, Moll included, who survive the public realm in a socially unacceptable manner.

One such character, "Mother Midnight," the midwife who teaches Moll to steal, displays a great deal of resourcefulness in surviving. While it cannot be said that Defoe sets her up as a positive example, her integral role in both Moll's survival and repentance establishes her importance in the novel. She, like the nurse, displays a strong will to survive, though her means of survival takes her outside the law. She helps Moll hide the birth of an illegitimate child, earning Moll's loyalty. Moll trusts Mother Midnight to train her as a thief and share in the spoils.<sup>18</sup> She completes Moll's education in the conduct for survival by teaching Moll to achieve financial independence without marriage or servitude, both of which had already proved unfruitful. Mother Midnight adheres to her own code of morality by supporting Moll emotionally throughout the latter portion of her narrative. Apart from Moll, Mother Midnight is the strongest female character in the novel, and she proves to be Moll's most loyal friend and ally.

Marital stability constitutes a critical component of Defoe's ideal; however, Moll's narrative primarily illustrates marital *instability*.<sup>19</sup> Once again, Defoe portrays the "non-ideal" to complicate and expand the limits of the ideal. The women in Moll's narrative cannot form stable family units because of such factors as their age and financial situations.<sup>20</sup> Older, impoverished widows are not sought by suitors; younger, well-off widows need be wary of fortune-hunters. Moll comments cynically that men have the upper hand in marriage. This truth forces a woman to be creative in protecting her own interests. The sheer number of widows in this narrative sharply problematizes the stability and duration of married life. In Moll's own experience, her most stable marriage ends horrifically with the discovery of incest.

18 Flynn characterizes this arrangement as a "triumphant matriarchal system that transcends circumstances of sexual and financial transaction" (p. 87).

19 For critical analyses of Defoe's attitudes towards marriage, see Tommy G. Watson, "Defoe's Attitude toward Marriage and the Position of Women as Revealed in *Moll Flanders*," *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 3 (1964), 1-8; and David Blewett, "Changing Attitudes toward Marriage in the Time of Defoe: The Case of *Moll Flanders*" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 44:2 (1981), 77-88.

20 Flynn, pp. 84-85.

Defoe is hardly a proto-feminist in depicting the instability of marriage, but he acknowledges that a woman's position in marriage is tenuous and dependent upon the benevolence, solvency, and longevity of her husband. Even more tenuous is the position of the widow who has no male intermediary with society. Thus, Moll's narrative proposes an alternative method of surviving in the absence of a stable male figure. Her life illustrates the importance of female networks as a way of overcoming the inequities of marriage and widowhood.

### Female Networks and the Exercise of Power

Christopher Flint suggests that eighteenth-century narrative is caught between "the urge ... to create a new and convincing discourse about individual autonomy, and a desire ... to exalt the notions of social obligation and causality."<sup>21</sup> Defoe alleviates this tension by sacrificing "social obligation" to "individual autonomy" in order to justify Moll's scandalous behaviour. Modern readings of Moll's narrative stress her individualism and deliberate alienation from a male-dominated society. Her life is analysed as a depiction of self-centredness that motivates all the behaviour in the novel. "Self-enclosure, which is both cause and effect of individualism, justifies belief in one's own supremacy and in the relative unimportance of others."<sup>22</sup> Thus, Moll ignores the restrictions of organized society and puts self-preservation before social mores. Critics also credit Moll's individualism as the only successful example of how a character can thwart patriarchal authority. For example, she evades the "Magistrates" who seek to put her into service too soon, and she manages to support herself when men and marriage prove unreliable. However, Moll's self-maximizing individualism does not preclude a considerable amount of aid from other characters in the novel. Critics have given Moll more credit for survival than she deserves, and they have grossly overstated the degree of Moll's autonomy.

Throughout her life, Moll relies on a series of female confidantes who keep her financially and emotionally solvent within the context

21 Flint, p. 36.

22 Helene Moglen, *The Trauma of Gender: A Feminist Theory of the English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 41. While Moglen acknowledges that Moll's individualism is deeply conflicted within the novel, she locates the sources of conflict in capitalist structures that disempower women and Moll's unsuccessful relationships with men.

of her society. This society consists mainly of lower-class women and men whose primary concern is having enough money with which to shelter and feed themselves. While male characters exploit Moll's body, female characters are crucial to her survival. Women, not men, provide structure and impetus for Moll's narrative. This contention contradicts work by feminist critics like Nancy K. Miller who claim that the "fundamental structuring sequence" involves the conflict between masculine and feminine.<sup>23</sup> The minor female characters who come to Moll's aid can be loosely grouped into three categories: first, women who house Moll; second, women who counsel Moll and facilitate her relationships with men; and third, women who foster Moll's criminal career. The female support system contrasts strongly with Moll's unsuccessful dealings with men. Female characters outnumber male characters almost two to one in the narrative, possibly indicating their greater importance to Moll's well-being. As a result, the picture of eighteenth-century lower-class society that emerges from her narrative is a society of *women*. While solidarity is not a concept one associates with Defoe—much less female solidarity—the female characters in *Moll Flanders*, with few exceptions, manipulate patriarchal restrictions on their gender *in solidarity*. This solidarity, *not* Moll's individualism, enables her to triumph over her misfortunes and redeem herself in the end.

Defoe appears acutely sensitive to the differing ways in which men and women exercise power. Social conventions ascribe overt power, such as the ability to practise a trade, to men. They are Magistrates, "Gentlemen Traders," involved in "business schemes," essentially operating in the public realm. Women, by contrast, are confined to the private/domestic realm, even as a method of supporting themselves. When forced to make a living for themselves, they run small schools and inns, or they function as midwives and bawds. In fact, the women who appear to have the most "individual autonomy" in the novel are those who practise disreputable trades such as prostitution or thievery. Even these women are forced to contend with patriarchal restrictions that limit their behaviour. The "patriarchal authority" illustrated in *The Family Instructor* encompasses all social interactions. Society functions by the willingness of women to do their duty and subordinate their desires to men. Defoe's women, however, are far

23 See Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

from disempowered. Women in the novel exercise covert power by forming mutually beneficial unions that physically and emotionally shelter them from a male-dominant system.

The actions of numerous widows and landladies who house Moll and protect her reputation provide the most obvious examples of female networking. Women prove more capable of providing Moll with basic shelter than any of her husbands. As a young child, she is sheltered by the nurse and rich patronesses, thereby avoiding a life of drudgery. After the death of her first husband, she moves in with a widow who is "one of the maddest, gayest things alive" (p. 48). When her second marriage dissolves, Moll escapes the Mint by lodging with another young widow. Her narrative abounds with examples of sympathetic widows and landladies who provide her with lodging for no apparent remuneration. The consistency of their help also indicates that Defoe understood the importance of networking to Moll's survival. The actions of these women transcend mere sympathy or pity for Moll's straightened circumstances. By providing shelter, they enable Moll to preserve her reputation, which is a valuable commodity in the patriarchal system. For example, Moll's move to the Mint, which is populated largely by men, taints her with "the scandal of a whore without the joy" (p. 52). In order to restore her good name, Moll leaves the company of these men to move in with the young widow. The apparent ease with which she restores her tarnished reputation suggests that the lower classes need only maintain a façade of middle-class respectability. Public demonstrations of virtue are more important than private behaviour; thus, this incident demonstrates the value of the female network in seemingly legitimating Moll's virtue.

A second function of the network involves women who serve as confidantes, marriage counsellors, and marriage facilitators. When Moll discovers she has committed incest by her second marriage, she confides first in her mother-in-law (her biological mother) for advice. At three specific points in the narrative, Moll comments on the importance of friendship and having friends in an advisory capacity. Each time the subject arises, Moll lacks the necessary friend or confidante to help her through the lower points in her life. Moll's statements regarding friendship re-emphasize the interconnectedness of women in the novel. One such instance occurs after Moll ends her relationship with the Bath gentleman. Left friendless, she sees her

situation as “one of [her] worst Misfortunes” because she “had no adviser” or confidante. Moll concludes “that to be Friendless is the worst Condition, next to being in want, that a Woman can be reduc’d to: *I say a Woman*, because ’tis evident Men can be their own Advisers, and their own Directors” (p. 100). Moll’s canny observation about her society underscores the powerlessness women experience, unable openly to “direct” their own lives. Since all of Moll’s interactions with men to this point involve licit or illicit sex, the “Friend” to whom Moll refers can only be a woman. Women serve as advisers to other women in order to offset the “danger of being wrong’d and deceiv’d,” and women are especially important as advisers regarding marriage.

Despite the constant trouble each husband brings her, Moll continues to view marriage as the avenue to respectability and the “gentlewoman” status she desired as a child. Before her second marriage, a female friend suggests Moll consider becoming a mistress. Moll resists the suggestion because “a Woman should never be kept for a Mistress, that had Money to keep her self” (p. 48). Furthermore, “I was resolv’d now to be Married or Nothing” (p. 48). While Moll adheres to this philosophy whenever possible, she does not benefit more from marriage than from being a mistress. In fact, she has more financial security with her Bath gentleman than her second and fourth husbands. Why would a woman seek to marry if the potential for disaster is as great as Moll’s experiences imply? Defoe’s understanding is that all liaisons outside of marriage are equivalent to prostitution.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Moll’s description of her own relationships indicates that the only legitimate union between men and women is marriage, regardless of the quality of the union. A young woman’s most attractive means of achieving financial well-being requires an alliance with a man. If this alliance is “unholy” then the woman runs the risk—specifically through unwanted pregnancy—of damaging her reputation. Thus, a woman must take steps to protect her reputation through wedlock.

Marriage as an institution subordinates woman’s choice to man’s whimsy, overtly ascribing power to men. Moll acknowledges that not only do men have the upper hand in choosing a wife, but women’s

24 Defoe’s definition of “marriage” has more to do with spiritual than with legal matters. Since there is no mention of divorce from husband number two, Moll’s marriages to husbands three, four, and five are not technically legal. However, Defoe considers those marriages to be legitimate unions by marking her other liaisons as “prostitution.”

choice is an illusion: "as the Market run very Unhappily on the Mens side, I found the Women had lost the Privilege of saying No, that it was a Favour now for a Woman to have THE QUESTION ask'd ... The Men had such Choice every where, that the Case of the Women was very unhappy; for they seem'd to Ply at every Door, and if the Man was by great Chance refus'd at one House, he was sure to be receiv'd at the next" (p. 54). Once again, Defoe demonstrates an awareness of the inequality between men and women in society. In exploring the reasons for marriage, Moll concludes cynically that "Marriages were here the Consequences of politick Schemes for forming Interests, and carrying on Business, and that LOVE had no Share, or but very little in the Matter" (p. 53). Given the emphasis on finance over emotion, Moll cautions women to investigate a man's position carefully before committing themselves to marriage. Female networks allow a woman to implement Moll's suggestion, so advice and counsel from female friends become particularly valuable with regard to marriage.

With the exception of her first, each of Moll's marriages is facilitated by a woman, as are all of her illicit liaisons with men. In some instances, Moll even acknowledges the superior wisdom of her friend in choosing a beneficial alliance.<sup>25</sup> If the nature of the union is illicit then women negotiate the proper remuneration for Moll's services. They also enable Moll to take care of unwanted children from her licit and illicit unions with men. The narrative illustrates numerous ways in which women facilitate marriage. Women friends expand Moll's social circle and allow her to meet eligible men. They also provide men with information, often false and exaggerated, about Moll's finances. This false overstatement of Moll's fortune makes possible her third marriage to the Virginia planter (her half-brother). When Moll discovers that she has committed incest with her brother, she distances herself from him and their children. Her husband then relies on his mother (Moll's biological mother) to intercede with her on his behalf.

Moll's fourth and fifth marriages exemplify the trust she places in the female network to arrange her unions. Though Moll is involved with a banker, whom she describes as the most trustworthy man or woman she has ever met, she abandons him on the advice of the

25 The "gayest" widow tries to pander for her brother and negotiate Moll's services as his mistress. Moll declines and marries a man of her choice, the Linnen-Draper, which leads to her disastrous second marriage. As a result of this disappointing union, Moll finds "I had much better have been Sold by my She Comrade to her Brother, than have Sold my self as I did to a Tradesman that was a Rake, Gentleman, Shopkeeper, and Beggar all together" (p. 48).

"Lady from Lancashire." She cajoles her banker to draw up a marriage contract and then avoids signing because the "Lady" promises her greater fortune in Lancashire. Luckily, Moll manages to marry her banker in spite of the unsigned contract, but only after another doomed marriage and unwanted pregnancy. This friend brokers Moll's fourth marriage by grossly exaggerating the extent of Moll's fortune. The reader later discovers this friend's intent is to find a wealthy wife for her former lover, and she is paid £500 for her services. Her duplicity underscores both the power and the danger of the network in ensuring her future. Moll's fault lies, not in trusting the network, but in trusting this woman. Despite her friend's selfish motives, Moll's fourth marriage ultimately succeeds happily in the New World. Thus, this episode serves more to caution than totally discredit the power of female networks. Moll continues to place her trust in the network to arrange her fifth marriage.

Further evidence of the integral role women play in facilitating Moll's relationships with men occurs in the circumstances surrounding Moll's fifth marriage. The banker still wishes to marry Moll, but Moll is pregnant with her fourth husband's child. As the banker is unaware of her fourth marriage, Moll must go to great lengths to conceal her pregnancy. The "Gentlewoman" with whom Moll lodges sends for a "Midwife of the right sort, that is to say, the right sort for me" (p. 126). The midwife, Mother Midnight, serves as confidante, adviser, and problem solver. After Mother Midnight delivers the child with discretion, Moll resolves "to unbosome" herself to the midwife and seek advice about whether or not to marry the banker. Moll describes the midwife's reaction: "She fell a Laughing at my scruples about marrying, and told me the other was no marriage, but a cheat on both Sides ... *in short*, reason'd me out of my Reason" (p. 135). Freed from this burden of conscience, Moll can safely marry her banker.

Moll's relationship with Mother Midnight introduces the third function of the female network: fostering Moll's criminal behaviour. In *Mother Midnight*, Robert Erickson characterizes her as a "professional secret-keeper" and the architect of Moll's "ill-fate."<sup>26</sup> Other critics view her as more self-involved than Moll, ascribing her concern

26 Erickson, p. 53. He further mythologizes Mother Midnight as "a figure of impenetrable darkness" with "almost godlike ambivalence and omniscience" (p. 55). His analysis completely devalues the devotion and care Mother Midnight displays after Moll's capture and imprisonment in Newgate.

for Moll to a fear of having her criminal activities revealed.<sup>27</sup> However, her actions reveal a real concern for Moll's well-being that no other character in the novel demonstrates. Though "honest Business did not come within her reach," the crooked midwife provides cheap enough housing that Moll "for a good while ... left off the wicked Trade" (p. 155). Only when Moll's ineptitude as a thief threatens her life does Mother Midnight teach Moll how to steal safely. She instructs Moll, disposes of her stolen goods, manufactures disguises for her, and provides her with an alibi when she is almost caught. Mother Midnight even finds a female "Comrade" to help Moll perfect her "Art."

In this stage of her narrative, Moll still describes a predominantly female criminal element which challenges the overt power exerted by men. The women are prostitutes and dexterous pickpockets who have no legitimate means of support. Defoe depicts the extreme poverty of these women as the factor that drives them to criminal acts. The "wise Man's Prayer, *Give me not poverty lest I steal*," resonates for Moll because of her "want of Friends and want of Bread" (p. 149). She states, "Poverty presses, the Soul is made Desperate by Distress, and what can be done?" (p. 149). However, Defoe does not use poverty as a justification for stealing. Though destitution drives Moll to sin, depravity causes her to repeat the sin in the absence of any pressing need. Interestingly enough, even women's criminality is defined in relation to men. Moll describes numerous instances when female thieves tempt men with their bodies and then rob them. What Defoe describes is the strong survival instinct these women possess that does not justify so much as explain their actions. The survival instinct operates within the structure of female networks and ultimately succeeds in subverting patriarchal power.

### The Dialectic of Survival and the Manipulation of Patriarchal Restrictions

The "real movement" of Moll's narrative has been described as a "depiction of a dialectic between self and other which has as its end a covert but triumphant assertion of the 'self'" that presupposes a uniformly constructed "society."<sup>28</sup> This description is based on three

27 Gregory Durston, *"Moll Flanders": An Analysis of an Eighteenth Century Criminal Biography* (Chichester: Barry Rose Law Publishers, 1997).

28 Richetti, *Defoe's Narratives*, p. 96.

erroneous assumptions: 1. that the “self” (Moll) is a self-enclosed individual moving independently through the narrative; 2. that the “other” refers to the structures of society impeding the individual’s progress through the narrative, and 3. that society functions uniformly against the individual. The female networks in the narrative complicate Moll’s individuality and independence. In Moll’s oppositional relationship to an “other” (that is, society), men and women perform distinctly different functions in the narrative. The social structures involved with the domestic realm (e.g., homes, taverns, orphan asylums) controlled by women work to Moll’s benefit. Men and women do not constitute a uniform “society” against which Moll works to preserve her interests.<sup>29</sup> The “other” to Moll’s “self” is more accurately defined as patriarchal restrictions imposed by specific gender roles, and Moll’s self is *interdependent* rather than strictly individual. Women collectively challenge societal mores established to support the public and domestic split, so their behaviour illustrates a counter-culture that thrives on group efforts and establishes alternative norms.

The dialectic underlying the episodes of her life should be conceived as part of a continual conflict between patriarchal restriction imposed by men and a pervasive support network formed by women. Critics are fond of creating binary oppositions between individual and society, Moll and men. By focusing on the actions of the characters, however, readers can see that the binary opposition illustrated by Moll’s tale opposes male dominance to female networks to illustrate the constant struggle for survival. This dialectic of survival highlights the ambiguous social position of women who lack financial and marital security. The alternate society of displaced women forms a powerful “matriarchal counterthrust”<sup>30</sup> in the novel. Critics have located this counterthrust only in the “mother figures” in Moll’s life, namely her nurse, her biological mother, and Mother Midnight. The

29 In *A Heroine’s Text*, Miller notes, “Moll’s successful female bonding is indeed key to the shape of her quest for security and identity and as such might also be seen as a muted challenge to the paternal metaphor, as a male fantasy—acted out through the fiction of the female—of independence from the law of the father” (p. 161, n. 15). I would contend that female bonding is less fantasy than reality and the challenge to patriarchal restriction is more open than muted.

30 Chaber, p. 219. Chaber positions this counterthrust with respect to control of capital and economic structures within the novel. She does not discuss how the counterthrust challenges patriarchal authority with respect to marriage or social power relations.

concept of matriarchy, however, should accommodate the other women in the novel who work together against patriarchal restrictions. Any analysis of power and gender within the context of *Moll Flanders* should not focus exclusively on the individual as opposed to a group or "society." Rather, analyses should expand to interrogate the interactions between the multiple groups depicted.

Not all of the interactions between women in the novel are supportive or positive, but the women who work against the female solidarity are thwarted. Only within the network can they succeed. For example, working for one's family and against female networks does not bring greater familial happiness. When Moll marries her first husband, the women in his family vehemently oppose the match. Oddly enough, Defoe excludes any mention of the father's reaction and focuses on the reactions of the mother and the sisters, the same women who brought Moll into their home. When one sister expresses her distaste for Moll as a sister-in-law, Robin (Moll's future husband) ridicules her and dismisses her concern as petty jealousy. The insulting interchange sets brother against sister and trivializes her cautions. Criticizing Moll and working against gender solidarity creates conflict within the family that has the potential of alienating family members. In a sense, the mother and sisters come together to form a counter-network that focuses inward, solely on family, to exclude the outsider, an unacceptable woman. Rather than promoting familial welfare, this counter-network creates a schism within the family, which works against the specific intentions of the characters.

Gender solidarity can also be disrupted by class stratification. Moll's narrative reveals that solidarity between women breaks down across class lines, as the women in the household consider themselves of a higher social rank than Moll. Even a beloved and well-respected servant cannot marry the master of the household. Moll is unsuitable as a wife, though she was very suitable as a charity project. In other words, women of the upper classes are willing to work within the network for specific reasons. These same women fought to bring Moll into their home, but their kindness only extends to providing her work in the household. They are not prepared to accept Moll as an equal. Ultimately, the wishes of the mother and sisters are completely disregarded, and they are forced to accept Moll as a daughter and sister-in-law. Thus, working against the network does not benefit these women either by building solidarity within the family or maintaining class distinctions.

Another episode, involving the "Lady" from Lancashire, provides an interesting test case for female networks. The "Lady" works against gender solidarity for her own interest, which seems to contradict the efficacy of networking. She sets forth the cost-effectiveness of country living in order to lure Moll to Lancashire against Moll's best interests. The "Lady" has been "hired" by her former lover to find a rich agreeable widow whom he can marry. She finds Moll and, believing the greatly exaggerated reports of Moll's wealth, she arranges the match. Because each woman has a false perception of the other, little good comes of the arrangements. Like Moll, this "Lady" masks her damaged reputation, and she manages to make her former lover pay for her services as a matchmaker. Unfortunately, the match is a financial disaster for everyone involved, though the "Lady" manages to escape with some money. Defoe includes this episode to highlight the duplicity of each member of this triangle. *Mother Midnight* calls it a "mutual Cheat" and dismisses the validity of the marriage. Moll is able to recover from this marriage, however, and move to her next marriage because of her reliance upon networks.

By looking beyond the selfishness of the characters, we can see how the network is actually the tool that facilitates the events of this episode. The fact that the Lancashire husband requires a *woman* to find him a wealthy widow reinforces the existence and effectiveness of the network, despite this episode's negative repercussions. Moll's (misplaced) trust in her comrade underscores her reliance upon women to contract suitable marriages. Considering the number of times the network has worked to her advantage, this experience proves to be an exception to the general value of gender solidarity. The faith Moll places in her female friends allows the reader to expand the examination of gender relations to include the bonds women form *with* each other. The novel shows how these bonds enable women successfully to subvert institutions and attitudes that Defoe acknowledges primarily favour men.

The dialectic of survival operates decisively throughout the novel in the actions women take collectively to ensure their personal well-being. Whether plying a legal or illegal trade, women demonstrate resourcefulness in the novel. Their resourcefulness only increases when they make use of female networking. The nurse's small school benefits greatly from the patronage of powerful women like the Mayoress. The widow who leaves the Mint and invites Moll to live with

her also maintains her own reputation by having a female companion. Moll's female "Comrade" expertly picks pockets while Moll distracts potential victims. Defoe also depicts the way women take care of unwanted pregnancies. Moll's landlady, who negotiates her liaison with the Bath gentleman, allows Moll to preserve her reputation by concealing the birth of Moll's child. The children from Moll's legitimate unions seem to disappear from the novel because they do not present problems to her, but Defoe recounts what happens to her illegitimate or unwanted progeny in great detail. Moll's marriage to the banker cannot proceed until she delivers and conceals the birth of her child by Jemmy. *Mother Midnight* offers a meticulous accounting of the cost of delivery and concealment in chart form, demonstrating that covert midwifery was rather profitable. This arrangement proves that virtue is a façade and shows how little middle-class morals mean to lower-class women. Women are quite adept at concealing their "sins" and thwarting patriarchal definitions of respectability. Neither Moll's fourth nor her fifth husband is ever aware that she was a man's mistress and had several children. Defoe does not find this behaviour admirable, but as author he demonstrates that Moll benefits greatly from this system of concealment. An alternative system of norms, at odds with the dominant system, comes into sharp focus.

Two episodes in the narrative illustrate how a covert circumvention of patriarchal restrictions is enabled by female networking. The first episode occurs when Moll helps a female friend avenge herself against a suitor. Defoe's text makes the reader acutely aware of the tenuous position in which unmarried women who possess a fortune are situated. When this widow makes inquiries into the condition of her suitor's finances as a precautionary measure, he is outraged. He expects full disclosure of her finances, but he considers a similar disclosure beneath him. As a result, the suitor courts a woman of lesser wealth and the widow unfairly earns a reputation that keeps other suitors at bay. Clearly, the widow is a victim of patriarchal restrictions that rigidly define the acceptable modes of behaviour for women. However, "the Advantage is not so much on the other Side, as the Men think it is" (p. 59). Moll helps the widow to get revenge and to regain her suitor by using the network of women. She instructs the widow to "take care to have it well spread among the Women ... that she had enquired into his Circumstances, and found he was not the Man as to Estate he pretended to be" (p. 55). The success of her

ploy rests on two facts: the widow and Moll are both trusted sources of information, and the information spreads widely to surrounding areas. The suitor is unable to find another woman who will accept his suit without demanding to know his circumstances. Ultimately, the widow marries her suitor after a full disclosure of his assets without revealing the extent of her own fortune. This episode illustrates how women working together can turn the tables on male "Advantage." Defoe approves of the methods used in this episode since they bring about a happy marriage for the widow.

The second episode that demonstrates a subversion of the restrictions on women occurs during Moll's criminal career. She and Mother Midnight work together to ensure each other's personal well-being. Moll takes all the risks of stealing and her Governess (Mother Midnight) converts the stolen goods into money. Periodically, Moll will work with a partner to steal more efficiently. In order to protect her identity, the Governess proposes to Moll that she dress up in "Mens Cloths." Defoe is not a proponent of such cross-dressing, and Moll's discomfort with the disguise underscores his opinion: "it is impossible to be so Nimble, so Ready, so Lexterous at these things, in a Dress so contrary to Nature" (p. 167). However, the disguise proves unexpectedly useful in eluding capture by the authorities. The Governess finds her a male partner, who is unaware of Moll's true sex, to co-operate in petty thievery. When he breaks into a house against Moll's advice to steal goods, he and Moll are discovered and chased by a crowd. The young man is caught, but Moll remains safe by running to her Governess's home and casting off her disguise. The crowd, in search of another young man, sees Moll in her nightgown doing needlework and moves on. The possibility that a woman could have disguised herself as a man does not even occur to anyone in the crowd, nor does it occur to her male accomplice. Though Moll does not continue this disguise, she successfully crosses rigid gender boundaries to her benefit.

Defoe's novel presents a highly complex series of actions and interactions that expand the boundaries of what respectable women can do. Defoe's concept of proper womanhood, based on his conduct manuals, defines women in relation to men. They are daughters and wives who look to their fathers and husbands for guidance. What happens in a world when men are largely absent, unable to give guidance, and act against the ideals of conduct manuals? *Moll Flanders*

answers this question by reproducing desperate conditions that illustrate how porous the boundaries which limit women can become. Women are neither passive nor wholly submissive to their husbands and lovers. They prove to be highly competent in managing their own affairs, and they form intelligent alliances that work around the restrictions imposed by society. In the narrative, women seek out other women, and their actions reveal a consciousness of the benefits of networking. The women pushing the boundaries are largely lower-class and marginalized women who operate on the fringes of polite society.

While Defoe's stated desire is to provide instruction in repentance, the underlying narrative of female networking teaches an altogether different lesson. Moll repents of her criminal activities and as a result of her new-found piety lives a happy life in the colonies, finally returning to England. Moll's success in the New World, however, owes more to Mother Midnight than to Christian remorse. This fact directly undermines Defoe's conversion narrative because female friendship proves more beneficial to Moll than repenting of sin. Mother Midnight represents a seedy, unholy aspect of lower-class society, and her behaviour should presumably be condemned, not imitated. However, she stays with Moll to the very end of her life in England. In fact, Mother Midnight repents *before* Moll and proves to be a "Penitent to the highest Degree for her Sins" (p. 224). While the prison minister attends to Moll's spiritual awakening, Mother Midnight arranges Moll's reunion with her husband and provides her with money to make a fresh start in the New World. Once again, a woman steps in to ensure Moll's happiness and survival.

Ultimately, Moll's narrative subordinates moral instruction to a more practical purpose: lessons in survival. The complexity of her relationships and her canny nature prove more interesting than her eventual conversion and reward. In a sense, the Defoe who wrote *The Family Instructor* loses control over Moll's narrative and tells a very different story from the one he may have intended. Moll's fictional life provides a template for undomesticated women in eighteenth-century society. The novel proposes a conduct for survival in order to overcome desperate circumstances. When trapped by financial and social insecurity, women must work collectively, in solidarity, for individual survival. Most important, men are not to be relied upon for financial, social, or emotional security. Rather than reading the novel as a series of liaisons between Moll and men, we should see in the

story a more complex struggle for survival in which female networking is crucial. As an alternative conduct manual, *Moll Flanders* offers rules for the proper behaviour of women on the fringes of polite society. First, make female friends, and second, rely on those friends for your survival. Moll looks to men for potential security, but in fact she survives because of women.

Pennsylvania State University