

# A FORTUNATE DIALECT: CLASS, LANGUAGE, AND SURVIVAL IN DEFOE'S *MOLL FLANDERS*

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In Daniel Defoe's novel *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, the eponymous protagonist is born into the lower class but spends her adolescence living with upper-class benefactors, almost as family. This transition during Moll's formative years allows her the opportunity to absorb and emulate the language and behaviour of gentility, transforming her into a hybrid of lower- and upper-class mentalities within the otherwise highly polarized social hierarchy of eighteenth-century England. One side of her personality aspires to the virtuous and private nature of the upper-class sphere, while the other is heavily influenced by the ambiguous morality and public nature associated with the survivalist impulse of her lower-class origins as understood by her contemporaries (Porter 48-97).<sup>1</sup> The dichotomy between these two spheres becomes evident in Moll's hybridized use of language. Her access to each dialect allows her to survive both physically and psychologically through her circumstances. Moll aspires to the mentality of a gentlewoman, but acknowledges the low-class equivalent when dictated by practicality, and appeals to the higher moral meaning of an upper-class mentality to justify her immoral actions. Moll's utilization of social dialect facilitates her self-preservation and reconciles her means of survival with her

<sup>1</sup> The use of "low-class" throughout this essay is meant to reflect contemporaneous understandings of class associations, however politically unpalatable they may seem today.

personal interests in a world where survival and morality conflict.

Moll expresses her own sense of gentility to the reader by using the language of the upper class, but then, in the same breath, translates the implications and semantics to those of the lower class. She uses this adaptability as a survival tool. Prior to her first marriage, Moll's place within the family is threatened by Robin's open affection for her; she comments that "his mother had let fall some speeches, as if she intended to put me out of the family; that is, in English, to turn me out of doors" (53). In this statement, Moll acknowledges two different contexts of the situation. She first uses a genteel euphemism that conveys the fact that Robin's mother is concerned with doing what she considers best for her family by attempting to preserve their propriety and reputation; then, Moll translates the same situation into a low-status context by describing it as it applies to her physical safety. What Robin's mother sees as protecting her family, Moll sees as potential homelessness. Although Moll aspires to be a gentlewoman and understands the language of gentility, she chooses to impose matters of the private sphere upon the realm of the public sphere; she appeals to the pragmatic language of her low-class upbringing to preserve her basic physical safety. Simultaneously, Moll's initial reference, indicative of her understanding of the genteel perspective, is an attempt to portray herself as part of that class. While Moll emulates the language and understanding of the upper class, it is easy for her to forget that her actions have attested to the opposite. Had Moll possessed the qualities of the class with which she wished to assimilate, she would not have allowed herself to be undone with no resistance, and would have sacrificed her personal interest, in this case her sexual relationship with Robin's brother, for the harmony of her benefactors from the onset.

Moll's appeal to straightforward language is again evident when she encounters the midwife, known as her "governess." Moll describes how the former made no profit from her lodgers, "but that her profit lay in the other articles of her management... upon the private account, or, in plain English, the whoring account" (170). This reference to "plain English" further emphasizes Moll's understanding that practicality and the preservation of her interests are best found in lower-class language. Moll places herself above prostitution by first alluding to it genteelly, but she is as familiar with the "whoring account" as her governess and, consequently, is able to express it through "plain English." She takes a similar approach to the subject of

abortion. Moll tells the reader that the midwife “said something that looked as if she could help me off with my burthen sooner, if I was willing; or, in English, that she could give me something to make me miscarry” (170). Moll’s description at first is one that belongs to the realm of genteel, private mentality: the language is evasive, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact meaning or consequently accuse the governess of immorality. This again deals with a euphemism through which the issue is handled delicately and taken care of behind closed doors. The matter at stake here is more complicated than the last: Moll is still aiming to achieve what she considers necessary to her physical survival. Pregnant and abandoned by her last lover, she seeks new money in the form of a banker but “knew there was no marrying without concealing that [she] had had a child” (173). To maintain her wealthy lifestyle, Moll must be rid of her child and, while recognizing this as immoral, she approaches it as a necessity to her own survival. To gloss over this aspect of her situation, Moll emphasizes the immorality of abortion and her high moral virtue in opposing it. To do so, she translates the situation into base, low language that firmly points at the governess as a character who proposes evil expedients, and is blunt in denoting the association between prostitution and shameless abortion: “I could never be brought to entertain so much as a thought of endeavouring to miscarry... I abhorred, I say, so much as the thought of it” (163). In this example, Moll’s translation aligns her with the high moral aspirations associated with the gentility—too high to be considered by low-class prostitutes—to justify her actions. She displaces the immorality of disposing of her child by emphasizing the importance of the assertion that she is far too moral to consider something as sinful as induced miscarriage. Moll uses her knowledge of both high- and low-class language to justify her own actions as necessary for her survival, intending her claim to morality on one subject to overshadow her lack of another, and thus maintain her personal interests as they relate to her “survival.”

In several situations, Moll’s knowledge of the upper-class discourse of morality enables her to justify any actions she feels are necessary for her survival by displacing the blame, and thereby preserving her sense of goodness, her place in the world, and, thus, her will to live. When Moll turns to stealing, she describes it as necessity and puts blame on the devil. She tells the reader that when “poverty presses, the soul is made desperate by distress” and describes how the devil “readily prompted [her] as if he had spoke”

(189). Moll's eloquent description emphasizes with preachy clarity that she feels she had no other choice but to steal.

The second time Moll steals, she takes a necklace from a child she found walking home alone, justifying it by blaming anyone but herself. She tells the reader: "I had given the parents a just reproof for their negligence in leaving the poor little lamb to come home by itself" and refers to the "vanity of the mother" for letting the child wear such a necklace in the first place, even accusing the presumed maid, who may have been meant to accompany the child, of being a "careless jade" who was probably "taken up with some fellow that had met her by the way" (192). Moll commits a patently immoral act, but displaces blame onto the parents and the maid, going so far as to portray herself as a moralizer who has improved the life of the child by teaching the parents to stay vigilant and to check their vanity. Furthermore, she continues to paint herself as innocent and saintly by describing the child as a "poor little lamb" and "poor little baby" (192) as though she felt great maternal affection for it, further removing any sense of her own immorality from the situation. Moll's familiarity with both lower-class and genteel language enables her to transfigure the immorality of her "low-class" actions and feel justified in stealing to survive.

Similarly, Moll later allows herself to be seduced by an intoxicated gentleman and, once he has fallen asleep in his carriage, steals his valuables. Her first means of justification is to raise herself morally by sermonizing against the evils of this man's behaviour: she says that "such a man is worse than a lunatic; prompted by his vicious, corrupted head" (218). She attempts to remove the responsibility from herself by implying that she is a deliverer of justice. Her tone immediately switches to one that portrays her as caring and tender, saying that "he was really to be pitied" and "seemed to be a good sort of man," and that she would have "sent him safe home to his house and to his family" if she had been able (219). While the impression of her initial moral speech remains, she contradicts it as if to portray her own virtues of forgiveness and kindness, and thereby convey her goodness and innocence. Furthermore, she implies that, after this incident, the man will have learned his lesson and will thus not repeat it, and that she, from whom he "was in no danger," has done him an edifying favour, instead of leaving him to one who would give him a disease. She has thus prevented him from "sowing the contagion in the life-blood of his posterity" (219). Moll has once again used

her hybrid concept of high and low mentalities, as well as the languages that accompany them, to circumvent her own sinfulness and means of survival: by the end of the scenario, both the reader and Moll herself hardly remember that she is a criminal.

Moll uses similar strategies to justify her participation in crime, which she considers implicit to her survival, as more moral than physical. Upon the revelation that her husband in Virginia is, in fact, her brother, she does not inform him or leave him for over three years. The best answer to the moral objections raised in the reader is that she was comfortable with the wealth that her marriage brought her and unwilling to abandon it. She justifies her position by referring to him as “my husband, as he thought himself” (102) and “my husband (as he was called)” (104). Through this complex and clever usage of language, Moll is employing her upper-class education as a means to conceive of a way to justify staying with him despite her discovery. Her qualifications convey that despite their marriage, she does not consider the man her husband, and thus cannot be accused of consciously engaging in incest. She emphasizes that she “loathed the thought of bedding with him, and used a thousand pretences of illness and humour to prevent his touching me” (103). Although revealing that she has caused her husband years of emotional strain on top of the eventual shocking disclosure of the truth, her purpose is to convey her own virtue by expressing incest as loathsome and in working strenuously to prevent it. Her concern is with the physical and downplays the immorality of her dishonesty and prolonged incestuous marriage. To abandon the marriage would be to abandon her material security and subject herself once again to an indeterminate future; thus, Moll contrives her language to remove herself from visible guilt.

In each of these examples, Moll engages in low-class behaviour and uses high-class euphemism to justify her participation. A flaw in this device which cannot be ignored is that, although Moll considers her actions necessary to her own survival, she is not interested in surviving through merely modest means. During Moll’s childhood, ladies “brought [her] work to do for them ... and not only paid [her] for doing them, but even taught [her] how to do them” so that she both “paid [her] nurse for [her] keeping, but got money in [her] pocket too” (39-40). Moll is perfectly capable of supporting herself through honest work, but her vanity and ambition cause her to see survival defined by wealth. Through the cunning language facilitated by her mixed-

class upbringing, Moll creates her own definitions of need, morality, and meaning, doing what is necessary to have them met.

Defoe's Moll Flanders consistently wishes to be a "gentlewoman" and emulates educated genteel language, especially in voicing moral aspirations; however, she employs this language as a justification for "low-class" behaviour. In the struggle to achieve her goals in the morally ambiguous environment of eighteenth-century London, Moll exploits the language of both low- and high-class mentalities to survive and to legitimate her means of survival. She employs whichever mentality will best suit her needs and uses specific language to justify her disposal of children, her marriages, and her crimes. Although Moll's overarching purpose is flawed in its rejection of modest living, her use of language adapts to justify her own personal definition and pursuit of "survival." In her words: "the soul is made desperate by distress; and what can be done?" (189). Indeed, who cannot admire Moll for doing what she thought needed to be done in her pursuit of synonymous survival and happiness? Moll may not be a morally admirable character, but her cunning and circular manipulations of language are adept beyond expectation.

#### WORKS CITED

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