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Refocusing the Gendered Gaze

Role-Playing, Performance, and Multiple-Identity in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*

Daniel Defoe makes use of subject-object patterns within his novel *Moll Flanders* in order to produce ruptures within eighteenth-century gender ideology and to reconstitute the subject-object relation between masculine and feminine within the novel. Even as Defoe affirms the dominance of gender ideology by positioning his readers as objects of the novel, Defoe uses his character of Moll Flanders to suggest the potential for transforming ideology through the performative act of gender. As Moll struggles to link fragments of her past, she explores the boundaries of gender identity and transgresses their limits in order to achieve movement within eighteenth century society. How Moll negotiates her conceptions and interpretations of her relation to her natural, cultural, and psychological landscapes suggests her success in tracing the presence of an identity that would inform and sustain the self by allowing her to assert a sense of economic individualism, which might release her from any moral obligation to the pervasive and dominant ideologies affecting gender in the eighteenth century.

“It is impossible to recover our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect.” (Marcel Proust)¹

Marcel Proust's comments on the vagueness of memory suggest ways in which we may reconstitute traditional forms of history by bridging chronology with personal narrative to explain the past. Our explanations frequently rely upon binary strands

1. Marcel Proust's focus on reconstructing memory has resurfaced in many contemporary novels (e.g. Don DeLillo's *Libra* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*) as a way to reshape traditional forms of history which have become both unreliable and unsuitable for explaining the past. See Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, 2 vols., trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1934), p. 34.

that reveal subject-object orientations within our narratives. We make use of these orientations to determine how we act and how we are being acted upon. What we learn from subject-object patterns affects our identity, determines our value, and influences our potential for growth.

Daniel Defoe makes use of subject-object patterns within his novel *Moll Flanders*.² Defoe employs many modern themes within his fictional work to facilitate the narrative mode. His character of Moll Flanders struggles to link fragments of her past in order to define a new gender identity that is informed by classifications she both embraces and rejects in order to achieve movement within society. Defoe appropriates gender opposition and spatially reconstitutes it in terms of antagonistic representations of historical and personal narratives, public and private identities, and insideness and outsideness.

Moll's identity is inscribed according to referents that determine her proximity to historically and socially prescribed definitions of insideness. These classifications are further qualified according to perceived physical attributes, gender, sexuality, class distinction, and morality. How Moll negotiates her conceptions and interpretations of her relation to her natural, cultural, and psychological landscapes suggests her success in tracing the presence of an identity that would inform and sustain the self by allowing her to assert a sense of economic individualism, which might release her from any moral obligation to the pervasive and dominant ideologies affecting gender in the eighteenth century.

Ideology is used to predict and to pattern the organization of humans and the distribution of resources within a socio-economic system. However, ideology requires affirmation that can only be demonstrated through a commitment to performative acts that stabilize these systems and affirm our value and location within them. By fulfilling the requirements of performative acts, we strengthen the multiple definitions used to outline roles and tasks we assume in service of the dominant ideology. By altering performance, by changing or reshaping established roles, we diminish the capacity of the dominant ideology to sustain its self and necessitate a refashioning of its conceptual fabric.

Defoe produces ruptures within eighteenth-century gender ideology by reconstituting the subject-object relation between masculine and feminine within the novel. Even as Defoe affirms the dominance of gender ideology by positioning his readers as objects of the novel, he uses Moll to suggest the potential for transforming ideology through the performative act.

2. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988).

The episodic plot of *Moll Flanders* allows the reader to sift through shards of memory that comprise the autobiographical mode of representation. Readers share in Moll's experience of tracing memories by struggling to unify the fragments she offers which reconstitute her identity through the affirmative act of narration. As Moll relates the events of her life, it becomes apparent that she has manipulated her identity in order to achieve social mobility. It is also apparent that Moll is inscribing a new identity, realized through the authoritative voice of the narrative, which places her in a more positive light. The conclusion of the narrative causes readers to wonder whether or not Moll has reconciled her past to achieve a new and enlightened sense of self, or whether or not she is merely playing the part of the penitent woman.

It is through the process of deconstructing and reconstructing identity that Moll seeks traces of memory to compose her subjective narrative in relation to the absence of identity that informs it. Sigmund Freud defined the term "memory-trace" to explain the ways in which we attempt to restore our knowledge of past experiences. Securing the trace memory is impossible, because, as Jacques Derrida suggests, "*trace itself does not exist.*"³ However, one of the problems with Derrida's concept of trace as signification is that knowledge is filtered through a subjective lens. Thus, how are we to differentiate the trace from the absence that informs it? I will apply the previous question to a close-reading of *Moll Flanders* in order to assess whether or not tracing the past enables Moll Flanders to recover her sense of self, a signification that has been compromised by her continuous manipulation of appearance and identity. I will also consider how gender ideology might frame our notions of self in a reductive and exclusive sense.

Through Moll's numerous gender transformations, Defoe suggests how the displacement of feminine gender within industrialized society might enable the birth of a neutral and commodious individualism that makes performance imprecise and destabilizes the traditional gender roles that inform the dominant ideology. Performance desires a subject that must be affirmed, and as such, performance is used to

refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his (sic) continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. It will be convenient to label as 'front' that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.⁴

3. Gayatri Spivak provides a translation of Derrida's theories of deconstruction, phenomenology, and psychoanalysis, which have affected criticism and theory: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), p. 167.

4. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 32.

The success or failure of Moll's performance is largely determined by the novelist's commitment to satisfying his readerships' expectations of gendered behavior and his commitment to traditional masculine and feminine representations, particularly at a time when the accumulation of wealth and status was a fully masculine concern.⁵ Moll struggles to locate a suitable identity that would accommodate both her public obligations to represent herself as a liberated feminine member of society, and her private concerns to accumulate and possess the artifacts of wealth (i.e., gold) which she believes signify masculine conceptions of nobility and gentility.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida adapts trace as a theoretical term in relation to a number of "nonsynonymic substitutions" (e.g., difference, arche-writing, and spacing); it will be beneficial to isolate trace as a by-product of the subject-object opposition within the context of Defoe's novel. There are numerous works that allude to the themes of memory, presence, and absence, and are available for inclusion within my essay.⁶ This essay will conclude by demonstrating how the concepts of self and other, subject and object, and masculine and feminine are used to suggest that Moll experiences "belonging" or "insideness" not as an absence, but rather as a presence which has not actually been present in her life. Presence, therefore, presents itself in terms of multiple histories of being that necessitate a unifying autobiographical narrative.

The notion of the trace left by the absent sign in the process of signification affects the continuity of subjective identity, a self-awareness that must be present within the narrative in order for Moll to have "grown Penitent and Humble, as she [affirms] to be" and to experience a spiritual rebirth (1). As David Marshall suggests, "The rebirth of conversion makes the retrospective reflections of autobiography

5. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 177, 181.

6. The following titles are insightful contributions to a growing corpus of readings on memory, trace, and presence-absence. See John Sutton's, *Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998); Lina Bolzoni "The Play of Images: The Art of Memory from Its Origins to the Seventeenth Century," in P. Corsi, ed., *The Enchanted Loom: Chapters in the History of Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 16–26; Robyn Fivush and Elaine Reese, "The Social Construction of Autobiographical Memory," in M. Conway, ed., *Theoretical Perspectives on Autobiographical Memory* (New York: Kluwer, 1992), 115–32; Robert N. McCauley, "Walking in Our Own Footsteps: Autobiographical Memory and Reconstruction," in U. Neisser and E. Winograd, eds., *Remembering Reconsidered: Ecological and Traditional Approaches to the Study of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 126–44; James L. McClelland, "Constructive Memory and Memory Distortions: A Parallel-Distributed Processing Approach," in D. L. Schacter, ed., *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 69–90.

possible.”⁷ Moll’s relation to her reader is characterized by a similar process of exchange. Moll parcels out fragments of her life story to a captivated reader. By controlling the textual flow of the narrative, Moll “withholds and spends information as both actions suit and profit her.”⁸ As Stephen Michael suggests in his essay “Thinking Parables: What Moll Flanders Does Not Say,” “Language . . . functions as a resource for Moll because it becomes part of her economy of accumulation; it is constantly associated with capital, in the sense that capital is a resource for Moll’s continued identity as a gentlewoman.”⁹ In this case, Moll uses language as a means for impressing upon the reader her qualities as a “gentlewoman.”

Moll offers and withholds information to continuously shape readers’ perceptions of her, perceptions that must agree with her ever-changing definitions of self, and also positions the readers as unknowing objects of her subjective narrative. The readers assume a feminine position as an object of the masculine gaze of the narrative subject. As much as Defoe’s heroine rejects the mandates of eighteenth-century ideology, her narrative prose draws readers into a dialectical behavior model of gender. Consequently, the dominant gender ideology is resituated within the readers’ subconscious, as we realize the limits of Moll’s witness-exploration of identity.

In her youth, Moll depended upon the charity of other townspeople for shaping and sustaining her existence: “But the Kindness of the Ladies of the Town did not End here, for when they came to understand that I was no more maintain’d by the publick Allowance, as before, they gave me Money oftner than formerly . . . so that now I was a Gentlewoman indeed, as I understood that Word” (15). Moll’s survival continuously hinges on the charity of benefactors.

Even when she mentions her relation to the good nurse who cared for her and enabled her by teaching her sewing and needlework, monetary exchanges always inform Moll’s conceptions of relationships: “I told my nurse as we called her, that I believed I could get my living without going to service, if she pleased to meet me; for she had taught me to work with my needle, and spin worsted, which is the chief trade of that city, and I told her that if she would keep me, I would work for her and I would work very hard” (10). Moll’s functional view of relationships takes root in her initial social interactions, even if she is not able to comment on it or fully perceive its implications: “As for my money, I gave it all to my mistress-nurse, as I called her, and told her she should have all I got for myself when I was a gentlewoman, as well as now” (13). For example, Moll reveals to the nurse her plan for becoming a

7. David Marshall, “Autobiographical Acts in *Robinson Crusoe*,” *ELH* 71.4 (Winter 2004) 899–920, p. 899.

8. Steven C. Michael, “Thinking Parables: What Moll Flanders Does Not Say,” *ELH* 63.2 (Summer 1996) 367–95, p. 367.

9. Michael, p. 367.

gentlewoman by “[being] able to get my Bread by my own Work” (13). However, Moll is fixated on the adornments of wealth (e.g., “gold” and “mended Lace”) and her fixation diminishes her ability to recognize the unscrupulousness of “Person[s] of ill Fame” who purport a social status to which she aspires (14).

False titles, deceptive intentions, and hollow trappings of wealth entice Moll and cause her to suffer misfortune at the hands of those who possess the significations of nobility and gentility. Moll’s innocence and naïvete of youth is betrayed as she is deceived by false intentions and appearances:

From this time my head ran upon strange things, and I may truly say I was not myself; to have such a gentleman talk to me of being in love with me, and of my being such a charming creature, as he told me I was; these were things I knew not how to bear, my vanity was elevated to the last degree. It is true I had my head full of pride, but, knowing nothing of the wickedness of the times, I had not one thought of my own safety or of my virtue about me; and had my young master offered it at first sight, he might have taken any liberty he thought fit with me; but he did not see his advantage, which was my happiness for that time . . . After this he thought he had heard somebody come upstairs, so got off from the bed, lifted me up, professing a great deal of love for me, but told me it was all an honest affection, and that he meant no ill to me; and with that he put five guineas into my hand, and went away downstairs. I was more confounded with the money than I was before with the love, and began to be so elevated that I scarce knew the ground I stood on. (23)

Moll recounts how she repulsed the advances of two brothers who rivaled for her affections but yields to the elder brother who “said a great many things, as in Jest, which I had the folly to believe in earnest, or to flatter myself, with the hopes of what I ought to have suppos’d he never intended, and perhaps never thought of” (21). Ian Watt concludes that the “animality of man can only achieve its purpose when the woman’s spirit is made absent.”¹⁰ As Moll reveals, her initial physical and emotional experiences of men reduce her to a state of passive suffering that is an historical symptom of repressed feminine sexuality and exploitation endured by women of the eighteenth century.

Judith Butler suggests we prescribe and authenticate gender through descriptive and normative accounts in which “[a] descriptive account of gender includes considerations of what makes gender intelligible, an inquiry into its conditions of possibility, whereas normative account seeks to answer the question of which ex-

10. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001), p. 34.

pressions of gender are acceptable, and which are not, supplying persuasive reasons to distinguish between such expressions in this way.”¹¹ Moll’s sexual compulsiveness as whore and mistress (multiple times over) affirms her emancipation as the object of masculine sexual aggression. Her ability to initiate sexual liaisons suggests the subject-object relation between man and woman which relied on masculine assertiveness and feminine timidity to perform the respective roles of subject and object: “Thus the government of our virtue was broken, and I exchang’d the place of friend for that unmusical harsh-sounding title of whore” (116).

Moll is unable to reach sexual fulfillment without constituting male sexual performatives because “the development of a sexually normal woman seems too clearly required by the practice of male sexuality.”¹² However, Moll’s erotic movements destabilize gender by suggesting how sexual pleasure is achieved without the phallus. Borrowing from Butler, Moll’s non-normative sexual acts might “call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis.”¹³ The repetition of Moll’s non-normative sexual acts displaces her gender identity. Her performative acts disrupt the reception of descriptive-gender identity and allow her to redefine her role as an emancipated woman.

Butler would contend “s/he knows that her position in that exchange is transgressive, that she is a usurper of a masculine prerogative, as s/he puts it, and that s/he contests that privilege even as s/he replicates it.”¹⁴ As Butler might conclude, it is not Moll, but rather her suitors who have been seduced by the performative act. Much like she has done to her readers, Moll, again, transposes the subject-object correlative and assumes a masculine glance toward her suitors as feminized objects. Butler might ask us to question whether or not gender identity has been reduced to a subjective orientation that requires reciprocal performance exchanges. For it is through the repetition of performative acts that identity becomes exact, verifiable, and universal.

As Larry Stewart comments, “Throughout the [novel,] the reader sees Moll’s life as dependent on the contingencies and vagaries of others and of that outside herself – *if the weather be fair, if she intended to put me out, if a man of virtue finds out, if possible*, etc.”¹⁵ However, Moll’s dependency is orchestrated by an over-

11. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. xxi.

12. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 23.

13. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xi.

14. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 128.

15. Larry Stewart, “Calculating Gender: Empirical Analysis and Gender Assumptions in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 23.1 (2005) 65–77 (my emphasis).

arching desire to secure title, rank, and station. As Moll accumulates age and experience, she displays a growing fondness for gold trinkets which she possesses as marks of her nobility, marks that were acquired through ignoble acts of thievery: “when I looked into this Treasure, to think of the poor disconsolate Gentlewoman who had lost so much by the Fire besides . . . I cou’d never find in my Heart to make any Restitution . . . and I began quickly to forget the Circumstances that attended the taking them” (207).

Moll’s preoccupation with possessing artifacts of wealth and status suggests a phallo-centric conception of her role in society. Her greed also distorts her perspective of relationships that direct the course of her life. Moll participates in a market-driven economy in which her sole commodity is herself. She exchanges flesh for the payment of debt, until age and experience wither her physical beauty and she must resort to crime as means of assuaging materialist concerns: “From hence ‘tis Evident to me, that when once we are harden’d in Crime, no Fear can affect us, no Example gives us any warning” (221).

Early in the narrative, Moll admits charges are still pending against her in the Old Bailey records and she must “give [her] leave” and not reveal herself “till I dare own who I have been, as well as who I am” (7). Moll acknowledges she may “not be able to be particular” about the experiences of her childhood and admits her memories are somewhat inaccurate, and she confesses how she has been “expos’d to very great Distresses” and “left a poor desolate Girl without Friends, without Cloaths, without Help or Helper in the World, as was my Fate” (8). As Moll comments, “‘tis enough to mention” that she did not a “Parish to have Recourse to” (8). Her inaccurate memories cause the reader to doubt her authoritative voice and question the veracity of her recollections, even while she continuously tries to yoke the readers’ sentiments to her narrative: “O Had this particular Scene of Life lasted, or had I learnt from that time I enoy’d it, to have tasted the true sweetness of it, and had I not fallen into the Poverty which is the sure Bane of Virtue . . . for while I liv’d thus, I was really a Penitent for all my Life pass’d, I look’d back on it with Abhorrence, and might truly be said to hate myself for it” (187). As Michael suggests,

The economy of revelation suggests more than an attempt to mask a name. As Moll tells us, her “True Name” is already “well known” in certain circles (7). What she so successfully keeps hidden is her identity, the real flesh, blood, and spirit who retreats behind inventories, accounts, moral *exemplum*, and even occasional revelations of emotion: we catch glimpses of fear, remorse, and even something approaching joy from time to time, but almost without exception Moll hurriedly erects the metaphorical battlements of “Circumstance” and “Fate” in order to obscure “who I have been,”

and as often as she seems to reveal herself through her acquisitive vocabulary, she just as often clouds our understanding of “who I am” with her incessant talk of finance and Trade.¹⁶

The misapplication of significations of identity causes a rupture in Moll’s personal narrative. She is displaced by prejudicial criteria such as landownership, wealth, and gender, which had been used to define social rank and status within the dominant culture of industrialized England.

Moll responds to the criteria by seeking traces of her identity within the emergent “criminal” counterculture she indirectly represents:

One of the greatest Dangers I was now in, was that I was too well known among the Trade, and some of them whose hatred was rather owing to Envy, than any Injury I had done them began to be Angry, that I should always Escape when they were always catch’d and hurried to Newgate. These were they that gave me the Name of Moll Flanders: For it was no more of Affinity with my real Name, or with any of the Names I had ever gone by, than black is of Kin to white, except that once, as before I call’d my self Mrs. Flanders, when I sheltered myself in the Mint; but that these Rogues never knew, nor could I ever learn how they came to give me the Name, or what the Occasion of it was. (214)

Moll is no longer in control of her identity. When she states how she has lost her “real Name,” her declaration works against the interests of the privileged class to which she desired admission, because the affirmation of her name assures her placement within the social hierarchy, even if such placement does not provide economic advancement. It further demonstrates her willingness to displace herself from her own cultural and gender orientation in order to aspire to a life of nobility and gentility. However, Moll fails to realize that the criminal counterculture provides only a fleeting opportunity to reinvent her self in opposition to traditional values, norms, and identities. Thus, as the criminal counterculture is being transformed and consumed by the dominant culture, another counterculture is taking ideological root in the fertile soil of conventional modes of discourse used to define an emergent middle-class of laborers. The middle-class laborers will repopulate the ranks of the social hierarchy through subsequent stages of social and economic revolt in response to modernization.

Moll’s emotional detachment from her acquaintances, family, and suitors is demonstrated by the calculating manner in which she reduces each relationship to a financial gain or loss:

16. Michael, p. 373.

I was now in a dreadful condition indeed, and now I repented heartily my easiness with the eldest brother; not from any reflection of conscience, but from a view of the happiness I might have enjoyed, and had now made impossible; for though I had no great scruples of conscience, as I have said, to struggle with, yet I could not think of being a whore to one brother and a wife to the other. But then it came into my thoughts that the first brother had promised to make me his wife when he came to his estate; but I presently remembered what I had often thought of, that he had never spoken a word of having me for a wife after he had conquered me for a mistress; and indeed, till now, though I said I thought of it often, yet it gave me no disturbance at all, for as he did not seem in the least to lessen his affection to me, so neither did he lessen his bounty, though he had the discretion himself to desire me not to lay out a penny of what he gave me in clothes, or to make the least show extraordinary, because it would necessarily give jealousy in the family, since everybody knew I could come at such things no manner of ordinary way, but by some private friendship, which they would presently have suspected. (31)

Moll enjoys a “freedom from the probable psychological and social consequences of everything she does, which is the central implausibility of her character”:¹⁷

Moll Flanders’s character, then, is not noticeably affected either by her sex, by her criminal pursuits, or indeed by any of the objective factors which might have been expected to set her apart from her author; on the other hand, she shares with Defoe and most of his heroes many of the character traits that are usually regarded as middle-class. She is obsessed with gentility and keeping up appearances; her pride is much involved in knowing how to get good service and proper accommodation; and she is in her heart a rentier, for whom life has no greater terror than when her “main stock wastes apace” (131).¹⁸

Thus, her freedom from punishment of sin limits her ability to value penance as a means for achieving self-awareness and is a symptom of modern economic individualism experienced by an emergent eighteenth-century middle-class.

Moll locates herself within an industrialized world that experiences cultural, social, political, and economic retooling to suit the demands of the modern age. Moll moves between masculine and feminine frames of reference to unify a fragmented past and, in the process, has become a present trace of the self:

17. Watt, p. 114.

18. Watt, p. 114.

I had with all these the common Vanity of my Sex (viz.). That being really taken for very Handsome, or if you please, for a great Beauty . . . but I had the Character too of a very sober, modest, and virtuous young Woman, and such I had always been; neither had I yet any occasion to think of anything else, or to know what a Temptation to Wickedness meant. (19)

Moll comes to know herself in relation to what she is not. Moll assuages herself for the loss of her defining characteristic of “great Beauty” by reclaiming traditional feminine qualities of modesty and virtue that strengthen her narrative voice. Watt lends historic resonance to the concept of wickedness by commenting on the ways in which it was associated with conditions of poverty and alienation:

In the Middle Ages the examples of Christ and St. Francis gave sanction to the view that poverty, far from being a disgrace, might well enhance the individual’s prospects of salvation. In the sixteenth century, however, as a result of a new emphasis on economic achievement, the opposite viewpoint came to be widely accepted: indigence was both shameful in itself and presumptive evidence of wickedness and future damnation. This view is shared by Defoe’s heroes; they would rather steal than beg, and they would lose their own self-respect— and the reader’s— if they did not exhibit this characteristic *hubris* of economic man.¹⁹

Watt comments that “Moll Flanders, of course, has many feminine traits . . . But . . . the essence of her character and actions is . . . essentially masculine.”²⁰ Moll must demonstrate the “hubris of economic man” through the performative act of assuming masculine appearance and demeanor, because her society makes no place for the economic *woman*. Thus, she must exhibit masculine characteristics (e.g., greed, sexual appetites, etc.) in order to secure the economic individualism that is made possible to men and not to women.

In *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that through the process of socialization “[t]he individual internalizes the new reality, but instead of its being *his* reality, it is a reality to be used by him for specific purposes. Insofar as this involves the performance of certain roles, he retains subjective detachment *vis-à-vis* them—he puts them on deliberately and purposefully.”²¹ The repetition of performative acts of role-playing fulfills the requirements of social identification, if only in a limited sense. Moll suc-

19. Watt, p. 95.

20. Watt, p. 112.

21. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), p. 172.

cessfully plays the roles of maiden, matriarch, and man, but her mimicry and repetition of each identity further distances her from her feminine orientation.

Derrida describes repetition as the “bottomlessness of infinite doubling,” or tracing “the self-identity of the origin.”²² Role-playing disrupts the process of signification and prevents Moll from authenticating her identity, and as Tammy Clewell suggests in her critical study on deconstructionism, role-playing may prevent an individual from reactivating and affirming the self:

What the lost other and the historical past have in common is the quality of radical otherness, an alterity that resists assimilation by either the mourning subject or social present. To recognize alterity, at least in a certain sense, can appear as a dangerous and disruptive force lodged within the self and the subject’s experience of the social.²³

As Moll continuously transforms her appearance, she gains entry to restricted corridors of society that were made inaccessible to youth, to women, and to the poor, and begins to embrace the “otherness” that once inhibited her social mobility: “I kept true to this Notion, that a Woman should never be kept for a Mistress, that had Money to keep her self” (61).

Moll experiences ideological placement by expressing a willingness to participate in the greed of an emergent industrial society. Her obligation to the present and to the environments she inhabits enables her to detach herself from moral concerns in favor of economic prosperity. Her pursuit of money and power might be considered an outgrowth of a central pathology of modern societies, which is the desire to colonize the natural world by reconstructing and re-inscribing it within interlocking systems of knowledge used to signify the limits of subject-object relations.

Moll is cognizant of the process of signification, and her self-naming suggests how she has become the trace her mother disappeared without. It also alludes to her baptism into otherness. It is through a baptism of otherness that Moll sets her existence in binary opposition to her non-existence as a means for detaching herself from the process of inscription: “I might call myself any thing else, as well as Moll Flanders, and no old Sins could be plac’d to my Account” (223). Moll resists inscription and circulation of her assumed identities amongst the criminal and privileged classes by countering with the limitless possibilities of identities she might still assume.

22. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978), pp. 296, 298.

23. Tammy Clewell examines the ways in which Toni Morrison responds to African American history by placing her fictions at the center of discussions about mourning and identity. Her study reflects well on the emergent. See Clewell’s, “From Destructive to Constructive Haunting in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” *West Coast Line* 37 (Spring 2002), p. 131.

The reliability of identity is put into question in the novel's introduction, when Moll's self-naming releases her from any connection to the criminal legacy of her mother. Yet she continuously deceives, subverts and manipulates men and women to achieve wealth as the principle signifier of gentility. As Watt intimates, "[M]oney is an autonomous force which determines the action at every turn."²⁴ Moll is, therefore, working with and against the process of signification, to fashion a more suitable identity. Even by choosing crime as a radical course of action, Moll must operate within the framework of the political, cultural, and spiritual systems of knowledge she rejects in order to achieve the ideological symmetry and certainty of identity.

Although Defoe indirectly addresses classism within the novel, he allows the rhetoric of class distinction to operate within the peripheral corridors of the narrative. Defoe establishes an historical milieu that sets the tone for character interactions within the dominant culture of industrialized England. Moll struggles to recognize her culture and history as she weaves together the threads of her origins, to compose her personal narrative: "The first account that I can Recollect, or could ever learn of myself, was, that I had wandered among a Crew of those People they call Gypsies" (9). Lacking the skills and education of her female acquaintances, Moll insinuates how she has used mimicry as a technique for social advancement: "I learn'd by Imitation and enquiry, all that they learn'd by Instruction and Direction" (18). Although Moll had "all the Advantages of Education," her vanity ("Conceit of myself" [19]), obscures the idea that she is not regarded "as much a Gentlewoman" as she had assumed (18). Thus, despite becoming more adept at mimicking the behavior of her ladies and gentlemen, she is not able to transcend her social designation and achieve gentility.

Adultery and measured silence become her mechanisms for coping with the experiences of life (7–8). Her calculated misrepresentation of identity releases her from the gender roles and responsibilities she once assumed and enables her to secure economic individualism: "I often robbed with these people, yet I never let them know who I was" (221). The ways in which Moll flaunts her deceit in name and appearance mimics how nobles of the time had begun to reject the roles and duties that defined their positions in society. It also suggests how industrialization precipitated the deterioration of social order that hinged on the ability to locate identity within a hierarchy, which was supposed to remain constant and immutable. Civic virtue had been realized by people performing their roles and fulfilling their obligations within the hierarchy. The possibility for non-normative acts within society undermines the stability of identity categories by making the performance of roles imprecise. Moll's use of role-playing might serve

24. Watt, p. 269.

as a paradigm for evidencing how changing conceptions of self were being advanced in early modern Europe.

Moll does not use her autobiography as an act of contrition. Rather, she uses her autobiography to mend the psychological and ideological ruptures caused by the habitual misapplication of identity. The ways in which the reader is informed of the consequences of Moll's misuse of identity substantiates my claim that her autobiography might be characterized as an elliptical omission of guilt, rather than a contrived act of penance. Watt suggests Defoe's motive for limiting descriptions of Moll's moral consciousness because

[her] loves and larcenies would obviously lose most of their attraction for the reader if they were too heavily sprinkled with the ashes of repentance; and partly because such a perspective called for a very rigorous separation in time between the consciousness that had performed the evil deeds and the reformed consciousness that was responsible for their redaction.²⁵

In simple terms, Defoe allows the reader to indulge in Moll's naughtiness without any prohibitions or guilt.

Moll participates in the performative act of role-playing to elevate herself beyond the prohibitions of gender and class. She uses techniques of accommodation and deception to support her functional views of relationships: "I was more confounded with the money than I was before with love, and began to be so elevated that I scarce knew the ground I stood on" (132). Moll frequently asserts her views on the unequal socio-economic opportunities between men and women of her time, and suggests how female subservience to males has caused women much displeasure: "On the other Hand, as the Markets run very Unhappily on the Men's side, I found the Women had lost the Privilege of saying No" (67). Moll adjusts her logic to support the immoral actions of a rising criminal class that aspires to commodious individualism at all costs: "Give me not poverty. Lest I steal" (142). However, Moll's "criminal individualism leads her to sacrifice the significance of personal relationships that might provide her spiritual sustenance and continuity of identity."²⁶

Watt adds a richer hue to Moll's characterization by considering her in terms of the picaresque novel which offers the "*picaro* as a cynical and amoral rascal who would rather live by . . . wits than by honorable work":²⁷

25. Watt, p. 116.

26. Watt, p. 111.

27. *Encyclopedia of Literature* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam Webster, 1995), p. 881 (my emphasis).

It is because her crimes, like the travels of *Robinson Crusoe*, are rooted in the dynamics of economic individualism that Moll Flanders is essentially different from the protagonists of the picaresque novel. The *picaro* happens to have a real historical basis – the breakdown of the feudal social order – but this is not the point of his adventures; he is not so much a complete individual personality whose actual life experiences are significant in themselves as a literary convention for the presentation of a variety of satiric observations and comic episodes.²⁸

Through the manipulation of identity, Moll is able to combine gendered characteristics to make a more full and more fluid interpretative performance of identity. Moll seeks to restore the theatrical whole of identity that has been reduced and sublimated by binary oppositions like self and other, subject and object, and feminine and masculine. It is from within the performative act itself that the individual broadens and stretches a commodious self to more fully embrace alterity, difference, contradiction and contradistinction. These ideas become tools for reconstituting and preserving the self in response to the most drastic social changes.

Moll clearly lives by her wits, even if it is not always apparent in the choices she makes: “I had been trick’d once by that Cheat call’d LOVE, but the Game was over; I was resolv’d now to be Married, or Nothing, and to be well Married, or not at all (60). Moll locates social artifacts such as wealth and status which enable her to create a theatrical performance of identity that is informed by gender and class.

Watt considers Moll’s motives by suggesting that “Moll Flanders, like Rastignac and Julien Sorel, is a characteristic product of modern individualism in assuming that she owes it to herself to achieve the highest economic and social rewards, and in using every available method to carry out her resolve,” even if such methods require her to balance passive and aggressive tendencies within an evolving social matrix.²⁹ One method Moll continuously employs to attain social advancement is accessing feminine and masculine frames of reference:

Moll Flanders, of course, has many feminine traits; she has a keen eye for fine clothes and clean linen, and shows a wifely concern for the creature comforts of her males. Further, the early pages of the book undoubtedly present a young girl with a lifelike clarity, and later there are many touches of a rough cockney humour that is undeniably feminine in tone. But these are relatively external and minor matters, and the essence of her character and actions is, to one reader at least, *essentially masculine*. This is a per-

28. Watt, p. 94 (my emphasis).

29. Watt, p. 94.

sonal impression, and would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish: but it is at least certain that Moll accepts none of the disabilities of her sex, and indeed one cannot but feel that Virginia Woolf's admiration for her was largely due to admiration of a heroine who so fully realised one of the ideals of feminism: freedom from any involuntary involvement in the feminine role.³⁰

Watt considers how masculine and feminine viewpoints inhabit Moll's psycho-sexual consciousness and correctly concludes that her masculine views must assert control over her identity in order for her to achieve economic sovereignty: "Men made no scruple to set themselves out as Persons meriting a Woman of Fortune, when they had really no Fortune of their own; it was but just to deal with them in their own way, and if it was possible, to Deceive the Deceiver" (77).

Moll's semantic doubling underlies motifs of calculation and deception that permeate much of the narrative, and force readers to consider whether or not she is misrepresenting not only her appearance, but her history as well. Since the narrative is reflected through a subjective lens, readers might question its consistency and veracity. As the narrator intimates, "To give the History of a wicked Life repented of, necessarily requires that the wicked Part should be made as wicked, as the real History of it will bear" (3). By suggesting the narrative may have suffered from editorial revisions that accentuated some parts rather than others, the narrator achieves an authenticity that is necessary for engaging the readers' sense of historical adequacy. In effect, readers might imply that Moll intended to tell us more but was prevented in so doing, and vouchsafe Moll's dubious narrative from further scrutiny.

Readers are left, however, with the difficult task of interpreting Moll's intentions through the fragmented language of narration, which is neither entirely truthful nor fully fabricated. Moll's questionable attempts at sustaining a coherent and reliable narrative leave us to ponder our own success or failure at removing ourselves from rigid binary categories that alienate and reduce us, and fragment our narrative stories into incoherent digressions. Derrida might offer "two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, [and] of play" that might provide readers some consolation.³¹ The first interpretation is the "lost or impossible presence of the absent origin."³² Orphaned to the world, Moll experiences displacement of origin through the loss of her mother and her struggle to successfully locate herself within the privileged class. The second interpretation is "the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of

30. Watt, p. 113 (my emphasis).

31. Derrida, *Writing*, p. 292.

32. Derrida, *Writing*, p. 292.

signs without fault, without truth, and without origin.”³³ Moll adopts a similar mode of interpretation to renegotiate her conception of self in relation to significations of social otherness, significations used to inscribe meaning and identity. Moll achieves Derrida’s “joyous affirmation” through economic sovereignty and resolves the antagonistic relation between self and other, subject and object, and masculine and feminine by using the performative act as a means for challenging and reconstituting the traditional dialectic of identity. Rather than choosing one mode of being, she engages many by exceeding the limits of binaryisms and embracing a plural definition of selfhood, a definition that announces modern individualism. She, therefore, becomes the subject as *jouissance* and experiences her readers’ blessing, whether she/he desired it or not.

33. Derrida, *Writing*, p. 292.