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**A Holiday from High Tone:  
Politics and Genre in Andrew Davies's Adaptation of  
Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders***

When Granada commissioned Andrew Davies to adapt *Moll Flanders*, they were consciously engaging in an act of TV politics, designed to counter recent BBC successes.<sup>1</sup> That latter organisation had long stood accused of renegeing on its public-service obligations and, in an attempt to compete for audience figures with ITV, of dumbing down its programmes. One of its responses was to reassert its commitment to

literary culture and it did this primarily by revamping a genre that had served it well in the 1960s: the classic serial. Black-and-white was to be replaced by colour, unconvincing studio sets by outside locations, shot according to the big-budget production values of cinema, and self-financed serials by ones co-funded by foreign—usually American—TV companies. The first of the new brand of adaptations to catch the popular imagination was Dennis Potter’s version of Thomas Hardy’s *Mayor of Casterbridge* (1978), filmed on location in Corfe Castle for the then-massive TV budget of over half a million pounds and starring Alan Bates as the Lear-like protagonist.<sup>2</sup> However, this popular success was itself eclipsed by two BBC adaptations of the mid-1990s—of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1994) and, pre-eminently, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). The romance of Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet gained such currency it found its way into the tabloids, especially after it was rumoured the actors playing the parts, Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle had themselves begun an affair during the serial’s shooting. After the success of *Pride and Prejudice* filmed adaptations of Austen novels became so fashionable that even Hollywood got involved in the financing of *Sense and Sensibility* (1996) and *Emma* (1996).

Granada felt they simply could not ignore the popular impact of *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which threatened to establish the BBC classic serial as an almost permanent feature of the list of top-ten programmes with the highest viewing figures. According to Gub Neal, the executive producer of *Moll Flanders*, the network “were undoubtedly egged on...by the success...of *Middlemarch* and they felt...it would be a good time to try to hit back with something in a similar vein.”<sup>3</sup>

In signing up Andrew Davies, the adaptor of both *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Granada were signalling a determination to compete with the BBC by inaugurating a prestige project of their own. These two screenplays had established

Davies as someone who, as an English graduate from Cambridge, was sensitive to the literary qualities of classic texts, yet also excited by television's non-literary possibilities, who was able to create an illusion of faithfulness to source without ever freezing into lifeless reverence. His respectful, yet creative interaction with the Austen novel, in particular, is evident in his comments:

When I was adapting *Pride and Prejudice*, I had the book open the whole time and I was continually referring back to see if there was any dialogue I could lift, because Jane Austen writes very good dialogue. In fact, Jane Austen's books are like perfect pieces of machinery; there's not a superfluous element in them.<sup>4</sup>

The general acclaim which met the resulting screenplay helped it define the conventions of the new, cinema-style TV adaptations of Austen: beautifully phrased, witty dialogue that has to be delivered in the high style of the comedy of manners; an understated, sophisticated irony both of dialogue and action; characterisation with little depth, the protagonists and antagonists not going much below the emblematic status suggested by the novels' titles (*Sense*, *Sensibility*, *Pride*, *Prejudice*, and so on); a gentility of manners, policed by a snobbish sense of propriety and caste, whose connotations are both aesthetic (elegant behaviour) and social (the etiquette of the gentry); a gentility of emotions, by which the immediate indulgence of sexual impulses is shown to be inferior to their deferment until the socially acceptable moment or even their repression in the interests of familial duty; by and large traditional gender relations of active men and passive women; the general omission of the aims and aspirations of the working and lower-middle classes, thus giving comfort to viewers who like to see English society as a rigidly stratified one with the middle-middle and upper-middle classes as the fundamental layer; little social mobility beyond what is involved in young women of straitened circumstances marrying wealthier men; and a consistently upheld image of heritage Britain, of one National Trust property seamlessly succeeding another.

Granada's attention was probably drawn to Defoe's novel by Pen Densham's MGM-version of *Moll Flanders* (1995), starring Robin Wright as Moll, Morgan Freeman as Hibble, a slave, and Stockyard Channing as Mrs Allworthy, which was released a year before their own version. The feature film had the double advantage of fixing the novel's heroine in popular consciousness and yet using almost no material from the novel itself. (Indeed the opening scene in which Moll is born in Newgate is the only point at which the two narratives intersect.) By choosing *Moll Flanders* as the text for Davies to convert, Granada were indicating a determination to move away from what they saw as the limiting gentility of the Austen classic serial towards an opposing mode with conventions of even broader appeal: informal dialogue; uncomplicated ironies; heightened realism; informality of manners; the direct, unabashed expression of sexuality; women as active and resourceful as men; social mobility from the lower to middle classes; and an image of England as dirty, corrupt and often squalid, yet instinct with a remarkable vitality.

Indeed the fact that Defoe was not Austen seemed a crucial distinction for the production team. The director, David Attwood, declared: "we've got used to...the kind of nineteenth-century Jane Austen...but this is...a much more rumbustious, rollicking tale" (*MMF*); while David Lascelles, the producer, asserted: "Moll...isn't a demure, wilting Jane Austen type." (*ST*). This juxtaposition was duly taken up by *TV Times* ("there may be corsets, ringlets and men in tight breeches, but genteel Jane Austen this isn't") and *Radio Times* ("say goodbye to the uptight, upright characters of Jane Austen...in *Moll Flanders* we're plunged headlong into the bosom-heaving world of Daniel Defoe.")<sup>5</sup> Reviewers dutifully reiterated the point:

The nation has spent a year now...strolling arm in arm with Jane and her creations in what Charlotte Bronte shudderingly described as a 'carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers'. Now

it's time to jump the fence and light out for the wild country in the company of Moll Flanders.<sup>6</sup>

Diana Rigg, who played Moll Flanders' mother, argued that the central difference between Austen's novel and Defoe's was a generic one: "*Pride and Prejudice* is ...comedy of manners and it's very refined in comparison with...this, which is...very robust."(*MMF*) That robustness appealed to Granada because it was mediated through a rich mix of genres, which would interest their traditional audience, while not necessarily alienating those who tended to watch classic serials. The production team were equally enthusiastic. The novel, as Neal put it, contained "something...for everybody":

It was a love story...a romp...a female *Tom Jones* and it would give the network an opportunity to embrace something which, whilst it was classic, actually encompassed some sort of commercial imperative as well...It was funny...fast-moving...an action-adventure story and so on.... (*MMF*)

*Radio* and *TV Times* and broadsheet newspapers ranged similarly widely in their attempts to categorise the adaptation's generic complexion. It was "a big-budget bodice-ripper", "ITV's raunch-fest",<sup>7</sup> "Defoe's epic tale of sex and scandal"<sup>8</sup> and, less reverently, "*Carry On* up the classics"; it was even an historical soap: "incest, prostitution, bigamy and theft: it sounds like a *Brookside* story line, you might be surprised to learn it all happens in TV's latest period drama."<sup>9</sup> More recently, John Mullan has compared the serial to soft porn: "Davies did a milder version of what *Playboy* would have done with *Moll Flanders*."<sup>10</sup>

The barely-suppressed hilarity behind many of these generic characterisations is a just response to what is manifestly present in the adaptation. Davies seems to have interpreted his remit as providing him with a holiday from the seriousness of his Eliot and Austen screenplays, a holiday allowing him to make witty, knowing allusions to

such a plethora of popular genres that he would end up with an affectionate, slightly subversive, postmodern parody of the classic serial. He certainly developed a playfully erotic relationship with Moll that would have been wholly inappropriate in his characterisation of Dorothea Brooke: “It wasn’t long before I began to be a little in love with her. The young Moll would have made a wonderful girlfriend—sparky, ingenuous, passionate....I imagined her as having a strong face, broad shoulders and a splendid bosom.”(ST) Davies did not stipulate Moll’s sex scenes should be filmed with the soft focus of *Emanuelle*, but he made sure they paid ironic homage to its formula of one coupling every ten minutes or so, a tactic which dismayed Daniel Craig, who played Moll’s Lancashire husband: “I kept thinking, ‘Not another sex scene!’ There’s at least four an episode and they’re full-on bums-in-the-air, or up-against-the-wall, or oops-Missus-there-go-my-trousers. Obviously they’ve gone for the sex angle....”<sup>11</sup> Moll is wittily transformed by Davies into something approaching a soft porn heroine, the woman of almost inexhaustible sexual appetite, who will hyperventilate at the slightest hint of dalliance. “She does, I am bound to say,” remarks Hilary Mantel somewhat dryly, “seem a little easily roused”.<sup>12</sup> Indeed so all-constraining is the sexual imperative in Moll that she is unable to reconcile herself to any prolonged period of abstinence. The novel has her and the gentleman of Bath agree to stay together and share each other’s beds without making love. This arrangement lasts for “near two Year” in Defoe;<sup>13</sup> in Davies’s script it does not survive a single night. Faced with the potentially repetitious nature of Moll’s heterosexual encounters, Davies makes an ironic reference to another soft porn convention of the all-women variation by “invent[ing] a character” merely so that Moll can indulge with her in what he describes as “a little bit of tastefully filmed lesbian action.”(ST)

Both production crew and Granada were decidedly less playful when they picked up on this sexual element in their publicity. Lascelles ‘promise[d] “a lot of sex and nudity”’ in *Radio Times*,<sup>14</sup> while *TV Times* concentrated in its preview article on Kingston’s unconcern about stripping so often because she had done nude modelling as a teenager. This titillating note was sustained in the broadcast’s final credits when an announcer informed viewers “a video... including previously unseen sequences” would be “available tomorrow at all good retailers”, which was a lightly coded reference to the presence of censored scenes that were considered too explicit to go out before the 10 o’clock watershed. Granada also made much of the fact that serial’s British transmission contained more sex than the even-more heavily-censored American one, which had predated it. One reviewer, David Aaronovitch, refused to take this sexual emphasis any more seriously than Davies had done, awarding the serial the alternative title of ‘*House of Bosoms*’ and claiming the ‘uncovering’ of Moll’s breasts becomes “a metaphor for the important conjunctural movement between mid-century Puritanism (no breasts) and late Restoration society (nothing but).”<sup>15</sup> Clearly, Davies had most fun engineering allusions to the *Carry On* films through his use of deliberately heavy-handed double entendre. So absolute was Defoe’s concentration on Moll that—with the exception of Robin and Jemy, her first and fourth husbands, and Humphry, the surviving son of her incestuous marriage—he did not bother to give other characters personal names, referring to them instead by generic titles like the Gentleman Draper or the Governess. Davies, on the other hand, awards them names in the spirit of the *Carry On* tradition: the Elder Brother is given the pseudonym Mr Garlic for one of his secret assignations with Moll, the Gentleman from Bath with his lack of sexual prowess becomes Mr Bland, the lesbian pickpocket is named Lucy Diver and Moll’s mother, the

former prostitute, appears as Mrs Golightly, an appellation which severely undermines her new-found non-conformist zeal.

Davies also entertains himself by adopting the *Carry On* convention of seeking sexual innuendo in all manner of word and deed. The eating of oysters by the young Moll becomes an initiatory rite into womanhood rather in the style of Anne Sexton's 'The Death of the Fathers' and her later spilling of an oyster tray connotes a crisis in her first affair with the Elder Brother. When she loses her virginity to him in a hired room, the camera pans from the Brother's bouncing buttocks to the inn sign just outside the window, on which is inscribed the Golden Cock! She takes off her jewellery at gunpoint for her highwayman husband in the provocative manner of a striptease artist and, while getting friendly with Bland at the dinner table, sucks and licks a roll in a way clearly intended to suggest fellatio.

This playful absence of subtlety in the symbolism is balanced by a similar absence in the dialogue. Thus when Bland guards Moll from molestation in a rough inn by sitting through the night with his back to her bed, a brace of pistols resting in his lap, she wonders whether both barrels are 'cocked', then suggests he lie down beside her with the guns between them ("there's no chance they'll charge spontaneously, is there?" she asks innocently). After he climbs in and she quenches the light, Moll touches his private parts quite by mistake, exclaiming: "Oh, there you are. Mind the pistol!" (III ii) Later in London, she informs the viewer, "I enjoyed many a game of Mind the Pistol with him" and, just in case the allusion was missed, we are then shown Bland making love to Moll: "Shall I pull the trigger?" he cries; "Fire away, my dear" is her reply.(III iii) This is the kind of dialogue we would expect in a *Carry On* film and indeed Craig was right to wonder whether the production might "turn out as *Carry On Moll Flanders*."<sup>16</sup>



Davies sets up a playful discord with this self-consciously emphatic jesting about private parts and bodily functions by inserting a series of allusions to some of England's finest canonic literature, most of which predate Defoe's novel (1722), but one of which wittily comes after it. Thus we encounter the "brave new world" from *The Tempest*, "come full circle" from *King Lear*, "a braver thing" from Donne's 'The Undertaking' and "world enough and time" from Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress', but also "burning bright" from Blake's 'Tyger' of 1794. However, these memorable phrases are themselves allowed to jostle ironically with a series of hackneyed modern locutions—"he could have had me on any terms he wished"(II iii), "I couldn't get enough of him", "it's a real pleasure to get [these sins] off my chest"(III i) and so on – so as to produce a verbal texture deliberately lacking homogeneity.

Davies's amused allusions to soap operas come out not only in his condensed treatment of the sensational themes of bigamy, incest, prostitution, theft and imprisonment, but also his structuring of the action. Unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, *Moll Flanders* is, according to Davies, "very rough and ready, full of repetitions and inconsistencies....I've tried to shape the narrative a little more than in the book."(*ST*) Much of this shaping was done in response to the format of ITV serials, which allotted him in this case four hour-long episodes, subdivided into three parts by advertisement breaks. This concatenated structure, which contrasts starkly with Defoe's unbroken narrative, encouraged Davies to pay homage to the soaps by steering each part towards some kind of cliffhanger, but to do so in a faintly hyperbolic manner that ironised the whole strategy by reducing it to Sontagian camp. Thus the slightly overacted way in which the Virginia husband affects a rapid transition from trying to shoot his uncooperative wife to collapsing on the floor in a mentally-challenged heap when he

learns that Moll is his half-sister forces the reader to ponder the seriousness of the whole scene (II ii).

Finally, Davies plays wittily throughout the serial with our clichéd notions of late seventeenth, early eighteenth century England—the Restoration as a lusty time of rakes and fops, willing town wives and country wenches, and Augustan London as a place of visceral, yet vigorous, corrupt, yet comradely life—making us realise how much our conceptions are based on a cursory acquaintance with a limited number of artefacts (Restoration comedy, libertine poets like Rochester, ‘The Beggars’ Opera’, the satirical prints of Hogarth and so on). He gives viewers exactly the kind of narrative such a partial view of the period would expect: a romp, combining dramatic action with spirited love scenes—in other words, as Neal remarked, “a female *Tom Jones*.” (*MMF*) Indeed Davies deliberately makes Moll’s sexually suggestive eating habits when feasting with Bland into a female variation on a similar sequence in Tony Richardson’s New Wave rendering of *Tom Jones*, thus linking his adaptation with John Osborne’s equally ironic version. Davies no doubt appreciated the neat circularity, whereby the BBC’s response to the success of his *Moll Flanders* was to commission their own romping version of *Tom Jones* (1997), which they promoted in precisely similar terms: “lock up your daughters! Here comes Tom Jones”; “follow an eighteenth-century rake’s progress from high society to low life”; Fielding’s novel appeared “about fifty years before Jane Austen ushered in an era of uptight, upright fiction.”<sup>17</sup>

Granada chose *Moll Flanders* for their classic serial not simply because of its diverse mixture of popular genres, but also because they sensed a contemporary relevance in the novel’s heroine and it was indeed on Moll’s modernity their production team concentrated its promotional effort. She is, Attwood insisted, “a very modern woman... a real... woman for our times” (*MMF*); Alex Kingston, who played Moll,

concurred: “she is a modern woman ...not something ...preserved in the seventeenth century.”(MMF) But in what sense is she modern? Moll is “an incredibly independent spirit” (Kingston), “a strong woman” (Lascelles), “a survivor” (Attwood)(MMF); “resilience and sensuality are Moll’s trademarks”.<sup>18</sup> In other words, she is one of a long list of powerful, resourceful women who starred in ’90s television serials and feature films: Jane Tenison, showing in *Prime Suspect* how effectively a woman can operate in the tough, almost exclusively male world of police detection; ‘Jeanette Winterson’ in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* overcoming the problems of adoption, a mad Pentecostal foster-mother, a persecuting church, intimations of lesbianism and expulsion from the family home before single-handedly winning a scholarship to Cambridge; the powerfully devious Becky Sharp in Davies’s own version of *Vanity Fair* (1998); and Moll Flanders in the 1995 feature film.

Densham’s Moll forms an instructive contrast with Davies’s in that for all her strength she is ultimately overcome by social process; the film illustrates the inability of women and Afro-Americans in the symbolic roles of servant and slave to determine their own destinies, despite all their resourcefulness, yet manages to conclude on an optimistic note: “All men and women are created equal. We are one being, humankind”. This upbeat ending is in line with the film’s general tenor for while it is true Moll is forced to accompany her mistress to America and thereby become separated from her only child, Flora (Aisla Corcoran), during her formative years, the link between them is preserved through her autobiographical memoir which Hibble reads to her daughter while bringing her back from England to a reunion with her mother in America. Indeed the narrative’s keynote is not Moll’s powerlessness, but her vigorous defence of her rights and interests: when, as a teenage foundling in a nunnery, she is sexually abused by a priest in the confessional, she stabs his hand with a needle, then

runs away; soon after ending up as a servant in Mrs Allworthy's House for Young Ladies or high-class brothel, she is about to be thrown out for lack of accomplishment, when she suddenly asserts herself: "I don't need to be told twice; if I do, get rid of me!" She strongly resists all forms of repression: despite the nuns' sadistic beatings she refuses to confess the sinfulness of attacking the priest; although beaten on the orders of Mrs Allworthy, she keeps silent rather than get Hibble into serious trouble by revealing that she saw him making love to one of the brothel's most prized prostitutes. The film's central relationship, which occurs when she falls in love with and eventually marries a poor artist (John Lynch) for whom she poses, seems engineered to illustrate her doughty qualities: early in the affair, she threatens to leave the artist's lodgings on the grounds that he ordered her to stay and she will "not be told what to do by any man"; when the artist returns after she has spent the day tidying his chaotic studio and coolly announces he prefers chaos, she dramatically tips all the shelves upside-down onto the floor; after he starts to weaken with consumption, she reverses roles and begins to draw him; though heavily pregnant herself, she finds the strength to nurse him through his final days, dismiss a doctor who claims five pounds for non-existent services and then give birth to Flora totally unaided. Behind these strong 90s women one sometimes senses the presence of Thatcher, 'the iron lady', who rose from Grantham grocer's shop, via Oxbridge and marriage to a millionaire, to the Prime Ministership and who was prepared to pursue a risky, jingoistic foreign war merely to deflect attention from failings at home and to convert England into a police state in order to defeat the miners.

Thatcher's upward social mobility is mirrored by Davies's Moll. "Born in Newgate Prison...she had a very bad start," according to Kingston, "but...she doesn't see...the fact that she wasn't born with privileges will hinder her from being taken as a gentlewoman."(*MMF*) She overcomes numerous setbacks to win through to wealth and

status not by collective action with others similarly disadvantaged, but by individual enterprise, by ruthlessly applying entrepreneurial skills to every aspect of her life (marriage, child-rearing, prostitution, theft, prison, transportation). She says and does many things traditional morality would condemn, yet remains unrepentant. In other words, viewers are encouraged to see in her an early prefiguration of the Thatcherite woman. When, in a strange confusion of art and life, Davies speculates “on what Moll would be doing if she existed now,” he decides she would be “an entrepreneur, or running a big organisation.”(ST) Such is her business verve and post-feminist confidence in facing almost every reverse that Kingston is reminded of the “life force.”(MMF)

Davies admiringly displays the enterprise with which Moll cashes in on every asset in a way Densham does not.<sup>19</sup> Economic self-interest rarely determines the actions of Densham’s Moll, who, more typically, leaves the kindly Mrs Mazzawatti’s household to assuage feelings of guilt after the mistress’s daughters are raped while following her advice of giving to the poor and who refuses to be bought off by the parents when it transpires her artist lover is the rebellious heir of an Irish landed family, although she knows marriage will result in his disinheritance. Davies, on the other hand, celebrates the all-pervasiveness of his Moll’s money consciousness with a supportive chain of capitalist imagery. Moll justifies her fortune hunting thus: “ours is an age of trade and enterprise. I was a going concern, my face and body my prime assets and a bold investment policy was recommended.”(II iii) Sleeping with a prospective husband to win him is part of a “business venture,”(II i) as Bland soon learns: “you have tried the goods. Are you willing to make an offer for them?”(III iii) Her relationship with the Lancashire husband problematically discards the profit motif:

“it was supposed to be a business enterprise, but Mr James Seagrave spoke to my heart and other parts too.”(II iii)

Moll likes to regard herself as the acceptable, romantic face of capitalism: she is “a merchant venturer in a small way”(III iii) rather than an investor who “live[s] on [merchant venturers’] backs like a louse on a sheep”. Bland is placed as a lesser figure because though he responds to trade’s romance—“England is a nation of merchant adventurers; our brave ships circumnavigate the globe and come home laden with the spoils of enterprise”—he still maintains that “the wisest man is he who sits at home and draws upon the interest in his investment...they venture their lives, we venture our capital”. When Moll characterises her Lancashire husband’s newfound trade of highway robbery as a kind of merchant venture, he dismisses it as “a high-risk enterprise”, which forces her to contemplate a capitalism without romance: “and what was I? Another desperate merchant adventurer with nothing to trade but my beauty and...wit, adrift on the ocean of poverty, greed and lust with no safe haven in view (III ii).

Moll continues to find the business ethic alluring even after she has been reduced to theft: “I... saw myself as a true merchant venturer. As our brave captains scoured the seas and brought home their prizes, so I scoured the streets and alleys....”(IV i) It is small wonder her partnership with Diver, “the best dip in England”, is celebrated with a toast to “free enterprise” ( IV i). Prostitution after theft is merely another entrepreneurial opportunity: “This was a business I had never tried before, but now I thought, Why not?”(IV ii)

Davies has clearly read Ian Watt’s neo-Marxist view of Moll as a female embodiment of Adam Smith’s *homo economicus* and thus one might think his script would stand in relation to Defoe’s novel in the same way Brecht’s *Mother Courage and*

*Her Children* (1941) does to Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* (1669) and *Trutz Simplex* (1670); but whereas Brecht condemns war as "a continuation of business by other means", Davies has a more benign view of capitalism's operations, a view more in line with Thatcherite revisionism.<sup>20</sup> Though set in motion by Fortune's Wheel, it is not a wholly contingent system for it is determined more by the aggregation of self-interest, the mass making of one's own luck through individual enterprise. Even as a child Moll has her philosophy in place: "I knew that luck rules the world...the turning Wheel of Fortune, and that those of us that make their own luck in this world do best of all," (I i) and it is this philosophy that helps her counter despair during her life's low points, as, for instance, when the Lancashire husband leaves her: "My heart was broken. I'd lost the love of my life, but the world goes on, the Wheel turns. I had my way to make and I knew how to do it." (III ii)

Such improvisatory enterprise is almost applauded for suppressing every moral scruple; Moll remains throughout her life a largely unrepentant figure. Her confession before her Lancashire marriage is treated as *Carry On* comedy, by which her joyful recitation of a catalogue of sexual misadventures utterly confounds the Catholic priest. When turning to theft, she does at first pray God for forgiveness, but the prayers soon degenerate into bluster: "And deliver me from all evil, I beg you, because if you don't, on your head be it; so there!"(IV i) In Newgate under sentence of death she seems about to confess only to turn to the camera with the ironic aside: "You see I'm rehearsing my repentance!" On being summoned to execution, she is asked whether she wants a priest for the last rites: "He can keep his scurvy face well clear!"(IV iii) is all she replies.

Davies's Moll is the foundling who succeeds not by struggling to reverse the inequalities of English society, but by forcing her way into the ranks of the privileged. As an orphan in Colchester she boldly declares her intention of becoming a gentle-

woman, by which she means a woman who can support herself without having to go into service, but with comic prescience she singles out the town prostitute as her exemplum. Her bafflement after she ends up as a quasi-servant, quasi-companion to the Mayor's daughters is presented in Thatcherite terms: "I never knew quite what I was in that house: one of them or a servant." (I i) She later sleeps with the family's Elder Brother in the hope of becoming 'one of them' through marriage, and although he finally rejects her, she does secure her objective by wedding his younger brother. On his death, she singles out as her next spouse a London tradesman with social ambitions, who invites her to play the role of gentlewoman to his 'gentleman draper'. After he flees to France as a bankrupt, Moll does temporarily sustain the role as the Virginia sea-captain's wife—"I am a gentlewoman again" (II ii)—but poverty on her return to England prevents her from making the part convincing: she rejects lodgings with other debtors in the Mint on the grounds she is "a gentlewoman and shall continue so" (I iii), while a later assertion that she is "a gentlewoman" is met by a landlady's tart retort: "A gentlewoman to me is one who pays a fortnight in advance." (III iii) However, the descent into poverty and crime proves only a temporary step down the social ladder because by the final episode she is back in America as a 'rich' and 'famous' lady (IV iii).

Moll's determined pursuit of class mobility is made particularly modern by an interesting choice of narrative mode. Davies had to decide whether to retain Moll as the text's character narrator, aware, as he was, of the cinematic prejudice against voiceovers for their archaic, 'literary' associations or whether to change to a more objective style. In opting to follow Defoe, he may have been influenced by youthful memories of the Nouvelle Vague for his script exploits not only voiceover, but a witty metafilmic layer. Moll is at all times aware not simply of herself and the ironies she is uncovering, but the



camera as well and, to intensify the French connection, that camera is often hand-held. At the plot's various turning-points she will reveal her modern self-consciousness by baring the device and addressing mischievous remarks directly to the camera. Most characteristically, Moll will throw down an ironic challenge to viewers by asking them the formulaic question, "What would you do?" She does this when deciding whether to sleep with the Elder Brother (I i), when pondering whether to marry the Younger Brother "without love or starve in the street or sell myself to customers as a tuppenny whore" (I iii) and, most audaciously, during the Lancashire marriage service when the priest pauses at "lawful impediment" (III i) knowing from her recent confession she is guilty of serial bigamy and incest. The question's form only changes when she is shocked out of irony by moral dilemma—"what am I to do?" (II ii)—or guilt—"what else could I do?" (III iii, IV ii)—and as she becomes increasingly sober, the camera momentarily ceases to be a friend. It spies on her in her marriage bed while she knowingly makes love to her half-brother and she rewards it with a desolate look; but, most interestingly, it pursues her like the paparazzi when she is at her most vulnerable: after she has stolen a girl's necklace with menaces the camera tracks her fleeing form with such determination she is forced at four stations to find a series of justifications, the last of which ends with the accusatory question, "Why do you stare at me?" and her hand placed aggressively over the lens. Similarly, the camera confronts Moll when her lover, Lucy, is taken in her presence without her offering any resistance. After failing to rationalise her inaction, she loses her temper with the camera, shouting "Leave me alone!" as she storms off. However, by the close she has reached reconciliation with the camera for the last sequence shows her stepping off the boat onto American soil with the Lancashire husband, embracing him and then running arm in arm with him, as it were, into the camera. This visual trope is the positive resolution of an earlier negative

one when Moll learns her Virginia mother-in-law is her biological mother and runs across a field towards the camera before stopping just short and delivering her horrified monologue into it.

Moll's role as a self-aware, business-minded manipulator of class is, however, less significant to her modernity than her uninhibited, yet pragmatic approach to sex. Lascelles saw Moll as "such a...modern character" because she is "a sexually self-confident woman" who is "very upfront"—"her relationship with men is very direct: how much are you worth? Do you want to go to bed with me?" (*ST, MMF*) Another way of putting this is that Davies gives Moll a post-feminist independence in relationships. On receiving the Elder Brother's first kiss, she reacts as a prudent servant ("No, please sir!"), but the next moment seizes the initiative by passionately kissing him (I i). When he abandons her, she does not react according to her social position, hurling "I never want to see you again" at his retreating back (I ii). Thereafter she becomes predatory in her treatment of men, an approach for which Mark Springer and Sarah Sarhandi find the musical equivalent in a stirring hunting theme on trumpet. In contrast, when Densham's Moll is informed by Mrs Allworthy that "all men are fortune hunters and therefore deserve to be hunted in their turn", she rejects the analogy. With Davies's Moll the thrill of the hunt is always subordinated to business considerations: "This was not love, though far from unpleasant. It was a business venture" (II i); "I needed a solid citizen with money in the bank and Mr Bland would do very well until a better offer came." (III ii)

Moll's modernity is a creation of Davies that finds little support in the original. True, Defoe's heroine does suffer the deprivations of capitalism, which teach her to commodify life and even body, but hers is an early capitalist outlook that combines an obsession with the cash nexus with a dissenting morality that Defoe internalised as a

young man studying for the ministry. Thus while Moll is allowed to delight in her entrepreneurial skills in the marriage market and the craft of theft, these skills are seen as encouraging the deadly sin of greed. The addictive, self-destructive nature of her vice is clearly shown when she reaches a point of financial security in her criminal career for she is unable to stop: "...the Avarice join'd so with the Success, that I had no more thoughts of coming to a timely Alteration of Life; tho' without it I cou'd expect no Safety."<sup>21</sup> Defoe does introduce business imagery to indicate how the profit motif substantially determines her existence. Thus Moll's Governess observes: "...a Their being a Creature that Watches the Advantages of other Peoples mistakes, 'tis impossible but that to one that is vigilant and industrious many Opportunities must happen, and therefore she thought that one so exquisitely keen in/ the Trade as I was, would scarce fail of something extraordinary where ever I went."<sup>22</sup> However, he also makes the reader aware that God is always at hand to release the sinner from the craft of stealing.

Defoe's Moll does struggle to shape her own fate through advantageous marriages, yet she does not respond to each setback with a renewed zest for competition because she sees herself much more as the helpless victim of circumstance (low social position, overwhelming sexual urges, inadequate husbands, poverty and the diabolic inner voice of temptation). She tends to come out with formulations such as "my own Fate pushing me on" or "the Devil... began, by the help of an irresistible Poverty, to push me into this Wickedness."<sup>23</sup> She is forever talking of fortune as something which transforms life unexpectedly, though not from a wheel's turn (Davies must have been remembering his undergraduate studies of Elizabethan literature). Ironically, most of her uses of the term relate to what a person is worth rather than to luck; that is the only kind of fortune she feels she can influence. Moll does defend women's rights—she successfully advises a widow on how to gain revenge on a slighting suitor;<sup>24</sup> she resists

unfair stereotyping of women (“it is said by the ill-natured World, of our Sex, that if we are set on a thing, it is impossible to turn us from our Resolutions”,<sup>25</sup>) and she lauds her own ‘Courage’, ‘Invention’ and ‘hardiness’ as a female felon<sup>26</sup>—but she is no believer in women’s autonomy:

I found by experience, 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...but if a Woman has no Friend to...advise and assist her, ‘tis ten to one but she is undone.<sup>27</sup>

She therefore commits herself to a series of men, and when her looks desert her and she turns to crime, she then transfers that dependence onto a woman, her Governess: “I knew no Remedy but to put my Life in her Hands.”<sup>28</sup>

Moll does mention her wish to become a gentlewoman at the narrative’s opening, but does not pursue the theme with the same persistence as Davies’s heroine. This can perhaps be explained in generic terms for the picaresque, rather than romance, is the work’s dominant literary type and even among its minor generic features romantic conventions like mysterious origins, the pursuit of love and upward social mobility are subordinated to those of spiritual autobiography. *Moll Flanders* is generically closer to Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) than Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740-41). Its narrative accrues a semblance of structure largely through the redemptive pattern of descent into vice, consciousness of damnation, repentance and salvation. True, Moll’s contrition will be regarded sceptically by modern readers because she only confesses under the threat of the hangman’s noose and reverts to earlier notions as soon as her sentence is commuted (she sees no problem in using her wealth, gained from theft, for buying privileges as a transported felon and eventually setting herself up as a Virginian gentlewoman). However, it is essential for narrative success that her words are given a certain credence when she declares: “I was cover’d with Shame and Tears

for things past, and yet had at the same time a secret surprising Joy at the prospect of being a true Penitent.”<sup>29</sup> Modern readers like Davies can be misled by Defoe’s preface, which refers to Moll as “one grown Penitent and Humble, as she afterwards pretends to be,” into thinking he is dismissing her newfound piety.<sup>30</sup> ‘Pretend’ in the eighteenth century could mean ‘aspire to’.

Defoe wittily claims the unexpurgated “Copy which came first to Hand [had been] written in Language”—and, by implication, with a viewpoint—“more like one still in Newgate.”<sup>31</sup> Davies’s script is, as it were, drawn from this imaginary Ur-text; it is as if he was guided by the printed work only as far as its unrepresentative title-page where Moll’s life is sensationally summarised as “Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother) Twelve Year a Thief”. Ironically, the contrite Moll reproves readers with Davies’s salacious interest in her memoir: “many of those who may be pleas’d...with the Relation of the wild and wicked part of my Story, may not relish this, which is really the best part of my Life...and the most instructive.”<sup>32</sup>

*Moll Flanders* is narrated through a complicated double perspective, which Defoe imperfectly masters: a present standpoint, from which Moll responds with increasing amorality to whatever occurs, and a retrospective standpoint, from which she laments her ever-deeper descent into vice. Defoe places his emphasis on the repentant Moll, Davies on the unrepentant. Davies moves the work towards what Stephen Dedalus stigmatised as “the kinaesthetic” in trying to stimulate the viewer erotically with softest of soft porn. However, as Malcolm Bradbury has pointed out, although it shares certain themes with the roughly contemporary *Fanny Hill, or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-49), *Moll Flanders* (1722) never strives for titillation.<sup>33</sup> Indeed its effect is more anti-erotic. Moll avoids explicitness in describing sexual encounters: “he went farther with me than Decency permits me to mention”; “he did what he pleas’d with me; I say

no more”; or “in short it went on to what I expected; and to what will not bear relating.”<sup>34</sup> Her whole attitude may be summed up by the comment: “as for the Bed, &c I was not much concern’d about that Part.”<sup>35</sup> She does not even like to refer to sex directly, preferring instead such euphemisms as “the last Favour,” “Correspondence” and “Conversation.”<sup>36</sup> Whenever the present perspective allows her a degree of pleasure in lovemaking, the retrospective one follows with stern moral denunciation. Thus premarital sex with the Elder Brother is later described as falling to the Devil’s “unwearied” temptation to be “as Wicked as we pleas’d,” while subsequent assignations become “frequent Opportunities to repeat our Crime.”<sup>37</sup>

On reaching adulthood, Davies’s thoroughly modern Moll narrates her tale with a cheekiness that declares with what clarity she sees the ironical implications of all that happens; but Defoe’s pre-modern Moll is rarely in complete control of the ironies she unloosens; indeed sometimes she—and perhaps even Defoe behind her—is their unwitting victim. Thus after robbing a young girl of her necklace, she justifies the crime as a timely warning: “I had given the Parents a just Reproof for their Negligence in leaving the poor Lamb to come home by it self, and it would teach them to take more Care of it another time.”<sup>38</sup> However, she seems unaware she is in no position to preach, that if she really feels pity for the ‘poor lamb’, she should have directed her home rather than robbed her, that if she sincerely believes parents should closely supervise their offspring, she should not have farmed her own inconvenient children out, often to complete strangers, whenever she moved on to a new scene of life.

The distinctively ironic narrative tone of Davies’s Moll, so modern in its boldness, largely derives from her consistent habit of forcing the viewer to take notice of the camera’s existence by directing some sly remark at it. While Defoe’s Moll is a radically intrusive narrator, conscious of the tale she is shaping as she tells it, she,

unlike the eponymous narrator of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67) and the narrators of postmodernist novels, is not interested in baring the device. Indeed Defoe, her creator, maintains the contrary illusion throughout his preface that the work should be classed not as a novel or romance, but a “Genuine...private History.”<sup>39</sup>

Davies knew his adaptation of *Moll Flanders* took considerable liberties with the original in the interests of contemporary relevance; he wanted his heroine to seem modern in her sexual directness, her witty self-consciousness and her Thatcherite strength. Faithfulness was not an issue because he was taking a holiday from seriousness, concocting instead an entertainment, in which the playful manipulation of popular genres produces a version that lightly parodies the whole notion of the classic serial.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I shall refer to the television broadcast (ITV, Sundays and Mondays, 1-9 December 1996) rather than the video publication (Warner Vision International, 1996) because the latter omits the original episode and part divisions. References to the broadcast ‘Episode II, Part iii’ will, for instance, become ‘II iii’ in the text.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed examination of the adaptation see Peter Widdowson, *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1989), Chapter 3.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Making of *Moll Flanders*’, ITV, repeat, 19 April 1998 (hereafter referred to in text as *MMF*.)

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Davies, ‘A Passionate Woman’, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 1 December 1996, 51-56. (Davies’s article, together with Lascelles’ ‘She Stoops to Conquer’ in the same issue, shall henceforth be referred to collectively within the text as *ST*.)

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<sup>5</sup> 'Pick of the Day', *TV Times*, 30 November–6 December, 1996, 43 (hereafter referred to, together with the interview with Alex Kingston, 'Going Nude, I Didn't Give It a Second Thought', 6-7 as *TVT*);

'Today's Choices', *Radio Times*, 30 November – 6 December 1996, 86 (hereafter referred to as *RT*).

<sup>6</sup> Hilary Mantel, *Observer Magazine*, 1 December 1996.

<sup>7</sup> The Hester Lacy interview: Daniel Craig, 'Real Life' *Independent on Sunday*, 1 December 1996, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *TVT*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *RT*, 86, 41.

<sup>10</sup> James Rampton, 'No Sex Please, We're High-Brow Literature', Culture section, *Independent on Sunday*, 19 November 2000, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Hester Lacy, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Mantel, op cit.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722, Norton: New York, 1973), 91.

<sup>14</sup> *RT*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> David Aaronovitch, Television, Culture section, *Independent on Sunday*, 8 December 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Hester Lacy, 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Radio Times*, 8-14 November 1997: 22.

<sup>18</sup> Mantel, op cit

<sup>19</sup> Although Densham's Moll does acquiesce in one act that would have been more typical of Davies's Moll: the auctioning off of her virginity to the highest bidder.

<sup>20</sup> See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), Chapters 3-4, quoting Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (London: Methuen Student Edition, 1983), xvii.

<sup>21</sup> Defoe, 162.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 83, 158.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-59.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 172, 187.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-01.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.



<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>33</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *Possibilities: Essays in the State of the Novel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 43-44.

<sup>34</sup> Defoe, 20-21, 176, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>36</sup> See Ibid., 21, 85, 97, 99, 46.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 3.