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## Cloth, Clothing, and Cloth-Theft in Defoe's England

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*Melissa is a senior history major who wrote this article for the lower division course, Historical Research and Writing, which is required of all history majors. Dr. Newton Key taught the course, which focused on the historical context and sources of Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders.*

Daniel Defoe's famous novel *Moll Flanders* has been used by historians and literary critics alike to study early eighteenth century London, gender roles, the colonial trade, and the criminal world into which the heroine Moll sank.

The novel can also be used to reveal the role of textiles in early modern England. Daniel Defoe uses cloth as a metaphor for many social transactions throughout *Moll Flanders*. The heroine's name, Flanders, even describes an illegally imported lace fabric while Moll herself steals cloth because it could easily be converted to cash. This paper focuses on the historical context of cloth, clothing, and the theft of cloth in the novel to argue that clothing represents the possibility of advancement within society, greed, and a readily available cash form.

Was the second-hand clothes trade respectable in eighteenth century London? According to Beverly Lemire, although the trade mainly consisted of clothes obtained by legitimate means, thieves provided a large portion of the trade.<sup>3</sup> "Fashion ... inspired the theft of clothing on a massive scale by both amateur and professional thieves."<sup>4</sup> Madeleine Ginsburg, however, argues that "second-hand clothes dealing was regarded as a respectable and profitable way of earning a living, carried out by the clothes brokers and salesmen."<sup>5</sup> Ginsburg claims that personal servants brought the majority of second-hand clothes to the market.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not the theft of clothing was large scale, it

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Defoe wrote *Moll Flanders* in 1722, and the description of London is reminiscent of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, although the author claims that the novel was written towards the end of Moll's life in 1683. Martin C. Battestin, ed., *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 39, *British Novelists, 1660-1800* (Detroit, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous, Moll Flanders* (New York, 1989). Page references in text (in parenthesis) are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Beverly Lemire, "Peddling Fashion: Salesmen, Pawnbrokers, Tailors, Thieves and the Second-hand Clothes Trade in England, c. 1700-1800," *Textile History* 22 (1991): 77.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Lemire, "Peddling Fashion," *Textile History*, 77.

<sup>5</sup> Madeleine Ginsburg, "Rags to Riches: The Second-Hand Clothes Trade 1700-1978," *Costume* 14 (1980): 121.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

became perpetuated by fashion obsession, greed, and the stolen goods for cash.

Defoe asserts fashion obsession accompanied contributed to crime which remained a major social seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Moll Flanders cloth, to advance her social standing. Moll obtains and buys exceedingly expensive clothes to imitate a high English society which was highly stratified. Moll Dorot an age of minute social distinctions, lines were drawn between the labourer, the master and journeyman ... often [when] Moll realizes the importance of dressing the part of set me off... [The] he entertained me ... but like they thought a widow of great fortune" (103). Moll's Irish landowner gain an imaginary fortune, which he suspects Moll is a fine dress.

The hierarchy extended into all aspects of life primarily of the gentry while lower levels merely existed of society dictated ways of life to the lower ranks. required identification by their clothing. As the *London* "[shopkeepers can distinguish a Country Man as well as a Parson by his Robes ... to promote the sale of their goods genteelly and desires being mistaken for a gentleman Moll's entire life.

Fashion awareness was a socio-economic issue Samuel Pepys, a wealthy diarist writing in the 1660s the social implications of his and his wife's dress (and his lowly origins).

Mr. Clerke's coming to dine with me next Monday and agreed upon matters; and at last for to make her [his wife] presently a new Moll Mrs. Clerke, which troubles me to part with a person had to maintain appearances to belong to correct clothing became an important part of appearance "clothes[,] I perceive more and more every day, is:

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<sup>7</sup> M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the 18th* 156-7.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Hay & Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth* (Oxford, 1997), 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> [Edward Ward], *The London Spy*, March 17

<sup>11</sup> Pepys' father was employed as a tailor and servant at the time of their marriage while Pepys was an important British naval official. Sir Leslie Stephen & *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1921),

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Pepys, *Everybody's Pepys: The Diary 1669*, ed. O.F. Morshead (New York, 1926), 160.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

desires the status of a gentlewoman, even though the goal is essentially unattainable because she was born to a convict in Newgate Prison.

Early modern Londoners thought of society as relatively stable allowing little movement through the social ranks. But the lines became blurred when people chose to wear clothes not befitting their position in life and deceit prevailed. Madeleine Ginsburg writes, "clothes implied status and ...wearing what was inappropriate ...might be socially misleading."<sup>14</sup> Moll purposely misleads gentleman on at least four occasions, and each time she marries well, and higher than her own station. Each gentleman speculates Moll possesses a fortune based upon her dress. Pepys noted a similar social mistake based on dress, "taking Captain Herbert home to my lodging...who did seriously enquire after who was that in the black dress with my wife yesterday, and would not believe that it was my wife's maid Mercer; but it was she."<sup>15</sup> Servants during this time were not issued a standard uniform, but often wore the cast-off clothing of their mistress or master.<sup>16</sup>

Distinguishing between divisions of society became almost impossible.

Henry Fielding, writing in the mid-eighteenth century, asserted,

one known division of the people in this nation is into the nobility, the gentry, and the commonalty, what alterations have happened among the two former of these, I shall not at present inquire; but the last, in their customs, manners, and habits, are greatly changed from what they were ...the lower sort [of people] ...is changed ...the simplicity of their manners into craft; their frugality into luxury; their humility into pride, and their subjection into equality.<sup>17</sup>

Clothing became a vehicle to a better life by imitation. And clothing which was unaffordable, was bought second-hand or stolen.<sup>18</sup> Defoe notes,

"there are temptations which it is not in the power of human nature to resist, and few know what would be their case if driven to the same exigencies, as covetousness is the root of all evil, so poverty is the worst of all snares" (140). Then as now, consumers desire to wear fashionable clothing. Greed causes people to desire fine articles of clothing and better lives, sometimes extremely beyond their means. Moll stole a way up the social ladder.

In January 1734, *The Gentleman's Magazine* called for the re-establishment of the sumptuary laws, "of great importance for preserving the distinction and order so necessary to the different ranks of men."<sup>19</sup> Sumptuary laws prohibited different classes from wearing the same attire. Fielding noted that without such laws,

<sup>14</sup> Ginsburg, "Rags to Riches," 121.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. 6, 1665, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (Berkeley, 1972), 238.

<sup>16</sup> Ginsburg, "Rags to Riches," 122.

<sup>17</sup> Henry Fielding, *Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers*, vol. 13, *The Works of Henry Fielding: Legal Writings* (New York, 1967), 11 & 14.

<sup>18</sup> Lemire, "Peddling Fashion," 69.

<sup>19</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Jan. 1734, 13.

the nobleman will emulate the grandeur of a gentleman will aspire to the proper state of the tradesman steps from behind his counter into gentleman; nor doth the confusion end here; it of the people, who aspiring still to a degree belongs to them.<sup>20</sup>

Defoe's Moll claims, "I had nearly 200 pounds for [sum]... I had still a cast for an easy life... [P]overty kept me in" (151). In the end, Moll depends upon her as a thief to obtain her dream of wealth.

Crime increased because population and poverty in the early eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> England continued

New World. When Moll Flanders finds herself in jail for a criminal, she primarily steals cloth. Her first theft in linen, more linen, a smock, and three silk handkerchiefs were readily available and easily shifted away from the historian, Lemire notes, "clothing was the most sought after commodity in this period. A summary of the most notable felons had thefts of shoes, handkerchiefs, a coat, and 108 yards of cloth. Pepys's wife was robbed of clothing.

Bringing home in a coach her new friend from Cheapside a man asked her whether that was true and while she was answering him, another man away her bundle out of her lap and could not get away with it; which vexes me cruelly, but it is true. Cloth became easily converted into cash and inflated.

The second-hand cloth trade allowed ease for shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, chapmen, and tradesmen dispersing second-hand cloth and clothing.

Shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, chapmen, and tradesmen were thieves themselves.<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Wild, "the Prince of Robbers,"<sup>27</sup> thieves to steal items and then return those items to reward.<sup>28</sup> This activity netted the thief a larger sum

<sup>20</sup> Fielding, "Late Increase of Robbers," 23.

<sup>21</sup> George, *London Life*, 25-6.

<sup>22</sup> Beverly Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes and Early Modern England," *Journal of Social History*

(London, 1824), 1:47-8, 56 & 207.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Knapp and William Baldwin, eds.,

*Everybody's Pepys*, 163.

<sup>24</sup> Pepys, *Everybody's Pepys*, 163.

<sup>25</sup> Beverly Lemire, "Consumerism in Preindustrial England: The Trade in Secondhand Clothes," *Journal* (Jan. 1988): 13.

<sup>26</sup> Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes," 267.

<sup>27</sup> Knapp and Baldwin, *The Newgate Calendar*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

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re-selling the item. In *Moll Flanders*, the **governess** provides a similar pawnbroker service for Moll, by disposing of stolen items.

Robbery victims promoted thieving, by advertising rewards for returned items in newspapers.<sup>29</sup> For example, an advertisement in the *London Gazette* during 1714 reads,

lost from the Vine Tavern in Thames-street ...a bundle with 2 large and 2 small **down** pillows, several suits of laced headcloths and ruffles, 2 suits of fine Macklin Lace Pinnar broad, with other linnen, and things of value; whoever shall bring or discover these things, so as they may be had again, to Mr. Crowch, Poulterer at Smithfield Bars, shall have a reward ...for the whole, or proportionable for any part, and no questions asked.<sup>30</sup>

The enticement of quick money and anonymity provided the thief with an incentive to steal.

Theft of clothing, a major problem in early modern London, depended upon pawnbrokers and merchants willing to turn items into cash.<sup>31</sup> Fielding

thought, "that if there were no receivers there would be no thieves, indeed could not the thief find a market for his goods, there would be an absolute end of several kinds of thefts; such as shoplifting, burglary, &c., the objects of which are generally goods and not money."<sup>32</sup> A thief often traded an item for services or essential goods.

<sup>33</sup> A stolen item could easily become lost in the maze of London shops, taken to the country by a chapman, or the piece totally re-done by a tailor.<sup>34</sup> People spent extra money on clothes and the clothing market attempted to meet its new-found popularity.

<sup>35</sup> Thievery provided the extra clothing needed by the market.

Defoe's view of social transactions, as asserted in *Moll Flanders*,

corroborates Lemire's theory that the second-hand clothes trade seemed destined to corruption. Clothes turned into cash swiftly, *via* the pawnbrokers and second-hand clothes dealers. In early modern England, people were concerned with the appearance of possessing status and class. As Defoe's *Moll* demonstrates so well, clothing made the woman.

<sup>29</sup> Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes," 259.

<sup>30</sup> *The London Gazette*, Jan. 25-29, 1714.

<sup>31</sup> The theft of clothing accounted for 27.1% of the recorded larceny prosecutions in urban areas between 1620-1680. Beverly Lemire, "Theft of Clothes," 257.

<sup>32</sup> Fielding, "Late Increase of Robbers," 76.

<sup>33</sup> Lemire, "Peddling Fashion," 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.