

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.⁽¹⁾ The novel can also be used to reveal the role of textiles in early modern England.⁽²⁾ 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.⁽³⁾ "Fashion ...inspired the theft of clothing on a massive scale by both amateur and professional thieves."⁽⁴⁾ 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."⁽⁵⁾ Ginsburg claims that personal servants brought the majority of second-hand clothes to the market.⁽⁶⁾ Whether or not the theft of clothing was large scale, it became perpetuated by fashion obsession, greed, and the ease in transferring the stolen goods for cash.

Defoe asserts fashion obsession accompanied by social advancement contributed to crime which remained a major social problem in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Moll Flanders steals, primarily cloth, to advance her social standing. Moll obtains money for the cloth and buys exceedingly expensive clothes to imitate a higher social rank.

English society was highly stratified. M. Dorothy George writes, "[i]t was an age of minute social distinctions, lines were drawn between the artisan and the labourer, the master and journeyman ...often

[with] distinctive dress."⁽⁷⁾ Moll realizes the importance of dressing the part of a lady, having "clothes to set me off.... [T]hey entertained me ...but like they thought I had been, namely a widow of great fortune" (103). Moll's Irish landowner woos her in order to gain an imaginary fortune, which he suspects Moll possesses because of her fine dress.

The hierarchy extended into all aspects of life. "Society" consisted primarily of the gentry while lower levels merely existed.⁽⁸⁾ The highest ranks of society dictated ways of life to the lower ranks.⁽⁹⁾ A person's social status required identification by their clothing. As the *London Spy* noted, "[s]hopkeepers can distinguish a Country Man as well by his Looks, as a Parson by his Robes ...to promote the sale of their goods."⁽¹⁰⁾ Moll dresses genteelly and desires being mistaken for a gentlewoman. Such deceit directs Moll's entire life.

Fashion awareness was a socio-economic issue in early modern London. Samuel Pepys, a wealthy diarist writing in the 1660s, was minutely aware of the social implications of his and his wife's dress (a concern, perhaps, due to his lowly origins).⁽¹¹⁾

Mr. Clerke's coming to dine with me next Monday, I went to my wife and agreed upon matters; and at last for my honour am forced to make her [his wife] presently a new Moyre gown to be seen by Mrs. Clerke, which troubles me to part with so much money.⁽¹²⁾

A person had to maintain appearances to belong to certain social groups. The correct clothing became an important part of appearance. Pepys thought "clothes[,] I perceive more and more every day, is a great matter."⁽¹³⁾ Moll 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."⁽¹⁴⁾ 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."⁽¹⁵⁾ Servants during this time were not issued a standard uniform, but often wore the cast-off clothing of their mistress or master.⁽¹⁶⁾

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.⁽¹⁷⁾

Clothing became a vehicle to a better life by imitation. And clothing which was unaffordable, was
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bought second-hand or stolen. 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."⁽¹⁹⁾ Sumptuary laws prohibited different classes from wearing the same attire. Fielding noted that without such laws,

the nobleman will emulate the grandeur of a prince and the gentleman will aspire to the proper state of the nobleman, the tradesman steps from behind his counter into the vacant place of the gentleman; nor doth the confusion end here; it reaches the very dregs of the people, who aspiring still to a degree beyond that which belongs to them.⁽²⁰⁾

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

Crime increased because population and poverty rose in England during the early eighteenth century.⁽²¹⁾ England continued transporting criminals to the New World. When Moll Flanders finds herself in jeopardy and becomes a criminal, she primarily steals cloth. Her first theft includes a laced child-bed linen, more linen, a smock, and three silk handkerchiefs. These types of items were readily available and easily shifted away from the crime scene. As historian, Lemire notes, "clothing was the most sought-after, and at the same time, most easily disposable commodity in this period."⁽²²⁾ *The Newgate Calendar*, a summary of the most notable felons hung at Tyburn Cross, records thefts of shoes, handkerchiefs, a coat, and 108 yards of woollen cloth.⁽²³⁾ Even Pepys's wife was robbed of clothing.

Bringing home in a coach her new ferraddin waistcoate, in Cheapside a man asked her whether that was the way to the Tower; and while she was answering him, another on the other side snatched away her bundle out of her lap and could not be recovered, but ran away with it; which vexes me cruelly, but it cannot be helped.⁽²⁴⁾

Cloth became easily converted into cash and inflamed the lust for a fortune.

The second-hand clothes trade allowed ease for disposal of stolen goods. Shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, chapmen, and tradesmen were instrumental in dispersing second-hand cloth and clothing.⁽²⁵⁾ Corrupt cloth brokers and pawnbrokers were thieves themselves.⁽²⁶⁾ A notorious criminal of the time was Jonathan Wild, "the Prince of Robbers."⁽²⁷⁾ Jonathan Wild planned with fellow thieves to steal items and then return those items to the rightful owners for a reward.⁽²⁸⁾ This activity netted the thief a larger sum than would be gained by 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.⁽²⁹⁾ 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.⁽³⁰⁾

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.⁽³¹⁾ 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."⁽³²⁾ A thief often traded an item for services or essential goods.⁽³³⁾ 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.⁽³⁴⁾ People spent extra money on clothes and the clothing market attempted to meet its new-found popularity.⁽³⁵⁾ 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.

1. Daniel Defoe wrote *Moll Flanders* in 1722, and the description of London is reminiscent of the early 18th 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).
2. Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous, Moll Flanders* (New York, 1989). Page references in text (in parenthesis) are from this edition.
3. Beverly Lemire, "Peddling Fashion: Salesmen, Pawnbrokers, Tailors, Thieves and the Second-hand Clothes Trade in England, c. 1700-1800," *Textile History* 22 (1991): 77.
4. Beverly Lemire, "Peddling Fashion," *Textile History*, 77.
5. Madeleine Ginsburg, "Rags to Riches: The Second-Hand Clothes Trade 1700-1978," *Costume* 14 (1980): 121.
6. Ibid.
7. M. Dorothy George, *London Life in the 18th Century* (New York, 1965), 156-7.
8. Douglas Hay & Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society* (Oxford, 1997), 24.
9. Ibid., 24.
10. [Edward Ward], *The London Spy*, March 1699, 13.
11. Pepys' father was employed as a tailor and his mother was a domestic servant at the time of their marriage while Pepys eventually became the most important British naval official. Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1921), "Pepys, Samuel."
12. Samuel Pepys, *Everybody's Pepys: The Diary of Samuel Pepys, 1660-1669*, ed. O.F. Morshead (New York, 1926), 160.
13. Ibid., 259.

14. Ginsburg, "Rags to Riches," 121.
15. Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. 6, 1665, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (Berkeley, 1972), 238.
16. Ginsburg, "Rags to Riches," 122.
17. 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.
18. Lemire, "Peddling Fashion," 69.
19. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Jan. 1734, 13.
20. Fielding, "Late Increase of Robbers," 23.
21. George, *London Life*, 25-6.
22. Beverly Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes and Popular Consumerism in Early Modern England," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1990): 257.
23. Andrew Knapp and William Baldwin, eds., *The Newgate Calendar* (London, 1824), 1:47-8, 56 & 207.
24. Pepys, *Everybody's Pepys*, 163.
25. Beverly Lemire, "Consumerism in Preindustrial and Early Industrial England: The Trade in Secondhand Clothes," *Journal of British Studies* 27 (Jan. 1988): 13.
26. Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes," 267.
27. Knapp and Baldwin, *The Newgate Calendar*, 225.
28. *Ibid.*, 227.
29. Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes," 259.
30. *The London Gazette*, Jan. 25-29, 1714.
31. 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.
32. Fielding, "Late Increase of Robbers," 76.
33. Lemire, "Peddling Fashion," 73.
34. *Ibid.*, 77.
35. *Ibid.*, 69.