Cloth, Clothing, and Cloth-Theft in
Defoe’s England

Melissa Johnson

Melissa is a senior history major who wrote this article for the lower division course, Historical Research and Writing, which required her to use the text 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 heroine Moll sank.

Daniel Defoe’s novel can also be used to reveal the role of textiles in early modern England. The heroine’s name, Flanders, even describes an illegal trade. Clothes obtained by legitimate means, thieves provided a large portion of the clothing which the heroine could easily convert 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. “Fashion inspired the theft of clothing on a massive scale by both amateur and professional thieves.” 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.”

Ginsburg claims that personal servants brought the majority of second-hand clothes to the market. “Whether or not the theft of clothing was large scale, it 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 evil throughout the eighteenth centuries. Moll Fl...
Latham and William Matthews (Berkeley vol. 13, distinction and order so necessary establishment of the sumptuaries laws prohibited different classes from wearing the same attire. Fielding noted that without such laws, 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 endure; it of the people, who aspiring still to a degree b. belongs to them.  

Defoe's Moll claims, "I had nearly 200 pounds for t sum... I had still a cast for an easy life... (P)overty kept me in" (151). In the end, Moll depends upon h as a thief to obtain her dream of wealth.  

Crime increased because population and pove the early eighteenth century.  

"Englandcontir New World. When Moll Flanders finds herself in 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 historian, Lemire notes, "clothing was the most sou time, most easily disposable commodity in this peri Calendar, a summary of the most notable felonious hur thefts of shoes, handkerchiefs, a coat, and 108 yard Pepys's wife was robbed of clothing.  

Bringing home in a coach new ferradinn  Cheapside a man asked her whether that was t and while she was answering him, another on away her bundle out of her lap and could not away with it; which vexes me cruelly, but it e Cloth became easily converted into cash and inflam the second-hand cloth trade allowed ease f Shopkeepers, pawnbrokers, chapmen, and tradesmen dispersing second-hand cloth and clothing. pawnbrokers were thieves themselves.  

" Jonathan Wild, "the Prince of Robbers." thieves to steal items and then return those items to reward.  

" This activity netted the thief a larger is  

Fielding, "Late Increase of Robbers," 23.  
Pepys, Everyboday’s Pepys, 163.  
Knapp and Baldwin, The Newgate Calendar  
Ibid., 227.

re-selling the item. In Moll Flanders, the goveness provides a similar pawbroker service for Moll, by disposing of stolen items.  
Robbery victims promoted thieving, by advertising rewards for returned items in newspapers.  
" 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 headcloth and ruffles, 2 suits olive Macin Lace Pinner broad, with other linen, 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.  
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.  
"Fielding thought, "that if there were no receivers there would be no thieves, indeed couldnot 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."  
" A thief often traded an item for services or essential goods.  
" A stolen item could easily become lost in the maze of London shops, taken to the country by a chapman, or the piecetotally re-done by a tailor.  
People spent extra money on clothes and the clothing market attempted to meet its new-found popularity.  
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.

"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.
"Fielding, “Late Increase of Robbers,” 76.
"Lemire, “Peddling Fashion,” 73.
"Ibid., 77.
"Ibid., 69.