

Woman, the Crowds, and City in *Moll Flanders*

FU Qiang (傅 强)

In this essay, I shall demonstrate that *Moll Flanders* is a flâneur novel, i.e., a novel employing an urban pedestrian figure (flâneur/flâneuse). Following Dana Brand and Walter Benjamin's writings on the genres of "flânerie," I shall explore the ways in which *Moll Flanders* deals at least in part with the nature of metropolitan culture and social life, and/or the urban culture and subjects of capital more particularly. The characters' interactions in the novel are, as I shall demonstrate below, almost exclusively constructed as relations of "exchange" defined in terms of contemporaneous anxieties over the burgeoning market and the societal changes this entails.

The Origin of Flâneur before the Nineteenth Century

Before I elaborate further on the notion of *Moll Flanders* as an early form of flâneuse, I would like to briefly sketch the ways in which this figure of the wanderer appears on the scene. Dana Brand finds sources of flâneur in Renaissance England. In *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1991), Brand maintains that

The figure that Benjamin discovered in the feuilletons of the 1830s was not a new form of consciousness that had sprung into being in conjunction with the development of enclosed shopping spaces that facilitated strolling. [...] By the early nineteenth century, this process was far more advanced, as well as far more geographically widespread than Benjamin represents. The manner and strategies Benjamin associates with the flâneur may be found throughout the literature of Europe long before the late 1830s [...]. [T]he flâneur is as English a phenomenon as he is a French one, and it was primarily from England that he was imported to America. (13)

Noting the coalescence of economic and political trends that helped to fashion London into a metropolis with the seeds of an “English consumer society,” Brand finds the roots of the flâneur “in the culture of spectacle that developed in London during its first period of extraordinary growth, in the sixteenth century” (14). According to Brand, long before the nineteenth century, London and Paris were rapidly changing metropolises filled with crowds, where traditional social forms were being called into question and modern forms of production were producing a society of spectacle. Meanwhile, literary genres which represent the city of London became popular, such as John Stow’s *Survey of London* (1597) which celebrated “the city’s magnificence and vitality, and a tendency to divide the city into separate spaces” so as to give the reader a sense of a coherent map or model of the metropolis (Brand 17). Then came another genre called the “Coney-catching” books which describe and classify the various forms of criminal and deeds. Both genres facilitate readers to make sense of the city “through observation of its inhabitants and environments” (Werner 7).

Brand finds “the origins of the flâneur’s conception of the urban crowd, if not the origins of the flâneur himself” (21) in the English Theophrastian character books popular in seventeenth-century England. Theophrastus, as a follower of Plato and Aristotle, wrote his *Characters* in the third century B.C., categorizing the various types and character traits of human personality. According to Brand, Sir Thomas Overbury popularized the English version. The English character suggests that certain people dressed in a certain way, frequenting a certain place and exhibiting certain recognizable facial expressions and gestures, could be expected to behave in a certain way. Overbury’s theory of the character suggests that, with the metropolitan tendency to see others as characters, an urban crowd may be read as a text (22).

Brand further traces the development of the flâneur in texts of periodical publications. Tom Brown’s *London Amusements* (1700), Ned Ward’s *London Spy* (1698-1700), and the *English Lucian* (1698), for instance, presented the city that welcome disorientation and sensory overload through the eyes of a detached observer. For Brand, these texts, though presented a carnivalesque view of the world with “a perpetually new and discontinuous spectacle that can be consumed by a spectator unable to influence what he or she observes” (27),

came closest to capturing modernity since the writers question power relations and portrayed the public spaces, which once part of the respectable political and economic worlds and which were portrayed as places with “lustful and illicit activities” (Brand 29). The urban spectator neither interpreted nor judged the content he or she presented to his readers.

Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, in *The Tatler* (1709-1711) and *The Spectator* (1711-1712), introduced a spectator who watches the chaos of the modern city and possesses the power to impose “order, continuity, and coherence in the act of watching what appears to be chaotic” (Brand 33). Steele and Addison depict this figure as a bachelor detached from any obligations but with a moderate income to spend his time in interpreting his surroundings.

Like Brand, Ferguson asserts that the flâneur appeared in a society much earlier than Benjamin suggests. The “mere flâneur” belongs to the “vast majority” who, in Ferguson’s words, “will best be ordinary flâneur [...] given to random speculations and ‘silly conjectures’” (29).

According to Charles Baudelaire, the “true” flâneur needs crowded space and population. The density of the urban experience which allows him his detached perspective on human existence, the crowning glory and chief interest for the metropolis:

The crowd is his elements, as the air is that of the birds and water of the fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. [...] Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. (9-10)

For Walter Benjamin, the city is a space which can be read as a text and where the flâneur, the city stroller, “goes botanizing on the asphalt” (Benjamin 36). According to Benjamin, the flâneur, being abandoned into the crowd, is the expert observer of the urban landscape. Benjamin develops his theories of flâneur literatures by examining Charles Baudelaire. As Parsons comments, “Benjamin never admits the possibility of a flâneuse but then Baudelaire himself never defines the flâneur either” (23).

In her seminal essay *The Invisible Flâneuse* (1985), Janet Wolff finds that most women are not included in these public spaces, apart from the exception of such “marginal women” as the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, and the passing unknown woman. She agrees with Benjamin on the marginality of the flâneur and confirms his statement that “[t]he anonymity of the crowd provides an asylum for the person on the margins of society” (Benjamin 40 and 170). Wolff further points out that the flâneur, as a kind of modern hero, moves about the city freely, “observing and being observed, but never interacting with others” (40). However, Wolff complains that all the figures invoked to epitomize the experience of modern life in the nineteenth-century city are invariably males, and even in those rare examples of female streetwalking, “they are subject of his gaze” (42).

In addition, Wolff indicates the invisibility of women on nineteenth-century streets as both an ideological construction and a social reality. Wolff employs the word *flâneuse* to express her disappointment to the fact that women are excluded from public space: “What is missing in this literature is any account of life outside the public realm, of the experience of the ‘modern’ in its private manifestations, and also of the very different nature of the experience of those women who *did* appear in the public arena” (45).

While noting that certain women were visible and active indeed in the nineteenth-century city, Wolff fails to acknowledge the urban walking of those women workers, women philanthropists, and women consumers as the paradigm of modern flânerie. Wolff only regards those activities as “the fleeting, anonymous encounter and the purposeless strolling” (44). Parsons cautions that in doing so, Wolff limits flâneur to “a racial and classed identity as well as a gendered one” (5). Wolff’s article arouses debates among feminist scholars since 1990s, resulting in repeated attempts at revision of the much restrained urban topology drawn by her. In her “The Invisible Flâneur” (1992),

a repartee to Wolff's article, Elisabeth Wilson points out that the passivity and victimization of women has been over-emphasized by earlier feminists. This over-emphasis makes impossible a perspective into women's resistance to the lines of demarcation in the nineteenth-century cities. She highlights the visibility of such flâneuses in late-Victorian London as white-collar female workers, working-class women, female shoppers, women journalists and writers, and even prostitutes. For Wilson, the nineteenth-century cities provide various opportunities for those women, albeit the fact that they may also have been regularly exploited and oppressed in the city. Wilson criticizes Wolff's description of the flâneur as a figure of authoritative observation, as well as Wolff's dichotomous concept of separate private/public spheres as evidence for the exclusion of women.

Parsons expands the notion of flânerie and examines a series of urban explorations carried out by female wanderers and writers. In *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (2000), she contends that the flâneur, characterized as "adaptability, multiplicity, boundary-crossing, fluidity," is "more influentially a conceptual metaphor for urban observation and walking that extends even to the present day" (41). According to Parsons, many women writers as well as their heroines, all perform flânerie with a perspective as "necessarily less-leisured, as well as less-assured, yet also more adventurous" (42), displacing "the traditional masculine *Bildungsroman* or *Kunstlerroman* onto female journeys around the city and over time" (122).

In addition, Parsons criticizes Wolff, Pollock and Wilson for their negligence of the fact that the post-Benjamin flâneur is "more influentially a conceptual metaphor for urban observation and walking that extends even to the present day" (41). In this way, Parsons wishes to propound a concept of flâneuse which is distinct from the flâneur that has been temporally universalized:

A reassessment of the figure of the flâneur indicates that the concept of the urban spectator is ambiguously gendered. This androgyny undercuts the myth that the trope of the urban artist-observer is necessarily male and that the woman in the city is a labeled object of his gaze, from outside a gendered structure of literature. (42)

The Feeling of Streetwalking

Moll Flanders is a story about leaving home, about losing home and about not being able to tell the difference between loss and relinquishment. It is about a woman who wanders not because she can afford to, but because she cannot afford not to. Moll, as I see, is constantly on the move, wandering literally across the landscape or from one home to the next, moving perceptibly and repeatedly. *Moll Flanders* is a story of both wandering and feeling.

We normally associate traditions of wandering with the figure of the flâneur, or the anonymous man caught up in the crowd. Mobile figures, as the center of texts which appear in the eighteenth century, tend to inhabit more marginal social positions. This essay investigates the increasing interest in the difficulties of wandering in literary representations of women during this period of intense and rapid commercialization. My argument is that Moll represents the forerunner of the later figure of the flâneuse who speaks from a marginal position. Specifically, through readings of *Moll Flanders*, I hope to provide material for thinking about the origin of the flâneuse in this period.

We can begin to see how Defoe's *Moll Flanders* incorporates a kind of ongoing, contested reorganization and reconceptualization of space by looking at how Moll's wandering reflects the map of a rationalized, commodified space. In her earliest childhood years, she is without parish residency and spends several years "among a Crew of those People they call Gypsies" (Defoe 10-11). While there is no single way to read Moll's childhood experiences, her itinerancy, shared as it is with a larger group, would evoke the large population of mobile people and displaced individuals roaming the landscape. It is also her walk that leads her to an apothecary shop where she becomes a thief. After her first act of crime, she roams through streets:

I cross'd the Street indeed, and went down the first turning I came to, and I think it was a Street that went thro' into *Fenchurch-street*, from then I cross'd and turn'd so many ways and turnings that I could never tell which way it was, nor where I went, for I felt not the Ground, I stept on, and the farther I was out of Danger, the faster I went, till tyr'd and out of Breath, I was forc'd to sit down on a little Bench at a Door, and then I began to recover, and found I was got into *Thames-street* near Billingsgate. (Defoe 152)

Not only does she lose her way in the many corners and turns but more importantly, she loses her sense of guilt during aimless wanderings.

Many of Moll's adventures, from picking pockets to stealing goods, take place within crowds since these provide "a criminal freedom of movement and numerous targets" (Fisher 73). For instance, one of Moll's most renowned criminal episodes involves attempting to steal a gold watch from a young lady while surrounded by people. By adopting the look of a respectable woman of the middle class, Moll pretends to be a relative of the 13 year-old young girl. Shoved into this intended victim by the commotion of the crowd who were excited to see the King's coach pass by, Moll steals the gold watch of the young lady and then escapes: "I Took my leave of her in the very Crowd, and said to her, as if in haste, dear Lady Betty take care of your little Sister, and so the Crowd did, as it were Thrust me away from her, and that I was oblig'd unwillingly to take my leave" (Defoe 203).

By employing the power of costume, Moll disguises her gender and class, become faceless in the crowd. With commercialization and the opening of more public spaces, the crowd takes a new shape: faceless, unapproachable, and indifferent. Moll makes use of this newly formed entity in her new profession, achieving a kind of privilege for her role as flâneuse---anonymity in the midst of a public scene and a temporary freedom.

In an environment that an eighteenth-century audience would readily recognize but which was not often realistically documented, Moll strolls throughout the city, through familiar venues, "hoping for opportunity wherever people congregate" (Fisher 73), and thus shows the reader a common public world where people must negotiate with crowded urban settings. One evening, for instance, having "strayed "into the streets and "wandered about I know not whether," Moll performs as a spectator who looks out upon an urban space and responds to it as if it were a "coherent and infinitely entertaining spectacle" (Brand 186). At this point in the text, Moll appears to be confident of her ability to interpret everything she sees. She resembles a social type who figures in some of the writings of Charles Baudelaire and his twentieth-century critic, Walter Benjamin, as well as writings of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson whose heroines perform flânerie. Moll may be seen as an early exponent of the role of the earliest form of flâneuse, the forerunner for Mrs.

Dalloway and other flâneuses in nineteenth and twentieth century literature and an early anticipation of a form of consciousness that is often considered characteristic of the twentieth century. As an urban spectator, the process of her development is intimately associated with the progress of the historical forces such as “urbanization, the development of consumer society, the cultural ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, and the development of modern techniques of image production” (Brand 187).

A Commodified Woman in Commodifying Space

On the surface, the story of *Moll Flanders* is not very different from the pattern of Defoe’s other novels in which a hero or a heroine rises from poverty to riches. It is a quest for survival, a search for economic and social stability. The central character is striving to achieve independence and self-sufficiency in the face of adversity. Most of Defoe’s novels are object lessons in perseverance. For instance, both *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll* succeed in engaging our sympathy and understanding largely because we identify with them in their struggle to bring life under control and master their own destinies. What generations of readers have admired them both is their sheer determination to survive. But *Moll* reacts to her initial poverty with a resilience and determination that *Roxana*, never displays. To escape from the plight of poverty, *Moll* first married her lover’s brother and then even her own brother; she is a whore and a thief. Like all Defoe’s characters, *Moll* reveals an intense emotional reaction to money. For example, she regards the Gentleman from Bath as a “Harvest” that must be gathered before the coming winter of the inevitable death of love. In another walk in the “Cloisters” a gentleman mistook *Moll* for a prostitute because of the place he encountered her and invited her to the inn. *Moll* offered no resistance to what eventually happens to her partly due to the curiosity to “see the End of it” but more due to the desire for some monetary contribution: “My Business was his Money, and what I could make of him” (Defoe 179).

The death of the matron and the closing of the school in *Moll*’s younger years symbolize the closure of ways for her to gain identity through vocational skills and work. This episode confirms *Moll*’s dependence upon the commodification of her femininity to survive. Losing traditional sources of

maintenance, she must put her sexual labor on the market as an item of exchange in order to remain self-sufficient. Moll's spatial and vocational dispossession denies a work-based gentility. Her sexual capacities served as an item of exchange that she puts on the marriage market with the goal of obtaining middle-class status. By moving from one place to another, Moll successfully manipulates her situation to make herself marketable as a potential bourgeois wife and to maintain a degree of autonomy in her transactions. By relocating herself to a new place where nobody knows her, she pitches into renewed circulation of herself in the market as a viable sexual currency. She unfixes herself in space so that she can retain her identity as a virtuous widow in order to continually renegotiate her economic and class position.

Fortunately, long before Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Moll finally has already demonstrated that landed property can bring women security. She successfully establishes her plantations in the American colony as well as inheriting another plantation from her mother. As Carol Kay concludes, "in the culminating achievement of her career, Moll furnishes a considerable estate in the colonies and so joins the class of landed proprietors, the fundamental base of political power in a nation as most eighteenth-century people conceived it" (93).

Eighteenth-century London undoubtedly supported a thriving consumer culture and a diverse literature of urban spectatorship. By the early eighteenth century, as Brand observes, London's topography "included works written with all of what Benjamin identifies as the most prominent features of the literature of the flâneur" (187). By transforming the flâneur into the pick-pocket and thief, Defoe expands the possible scope of urban literary consumption in response to changes that were taking place in the public's understanding of the nature of the city.

Geographical location and movement of women in spaces outside the home facilitate the understanding of the emergent commercial culture of eighteenth-century Britain. Representations of female consumers are part of a broader discursive construction of London as a center of commercial activities. Moll's mobility demonstrates the geographies of women as part of a broader marketplace, which reconstructs eighteenth-century Britain's social structure. The spatial location and movement of Moll can be regarded as a source of

class position and a means of generating gender-inflected class distinction. I see the female wanderer, as represented in Moll, as a precursor to the more fully articulated ideology of the flâneuse. In doing so, I see the earlier historical period as a first step in the progressive development of this social figure. Tracing this evolutionary advancement through and beyond the eighteenth century, we can construct other ways of understanding this earlier historical moment and examining the presence of women outside the home and the new sorts of social distinctions market culture engendered.

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