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The Impact of Colonialism in *Moll Flanders* and *The Belle's Stratagem*

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the City College of New York of the City University of New York

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Introduction

He who has sovereign power does not value the provocations of a rebellious subject but knows how to subdue him with ease and will make himself obeyed; but patience and submission are the only comforts that are left to a poor people who groan under tyranny unless they are strong enough to break the yoke, to depose and abdicate, which I doubt would not be allowed of here. For whatever may be said against passive obedience in another case, I suppose there's no man but likes it very well in this; how much soever arbitrary power may be disliked on a throne, not Milton himself would cry up liberty to poor *female slaves* or plead for the lawfulness of resisting a private tyranny. (Astell 73)

Mary Astell's reflections above capture the treatment of women in the eighteenth century and how they were no better than "slaves" under the "tyranny" of men. She is scathing in her opinion of the great poet John Milton, known for his polemics against religion and political injustice, and questions the integrity of his views on the "liberty" of women. Her view of women as poor British subjects groaning under the "yolk" of oppression speaks to the limited freedoms women enjoyed at a time when major political changes in governance were impacting England and restructuring its economy. British historian Linda Colley opines that "almost all of those engaged in trade benefited in some way from Britain's ruthless pursuit of colonial markets and from its other main contender for imperial and commercial primacy, France"(56). Britain waged wars for access to raw materials that were imported from India and North America, manufactured into commodities, and then sold in foreign markets. These wars were a drain on the treasury but they also predicted a better future for a nation that based its profit on the fluid nature of property that ushered in opportunities for diverse investments through the credit

system. As the wars ushered in opportunities for diverse investments, the world of commerce was in motion not just in England, but globally. The changing economy also impacted gender relations—ideas of masculinity and femininity. While patriarchal culture from previous centuries still existed, it had now acquired a codified structure of values based on the newly emerging paper credit system that had much to do with England's colonial outlook and ambition. In my thesis, I explore through Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* the effects of colonialism on issues of gender and social identity.

While Defoe builds his plot around the biography of a woman who navigates a social hierarchy of identity and gender, Cowley's protagonist also moves through a gendered hierarchy of social pressures that place women in subordinate positions. These are impacted by a colonial mindset in Britain, which reflects how men enact their roles as husbands and fathers. Defoe was a strong supporter of tapping into the wealth of colonies. According to Downie, "the character of native populations is often stressed in Defoe's narratives as if to indicate their readiness for conversion and civilization" (80). Defoe is of the opinion that natives of other countries would greatly benefit from being "civilized" and offers a scheme of clothing them with British wollens. Cowley, too, supported England's imperial ambitions through her plays. She was writing at a time when Britain was trying to hold on to its colonies with patriotic fervor and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had gained popularity. Adam Smith proposed:

The colonies carry out with them a knowledge of agriculture and of other useful arts, superior to what can grow up of its own accord, in the course of many centuries, among savage and barbarous nations. They carry out with them, too, the

habit of subordination, some notion of the regular government which takes place in their own country, of the system of laws which support it, and of a regular administration of justice; and they naturally establish something of the same kind in the new settlement. But among savage and barbarous nations, the natural progress of law and government is still slower than the natural progress of arts, after law and government have been so far established as is necessary for their protection. (963)

Smith's rhetoric voices support for the colonizer's professed intentions to increase the well being of its citizens and those of other nations that it colonized. Such thinking corresponds to an eighteenth century patriarchal mindset that considered males as natural heirs to protecting the rights of women. Smith's radical views were echoed in the country's marriage and inheritance laws that limited the freedom of women in matters of estate and marriage. Women lost their independence from the time that they were born. In *The Belle's Stratagem* Letitia's husband has been chosen in infancy and in *Moll Flanders* Moll has to depend on men to gain access to material wealth. While trade had made it possible for the English to capture new lands and funnel the resources of another country to its own advantage, the government's dependence on the wealth flowing in from its colonies and the struggle with other European powers for the control of resources determined the fate of a nation. The imagined nature of property in the form of credit had no tangible value. And just as imagination produced a discursive narrative of property built around credit, it also provided an environment in which human values could be reconfigured. Both Defoe and Cowley create their setting and characters against the backdrop of such an environment. Their works show how women were constrained by

laws that strengthened male dominance but they also had opportunities, which gave them more choice in deciding their future in a marriage. According to Catherine Ingrassia:

In these two different yet similar environments, individuals disenfranchised from traditional avenues of power—women, non-aristocratic men, members of the middling and lower classes—gained new opportunities through paper credit”(7).

Eighteenth-century society was shaped through an imagined narrative with which internal structures of cultural exchange were negotiated by the indeterminate value of stock by means of “paper credit.” Because an individual’s worth was determined by material possessions, it often reflected the outcome of a story. Whether the reference was direct or implied it became significant for an understanding of how people were represented in society. The treatment of gender in *Moll Flanders* and *The Belle’s Stratagem* shows how wealth was manipulated and retained through distinct socio-economic advantages men had over women. While conduct manuals laid out a behavior code for women, they were those, like Astell, who questioned the social order and refused to accept that “the husband was too wise to be advised, too good to be reformed, she must follow all of his paces and tread in all unreasonable steps, or there is no peace, no quiet for her, she must obey...”(72). Mary Poovey points to this “self-effacement” being a necessary characteristic “proper for women” who were not supposed to “express their own wishes, make their own choices” like men who could “imprint their images,” or their desires on them; women were the “receptive glass”(4). Male authority received more impetus from colonial successes and philosophers, like Adam Smith, whose argument that “law and government have been so far established as is necessary for their protection” rested on the assumption that it was Britain’s birthright to manage the wealth of its colonies to make

the nation prosperous. Colonies were supposed to defer their wealth to the colonizers because they were “superior.” This deferment exerted false notions of power and authority on women who were supposed to defer their desires. Women had very limited education, which did not give them the broad critical equipment expected of them when they blundered through challenging situations that objectified and exploited their sexuality. They leaned on the advice of conduct books that “transformed the female into the bearer of moral norms and socializer of men, they also changed the qualities once attributed to her nature and turned them into techniques for regulating desire” (Armstrong 89). Women had little autonomy in choosing a future husband. Much depended on the money they brought into the marriage. The “loose alliance” that was forming between the “landed elite” and the “upper bourgeois society” of an “upwardly mobile social group” dominated the socio-political scene, changing existing patterns of “cultural values in personal and family life”(Stone, 174-175). Old bourgeois values of ownership were clashing with the ideals of personal autonomy.

The rise of a commercial culture in the eighteenth century produced “a psychological shift in the meaning of family and kinship,” altering the structure of English society and “putting pressure on the traditional kinship system that had been a hallmark of English society since earlier times (Perry, 112). Family wealth was concentrated within and most of it was passed on to the oldest male sibling, sidestepping the daughters. The disinheritance of daughters in the presence of male siblings from family property affected a woman’s worth. Nancy Armstrong describes how a woman was valued in the domestic sphere:

Of the female alone did it presume to say that neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual; only the more subtle nuances of behavior

indicated what one was really worth. In this way, writing for and about the female introduced a whole new vocabulary for social relations, terms that attached precise moral value to certain qualities of mind. (3)

Women were not expected to question institutions of marriage and education or those that punished people when found guilty of a crime but often writers, including Defoe and Cowley, did stir up a silent resistance. The production of culture was associated with the regulation of passions to perform an identity. As J.G.A. Pocock observes, “it was the perceived function of property and commerce to refine and polish human passions and behavior”(117). This association was based on the “still surviving view of women as a species of property, or as a medium of exchange between proprietors” (117-118). But women were becoming more entrepreneurial and were finding ways to express their individualism. I explore this aspect in Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and Cowley’s *The Belle’s Stratagem*.

Even when women were circumscribed in their domestic roles, they were able to contribute to the newly emerging economy by buying goods for personal consumption or by exchanging their views as writers. They found ways to step out of their individual personas and cross over to new and imagined roles. Moll’s disguise and Letitia’s masquerade affirmed their fantasies. Masquerades functioned in a cathartic role as they allowed women to give shape to their fantasies by embracing a fictional identity.

Thus masquerade metamorphosis insinuated a new global fluidity, not only between bodies but between states of being. Foreign costume breached ideological divisions between the indigenous and the exotic, European and Oriental, the light and the dark races, Northern and Southern. Occupational dress overthrew the hierarchy of rank and

class, destroying distinctions between masters and servants, consumers and producers....
(Castle, 77)

Masquerades did not formally take place in social events until 1713 in Britain but the concept of disguise was being explored in different forms. Defoe used its rudimentary ideas in his fiction. But towards the middle and later parts of the eighteenth century, the masquerade had established itself in private evening parties as well as in public events. Hiding behind a mask or putting on a disguise gave women greater sexual freedom and confidence in emphasizing their imagined identities. Cowley explores the boundaries of real and imagined identities in *The Belle's Stratagem*. Because masquerades were heavily influenced by foreign travel, they also allowed identification with other cultures and even commodified them. However, the possibilities of crossing over to imagined identities presented opportunities to explore the nuances of internal world-views as well as emulating an appearance that was admired for its exotic allure in Britain. Whether it was the identification with a Mogul princess or European lady of fashion, the use of colonial narrative, which freely circulated in society, helped in strengthening stereotypes. Disguise also helped writers in claiming a different identity when they wanted to write freely from the perspective of the opposite sex. Writing was associated with a gendered discourse. Defoe adopted the identity of a female to write to *Moll Flanders*. According to Armstrong: "As such, gender provided the true basis for human identity"(28) and helped authors to hide their political affiliations. They did not want to come across as "royalist" or "dissident" because the "female view was simply different from that of an aristocratic male and not likely to be critical of the dominant view"(28). Women were considered to be in a better position to understand the social experiences of women.

Novelists could make a woman's response as flattering or caustic as they wished if the woman in question interpreted behavior on the basis of sexual rather than political or economic motivations. Domestic fiction mapped out a new domain of discourse as it invested common forms of social behavior with the emotional values of women. Consequently, these stories of courtship and marriage offered their readers a way of indulging, with a kind of impunity, in fantasies of political power that were the more acceptable because they were played out within a domestic framework where legitimate monogamy—and thus the subordination of female to male—would ultimately be affirmed. In this way, domestic fiction could represent an alternative form of political power without appearing to contest the distribution of power that it represented as historically given. (Armstrong 29)

Female subordination to males also affirmed that the power structure was internally being redrawn with colonial conquests. These fantasies of power were transformed into patriotic fervor when the British began to lose colonies in America. Writers gained authority when they could discuss their political differences behind the mask of writing from a female perspective. Yet these female perspectives were open to criticism in female reviews as the gendered discourse was assumed to play a role of political authority.

The reality for women was distorted because the power of eighteenth-century patriarchal society distorted individual justice while claiming to uphold egalitarian principles. Social personality had become a product of exchange and ownership through property. Women were viewed as property and even if they could exercise their choice in marriage they lost their freedom after marriage as whatever they possessed came to

belong to their husbands. They had to find self-expression within the limiting boundaries of freedom.

If Daniel Defoe was ahead of his times, he was also deeply conflicted. The economic and socio-political climate of the eighteenth century contributed largely to this dilemma. We see his career as a journalist, trader, and fiction writer attest to the diverse influences impacting his life and his writings. While he was sympathetic to the treatment of women and the poor in society, his solutions for improving their condition did not entirely stem from a belief in individualism. Almost six decades later, towards the last quarter of the eighteenth century, not much had changed when Hannah Cowley stepped in as a playwright. In the works of both these writers there is an underlying central theme of economic turmoil that impacts the fate of their protagonists in relation to their financial security. In Defoe's time, Defoe after thriving economically for a period suffered financial setbacks and tried to recoup his losses but did not experience luck, though England was able to eventually come out of its debt.

I chose Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, which is a novel, and Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*, a play, despite their difference in genres, because both give us penetrating insights into similar issues of gender and identity that were being impacted by England's colonial ambitions. The presence of a colony in *Moll Flanders* and the emphasis on English women and customs being superior to European culture in *The Belle's Stratagem* affects the gender relations and take us through a power struggle between Defoe and Cowley's characters bear the effects of a changing economy and the importance of finding a marriage partner belonging to the gentry. If we consider how Defoe and Cowley's personal histories found expression in their writing, it gives us a representation

of the changing social environment shaped by the politics of major events. Defoe was extolling the benefits of having credit when England was eager to spread its colonial influence while Cowley was championing the nationalist spirit in the aftermath of the English losing colonies in North America. The wealth of colonies and the possibility of owning large estates with slaves from Africa and liveried servants in India must have dazzled the imagination of many.

In Defoe's novels, there is a puritan understanding of good and evil, which supersedes male authority. Defoe, who had been raised as a puritan himself and was being prepared for the ministry, had found a different calling as a trader and found success, but never accepted the blame for the frauds with which he had been charged. Shinagel cites James Sutherland's research in pointing out that Defoe, in his business ventures, aimed for "quick and high profits, even if it compromised his conscience as a Puritan just a little"(37). This brings us to question Defoe when he ardently supported government schemes of investment in the South Sea Company. But there is a more credible fear out which both Defoe's characters operate in dire situations. They fear how extreme poverty would make survival extremely hard. Defoe was sharply critical of the narrow scope of skills that was required of girls and in the *Essay Upon Projects* he mentions "the great distinguishing difference that is seen in the world between men and women in their education"(Defoe in Shinagel, 142) Defoe as a male was also fortunate in experiencing an upward mobility in status by dabbling in the stock market and marrying into a wealthy family that brought him a handsome dowry. Not surprisingly, he favored the financial system of a credit economy and how it determined individual worth.

Both writers, though separated by many years in their literary accomplishments, tried to negotiate a better future for women in terms of education and marriage laws. When Hannah Cowley began her career as a playwright, a woman could expect to find happiness only if she belonged to the middle class and was married to a bourgeois gentleman. Cowley's husband was serving in the East India Company when he died and left Cowley to navigate social and political hurdles as a female writer. Cowley's plays reflect changing gender relations and the negotiation of identity by the procurement of financial and emotional stability through marriage.

In the following two chapters, I will focus on how colonialism impacts the hierarchy of social identity and gender in *Moll Flanders* and *The Belle's Stratagem*. In the first chapter, I talk about the credit economy as Defoe saw it and how it plays out in the social anxieties of *Moll Flanders*. I use Bhabha's theory of master-slave relationship to explain the problem of identity in *Moll Flanders* and I analyze how the presence of Virginia and its fluctuating value impacts Moll's future. In the second chapter, I discuss social mimicry and problems of identity in the context of Britain's diminishing authority as a colonial power. I show how the confidence of male authority and female individualism is impacted by the losses sustained in trade and commerce, and weakens position of women after the Marriage Act of 1753.

Chapter 1.

Desire, Disguise, and Identity: The Impact of Colonialism in *Moll Flanders*

Section 1.

Paper Credit and the Problem of Social Identity

In Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Moll aspires to be a gentlewoman but that wish remains elusive for most of her life until she is transported to Virginia as a convict in her later years. Moll's material ambitions reflect the aspirations of Britain's emerging bourgeois middle class, economically driven by the trade and exchange of commodities. It is evident that Moll feels the constant pressure to reinvent her social image as she continues to wrestle with the problem of identity and is anxious about her value in the marketplace of marriage. As Moll reaches middle age and transitions from being a servant to a plantation owner, she realizes that she cannot cash in on her physical charms to bait a husband. This begins her career as a criminal. Moll uses different disguises to evade recognition but even as she crosses over to the subjects of her fantasy, and carries out the wish fulfillment of her desires, Moll ultimately conforms to patriarchal norms of authority being impacted by Britain's colonial milieu.

In *Defoe's Narratives*, Richetti, addressing the source of Moll's popularity argues that Moll is not a "person in the ordinary sense" and her personality is not the result of cumulative experiences; rather, she is an entity who invokes a world of specific language and events (95). That Moll's experiences of being born in a prison and later of being raised in an orphanage essentially have nothing to do with her criminal career, and Moll is not served so "badly by the social circumstances surrounding her childhood"(97).

Backsheider, another prolific critic of Defoe's novels, in *The Making of a Criminal Mind* also leans more in favor of Moll's independent power of judgment rather than the pressure of circumstances. She debates whether Defoe was effective enough in showing how "necessity overcame reason" and cites Moll's addictive greed for money in wanting to continue as a thief (46). Backsheider proposes that Moll is "more a study of criminal minds and of the addictive nature of human beings than of the effects of poverty"(47). Her analysis highlights a significant problem in Moll's moral universe while Richetti's maintains that Moll's response to "hostile circumstances" in her environment is "manifestly a dialectical one" (102). She insists that for Moll's personality to assert itself she must confront the "negativity of the other." In other words, her dialectic with society is constructed from a place of negation. While Backsheider questions Moll's choice of continuing with the life of a criminal, both she and Richetti hold Moll responsible for the choices she makes and how she maneuvers an exploitative world. Their discussion deflects the impact of socio-cultural pressures on hierarchical systems of appropriation, which discriminate against Moll and place her in a subaltern position. I examine Moll's social circumstances and argue that while it is important to consider individual agency it is not the only determinant. Moll's choices cannot be reductively explained away if she represents the consciousness of an environment shaped by Britain's colonial expansion. In her quest for personal happiness, Moll unwittingly conforms to the norms of a patriarchal bourgeois society financially motivated by the credit economy. When Richetti observes Moll's description of "events leading to the seduction" and how they "reveal the qualities of mind and the self-positioning skill that she is to acquire later," he implies that she is in complete control of her circumstances (103). However, Richetti overlooks the

intense pressure of a socio-cultural environment, which exerts a deep impression on Moll's psyche and subverts her autonomy as an individual. The evolution of a person's character is far more complex, as we see in the case of Moll whose powers of self-reflection are gradually eroded. Because eighteenth-century class and gender hierarchies present a complex picture of society with its stakes in a materially driven power structure in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Moll's use of disguise to appear as a gentlewoman or commit a theft is merely her response to existing social stereotypes. For instance, being a servant girl does not give her the same privileges as other members of a household while being married to men of status elevates her social position.

It is ironic that Daniel Defoe who encouraged his countrymen to invest in the stocks of the South Sea Company would himself be overwhelmed with debt and poverty at the time of his death. Though Defoe disapproved of the company's financial practices, he stood firm on the institutional soundness of the credit economy. According to Backsheider, the South Sea Company, founded in 1711, held the promise of unlimited wealth in the colonies of South America and was seen by most people as "a means to restore public credit and fund the War of the Spanish Succession" (447). Defoe, too, was a "tireless proponent of colonization and improving trade routes"(439); supporting the war meant control over trade in South America. After his initial criticism of the company, he eventually backed the government in partnering with it to help England recover from its enormous national debt. The company projected itself as a major trading corporation capable of converting the country's debt into stock that people could buy (450). It was clear that Defoe's support of South Sea Company was politically motivated despite the fact that he "bought South Sea Company stock for his daughter (457). Defoe's

endorsements of the South Sea Company, even when it was failing, were reflected in his journalistic tracts and fiction through which he tied individual value to material success. In the *Director*, one of the papers that Defoe published, he encouraged people to “hold on to their South Sea stock and to support public credit” while covering up the corruption of the government employees who had vested interests in the company (464-465). In his fiction; for instance, *Captain Singleton*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Moll Flanders* the success of his characters largely depended on their adventures in foreign lands. In *Moll Flanders*, he makes a persuasive argument through Moll’s character as she transitions through the credit economy and how that affects her value in society. Moll’s predicaments highlight the socio-economic changes taking place in Britain when colonial markets and investments in foreign lands formed large parts of British revenue.

In a profit driven socio-cultural environment, Moll is acutely aware of her shifting social status and appropriates her self-worth either through her material assets or personal attributes. Rojal notes that she uses the stock several times in her narrative (98). For instance: when she gives in to her employer’s older son’s sexual advances, her remorse appears genuine as she says, “I had a most unbounded Stock of Vanity and Pride, and but a very little Stock of Vertue;” but then she is dazzled by “fine Words, and the Gold;” and her self-reproach sounds insincere (26). Then in another episode with the captain’s wife, she smugly discloses her finances, claiming that her “Stock was but low” for she had made “about 540 *l.*” at the end of her “last affair”(73), but had already used some of it. She again worries about her “stock” when she tells the banker: “I was going into the North of England to live cheap, that my stock might not waste”(125); but it’s just another ruse to acquaint herself more personally with him. She can barely hide her joy when her

son reads to her his “Grandmother’s Will,” and she discovers that she’d been “left a small Plantation,” that had a “Stock of Servants and Cattle upon it,” which was for her personal use (279). The word “stock” is also sometimes used for human labor. Moll is quite at ease referring to humans as stock, which should not come as a surprise because when Defoe wrote this novel, he was encouraging people to invest in the South Sea Company that mostly traded in human labor on plantations in Virginia.

As Ingrassia asserts, the early eighteenth century saw England’s idea of investment shifting from ownership of property in the form of land or tangible goods to “speculative investment” in multiple forms of paper credit, such as stock, bonds, and annuities; and “property became increasingly unreal”(5). Because paper credit offered no concrete value for what was received, the investors created an imaginary value of the goods they purchased and varying consumer tastes produced financial anxieties in a fluctuating marketplace among shareholders and merchants. The effect of government investment on foreign trade, originating from colonial goods, had a trickle-down effect. It created a conflicting socio-cultural environment where “individuals disenfranchised from the traditional avenues of power—women, non-aristocratic men, members of the lower and middling classes—gained new opportunities through paper credit” (7). At the same time, those creating a narrative of profit around an imaginary value of goods also felt anxious. People were no longer secure in the accepted class order of the feudal system when power and freedom of choice was proportional to the size of a person’s estate and women and children were part of a large family unit that made life decisions for them such as whom they could marry and what recourse they had if their husbands abused them. According to Lawrence Stone, in the sixteenth century most children were “so

conditioned by their upbringing and so financially helpless that they acquiesced without much objection to matches contrived by their parents” (128). Women fared no better and surrendered the rights to their estate once they were married. “In some ways the status of wives, as well as legal rights, seem to have been on the decline in the sixteenth century, despite the genealogical accident by which so many women became queens at that period” (137). But by the eighteenth century belonging to the upper class was not the only sole privilege of the landed elite and the role of women became possible beyond the domestic sphere. These possibilities created anxiety around “shifting constructions of gender” and what constituted the main role of females in society as socio-economic relations were contested and reconfigured (Ingrassia 7). We see these anxieties playing out in the character of Moll Flanders.

Section 2

The Master- Slave Relationship and Disguise

Homi Bhabha's theory on the formation of identity in the master-slave relationship that colonization entails is particularly useful in understanding the processes at work as we apply it to Moll's situation. Bhabha proposes that it is the "doubling, dissembling image of being in two places at once that makes it impossible for the devalued" self to conform to the identity that the colonizer's invitation of acceptance demands.

The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification—that is to be *for* an Other—entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness.... (64)

The colonized man wants to occupy the colonizer's place but his desire to be different from his native disposition becomes antithetical to his purpose. He cannot deny what makes him different even if his behavior is modeled after the personality he seeks to emulate. The act of replication ironically involves varying degrees of "otherness" or person he seeks to become in the formation of his colonial identity. Therefore, nuances of behavior set a person apart because it cannot erase the cultural and historical specificity and imitates a stereotype that is pre-conceived and exists more in perception than in reality. For instance, Moll does not want to conform to the "pre-given identity" of a gentlewoman yet she wants to be known as one. When she poses as a gentlewoman, her denial of the original notion accompanies a transformation but her reasons for wanting to

become a gentlewoman are different from the social stereotypes that prevail around her. The credit-paper economy that colonization brought about and the slave-master relationships that were defined in the colonies affected human behavior in the colonizing nations as well. Bhabha's theory is particularly useful in understanding male and female social behavior when human qualities were distinctly gendered. Manliness was attributed to power and ownership of property while managing the household was primarily a woman's job. As women's roles were circumscribed within the domestic sphere, women found themselves in vulnerable situations when their rights to own property or divorce were not equal to a man's. A married woman lost the individual rights to her property while her husband became the owner to all of her assets. If as a married woman, she lost most of her privileges, as a widow she regained most of her dead husband's wealth. Women's roles in society were relegated to housekeeping once they were married. Even when women went to school as children, they were given different subjects to learn that turned them into good housewives. Men, meanwhile, were rigorously prepared for higher education with a wide choice of subjects, which included science.

Bhabha's theory affirms that Moll is conscious of the those qualities that distinguish her from the privileged "other," and in forming her image after that of a gentlewoman also considers the "Gifts of Nature," which she has been bestowed with and the "ladies with all their good fortunes could not furnish"(20).

But Moll's transition from poverty to wealth is also dependent on her being circulated, first, as a commodity in her home country. The novel is being written at a time when England's burgeoning credit economy was impacting its cultural sensibility. Capitalistic ventures with foreign investments were affecting how people gained status in

society. Gender and class hierarchies, in fact, were being exercised at home in England. But they were not exactly similar to the ones followed in the colonies. Moll was placed in Britain's own hierarchy of class and gender relations but these hierarchies were being impacted by possibilities of similar hierarchies presented elsewhere in British colonies. As Bhabha's discourse on mimicry elucidates: "Colonial desire acts to displace the "whole notion of identity and alienates it from its essence" (127). The presence of a colony distorted the "notion of identity" in the context of socio-cultural norms. According to Bhabha, the presence of a colony acts as a "disturbing force, a magnetic power placed at the periphery tending to distort the natural development of Britain's character"(127). Britain faced a crisis of poverty and unemployment and the role of women was being redefined within a domestic sphere. What was different now as opposed to earlier times before the industrial revolution, was that women had entered the market of a capitalist society that saw power in ownership. Moll's rise to prosperity is possible only when she lands in Virginia. She is able to rise on the social and economic ladder in Virginia and not in England where there were laws preventing married women from holding property in their name, which made it difficult for her to visualize herself as an individual. Pollock, too, points to Moll's return to "America and economic security only after she has taken her place within" a hierarchy 'and, through her marriage to a "gentleman" and the settlement of her estate upon her son, she is in a position to reenter the kinship economy in the "proper" role of wife and loving mother" (Kindle, 4247).

Moll's relies on disguise, even in Virginia, when she goes to see her brother hiding her face in a hood. She seems to have become comfortable in the habit of using a disguise as that helps her assess what opportunity a situation might present. From the

beginning of her story to the end, she is never comfortable disclosing her true identity, though her tireless efforts to become a gentlewoman of wealth ultimately succeed.

Section 3

Virginia and Economic Security

If Moll's mother had not been shipped off to Virginia, perhaps Moll's resentment of the incidents surrounding her birth might not have been so severe. The presence of Virginia creates the tension in Moll's narrative that propels the story. Her mother's incarceration for a petty theft and transportation to Virginia as a slave not only leaves her destitute but makes Moll conscious of her self-worth and affects her self-image. Moll's continuous efforts to conceal her identity reveal the subtext of a deeply discriminatory class hierarchy that limits her opportunities of survival. Even as Moll is drawn to the idea of being a gentlewoman, her perception of female gentility is quite different from that of her nurse or the mayor's wife, and she's smart enough to realize this when she rues: "the rest did not understand me at all, for they meant one Sort of thing, by the Word Gentlewoman, and I meant quite another" (14); that in their opinion, "it meant to live Great, Rich, and High." Moll senses how contrasting notions of female gentility differ from her own perspectives of being a gentlewoman and devalue her position in society. Gentility was an important epithet that influenced how people perceived themselves in a layered class system. In the eighteenth century, when slave trade was thriving, ownership of property was not just the defining feature of class hierarchy; it now included human labor. Having servants was an important indication of social status. The appropriation of authority and possession of human labor and monetary assets also produced a social mindset, which affected gender relations. Women were considered to be physically and intellectually weaker than men who exercised their newly found economic power with a sense of unquestioned authority. While servants slogged away in affluent homes, women

too being economically disadvantaged found limited opportunities for work outside their homes. We can understand why Moll as a “poor desolate Girl without Cloaths, without Help, or Helper in the World,” was vulnerable to the charitable dispensations that came her way; for instance, as a three-year-old child when she is placed in an orphanage, or when she is taken in by the mayor’s household on the death of her “good old Nurse,” and finds that she has nowhere to go (17). Moll would have found it difficult to survive as a servant if the Mayoress hadn’t come to her rescue. She wanted to earn money through her talents and viewed them as an investment for future earnings.

Richetti observes that Moll’s “self-confidence” fails in the “context of the socially established moral cynicism of the household”(100). According to him, Moll becomes a victim of her own “sense of power” because she vainly believes that her “natural accomplishments” will secure her with the marriage she desires. Richetti argues that we should see this episode as the “beginning of her strength rather than merely the first surrender to circumstances” (101). He contends that Moll is transforming herself to “meet the needs of experience,” and that she is essentially at “first a passive entity to whom things happen.” That throughout the novel Moll depends on changes to happen from the outside, for opportunities to offer themselves to her so that she can profit from them. He argues that Moll “responds to events and dominates them,” but cannot initiate them. However, Richetti does not consider the images of individual identity that affect Moll’s perception of self and are characterized by material worth. She has to subscribe to the demands of male authority and is not in full control of her transformation because she has to wait for opportunities. Moll’s domination of events is mere illusion. In essence, she becomes a commodity, being traded for a “hundred guineas” and surrendering to false

promises. She spends more time blaming herself and the “Devil an unwearied Tempter so he never fails to find opportunity for Wickedness” that he “invites” her to commit”(27). Moll does not have the insight, even as an adult, when she is trying to make sense of her follies, and her status in the Colchester household that claims to be so fond of her remains that of a slave’s. Not only is she dependent on her benefactors materially she is also dependent on how they fix her ambivalent position in society; for she may have been given more privileges in the household yet her poverty still remained a subject of discussion. We can see how Moll’s personal worth is being determined when one of the sister’s remarks: “Money recommends a Woman; the men play the game all into their own hands” (21). These remarks open up Bhabha’s discourse on the “strategies of signification” that discuss the hierarchy of “gentleman and slave,” (208) which in *Moll Flanders* is being enacted microcosmically in a household representative of Britain’s culture and politics. Bhabha opines that “forces of social authority and subversion or subalternity may emerge in displaced, even decentred strategies of signification.” In the context of Moll’s predicament, his theory further explains how

positions of authority may themselves be part of a process of ambivalent identification. Indeed the exercise of power may be both politically effective and psychically affective because the discursive liminality through which it is signified may provide greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation. (208)

Moll’s consciousness too is being covertly controlled and directed with “strategic manoeuvre and negotiation” by the household when she thinks her vanity or the devil are to blame. She doesn’t have a social identity that would fix her. The “old Lady” calls her a “Beggar(55)”. She has to make herself relevant in a culture that exercises its power on

her through her psyche by demeaning her status in society. These ambivalent rhetorical strategies she uses in her narrative to explain her actions reveal a self trying to authenticate the legitimacy of its actions, which it thinks will come from an entry into a middle-class world. She wants to affirm her own image and tries to imbibe the narrative around her of women whom she sees having the comfort of a home and not doing much to receive the privilege. How she fixes her image before them is not the same as how they appropriate her. The family's attitude towards her carries a sense of entitlement but Moll sees only its outward manifestation and not the difference in perception that causes it. She thinks by posing like them she can take their place but in reality the act of transcription metamorphoses into a separate identity that carries her own consciousness of who she is and what her experiences are.

If she leans on her vanity to project her self-image, it gives her some confidence in a social setup that fixes human value on material assets. At seventeen, she is quite aware her of physical beauty and defines it as if it holds the prospect of profit. Taking delight in her fancy, she says:

First, I was apparently Handsomer than any of them. Secondly, I was better shap'd, and Thirdly, I sung better, by which I mean, I had a better Voice, in all which you will I hope allow me to say; I do not speak my own Conceit of myself, but the Opinion of all that knew the family. (20)

Though Moll is being deceptive of the "Conceit" she claims not to have, she is also consciously aware of how her value is being judged by others in her social circle. "The opinion of all" that knew her objectifies her outward appearance as she represents the values of her environment. As much as Moll asserts herself with the childish fantasy

of using her beauty and education to gain entry into the middle class, it does not add to her worth in society. Moll is made to feel conscious of her low social status, and fails to realize that those talents that give her advantage over the sisters only eroticize her presence. She ends up being used for sex by the older brother whose behavior implies the assumption that his family owns her. Even if it may seem to Moll that it was her vanity that led her astray when she gave in to his seductions, in reality she was just caving in to the basic human need of actualizing her self-worth. The older brother is implicitly aware of the “gentleman and slave” hierarchy and takes advantage of her low social position. Here colonial authority operates at a different level in relation to gender yet it sends a similar message of inadequacy as it does to the subaltern mind. Moll remains concerned about her “virtue” and “honor,” labels that appear to be embedded in the very nature of gentility and are used in the novel to describe both male and female character. But one can’t help noticing how these terms come up in relation to economic status. The commodification of these terms and how they determine value is illustrated frequently in Moll’s responses to men in her attempts to find a husband. After her second marriage fails, she learns that virtue, which she undertook to mean: “Being well Bred, Handsome, Witty, Modest, and agreeable” did not matter unless she had “Dross” or money, which had become “more valuable than Virtue itself”(73). But her virtue becomes significantly elevated when she returns from Virginia to Bath, an expensive resort in England, where men preferred to keep mistresses. The colonial experience adds to her material worth with her “cargo of considerable Effects”(109). She considers the married man in Bath to be a “compleat Gentleman,” since he is a “Man of honor and of Virtue, as well as of a great Estate,” who does not solicit her for sex. She seems to be at ease with him being

married and he eventually lands her as his mistress. Both she and the Gentleman don't seem to mind that he was married. Mason's study on the status of women in England during Defoe's time is particularly helpful in understanding the problems couples faced in securing a divorce. As Mason notes "bigamy was not considered a major offence for those people seemingly permanently deserted and too poor to afford a divorce." Moll could be considered a bigamist too, since she never legally obtained a divorce from her second husband but Moll's Bath lover could have afforded a divorce yet he preferred to have a mistress. The complexity of the relationship that both Moll and her married lover by degrees agree to participate in can be analyzed in relation to Mason's research on "bigamy and polygamy" that became "topics for great debate because of the difficulty of obtaining a divorce and because of the inadequate marriage laws which offered little protection" to those who wanted to marry again while their spouses "were still living"(68). It serves to explain why he was afraid of his wife's relations finding out that he had a mistress when he was sick but Moll wishes to "Tend and Nurse him" like she had done before, which shows that she has come to accept her place as his mistress who can only be there when social circumstances permit (114). The part that necessity plays in pushing Moll to remove, as she claims, the "bars of Virtue and Conscience" are also significant. Moll has no economic security left when the goods from Virginia that she keeps waiting for are destroyed at sea. She is at such a loss without them that it prompts her acceptance of being willingly exploited by the Bath gentleman. Moll remains insecure, even with the money she receives from her brother/husband in Virginia to "make up the Damage of the Cargo" that she had been left with to release him in general

him from any responsibility (120). The guise of a wealthy widow becomes Moll's refuge and allows her to pose as a gentlewoman as she tries to secure what's left of her money.

Section 4

Easy Wealth, Disastrous Investments, and Promising Prospects

Moll is eager to go to Virginia for the first time with her third husband in the hopes of finding a fortune. She restrains her enthusiasm when she learns that her husband is the owner of “three plantations,” and an Estate. With the promising prospect of easy wealth in a colony, Defoe is clearly pushing the idea of the home country not having enough opportunity to sustain the aspirations of its citizens. Downie points to Defoe’s imperialistic ambitions as the reason for such propaganda, and cites the *Humble Proposal* (1728) in which ‘Defoe complained that the British did not “sufficiently apply themselves to the improving and enlarging their colonies” to increase manufacturing. “Britain had to find new economic settlements, virtually anywhere” and it was the essential to improve colonies in North America for economic stability (79). Moll’s economic stability also depends on the money her husband would make in Virginia. She quickly adjusts her argument to suit his views on the colony being a valuable option when he’s displeased to hear her “undervalue his Plantations” (78). She cannot carry on the pretense of being indifferent to his property in Virginia as prospective income. It doesn’t help her at first to disclose the truth about her 500 *l.* worth to her husband, but she touts her feigned reluctance as a good self-marketing strategy and sees how “he could not say one word,” as the truth sinks in and he’s unable to hide his disappointment (79). But Moll plays up her value in the stock market of marriage and manages to assure him of the soundness of investing in her as a wife that eventually he does not “repent his bargain.” Though Moll prides herself in her husband-baiting skills, the irony is that she might not have married a

plantation owner if her friend, the Captain's Wife, had not established the authenticity of her social position.

As Moll justifies her actions, her husband's disappointment in her small dowry is implicit in her lengthy discourse. He too had been hoping to find a good bargain in marrying Moll and it's no surprise that she feels insecure in her marriage as her husband also relies on her material value. Unfortunately, they both make a bad investment in choosing each other. But Virginia changes Moll's outlook on the economy of profit and loss. Her stock as a married woman really doesn't rise though she leads a comfortable life for the first few years. Her mother-in-law owns everything while Moll is still a marginal entity as a wife. The limited power she yields in her household is evident when she wants to exercise her freedom in ending her marriage. She has to first convince her mother-in-law of the senselessness of continuing her marriage with her own brother before she takes the "more desperate course," and tells him the secret directly (94). Though Moll is now positioned as a strategist negotiating her way out of a disastrous investment, she's still trapped within a material hierarchy of power. However, life in a colony serves a dual function for Moll: It gives her the chance to experience prosperity and form the habits of luxury that women of middle-class gentility were able to afford. She leaves Virginia with a "very good Cargo" with social realities of a privileged life that influences her choices (99). According to Shinagel, "Moll's formative education in gentility has a lasting effect on her and when she returns to England, she is drawn almost instinctively to the favorite resort" of Bath (154). But Moll's return to her home country, however, does not guarantee the financial security she seeks. Defoe does not want to convey that the failure of her life in Virginia can be offset by promising financial prospects on British soil.

Moll's fourth marriage is short-lived. Her narrative only exposes how the social mindset she has absorbed usurps her own judgment, each time she is faced with a profitable opportunity. Moll is unable to resist the lure of gentility, and when she meets James, her Lancashire husband, displaying the gallantry of a gentleman she gets easily taken in by his false show of fortune. Kohnisberg contends that Moll is driven by a "will to survive" and "forced into these situations" because of necessity. Parting with James when she is pregnant with his child is hard for her but she has no option. If Moll is in essence an honest person, as Kohinsberg argues, then her self-condemnation is "gratuitous, not hypocritical" (38). We see her deliberating on the culpability of mothers who give up their children to total strangers and goes so far as considering the act as "intentional Murther, whether the child lives or dies"(163). This is so because she becomes immune to the emotional bonds of motherhood and disposes off her children in an enterprising fashion, treating it as a necessity. One loses count of how many children she abandons from Colchester to Virginia. Moll seems to have developed an internal mechanism for dealing with the trauma of parting with yet another child each time she is married. In a way, Moll becomes representative of England's inability to nurture its own people by being unable to sustain its investments. Moglen's essay on Defoe's female narratives speaks to Moll's predicament. She proposes that when female "sexuality is detached from desire and maternity, it becomes merely entrepreneurial, and the children who mark what becomes a parodic family must either be commodified or ignored" (36). Moll too appears to be "detached" from maternal feelings when she finds a way to dispose off her baby. When she entrusts her baby to the care of a "Cottager's wife" for ten pounds, it frees Moll up from the responsibility of motherhood to marry again (166). In England

motherhood becomes extremely difficult for Moll; however, Defoe gives us a dubious picture of her maternal instincts in Virginia. Even in Virginia, she continues to hide her identity and does not rush to embrace her son when she sees him, proclaiming the “anguish” of her mind and “yearnings of Soul” that seem genuine (299). If her cunning is put on display, so is her emotional bond with her son, but doubts linger about her being truly penitent of her criminal past. It is only when she hears of the money being left to her that she experiences the urgency of writing to her brother, knowing full well that her son would read it instead, as his father was nearly blind. In Virginia she is able to experience the maternal feelings that had been buried in her for years. One could say that Moll is acting out self-interest; which may be true, but now she doesn’t have to worry about taking care of a child and not having the means to do so. Moll’s residence in a colony plays a significant role in determining her course of action.

Like the women before, who helped Moll in her predicaments, Moll now reposes her trust in her son. He becomes the only successor to her estate, as she tells him to get a “Writing Drawn” by which she would leave everything she owned “wholly to him, and to his Heirs” before she left for England (313). But Moll’s affluence is again built around the presence of a male who now happens to be her son with whom she has a lasting relationship. Her life in Virginia is spent spoiling her husband who is ultimately rewarded with having married a woman of considerable fortune. The social hierarchy now serves to fortify Moll’s status as a gentlewoman. She is the owner of a “Plantation” and is “worth so much in England”(317). Her penitence in reality only serves her personal interests, which in turn have been conditioned by her environment. If Defoe is trying to show how Moll as a woman overcame her obstacles in life, he succeeds, but eventually exposes how

Moll, and women in general, occupied a status similar to slaves yet did not realize how they were being manipulated by a rigid social hierarchy. Moll continues to lead a life of pretense and is unable to develop relationships based on any deep, significant connections. Each time she divorces or loses a husband, she moves on to the next one without much self-reflection. According to Donovan, "Moll's relationships with other people, whether based on sex, affection, gratitude, or common interest, and whether or not they are confirmed by legal or religious ties, generally prove casual" (28). Moll's sense of self has been gradually diminished. Moll tries to transgress boundaries set by the existing conventions of gender; she thinks she has attained liberty but that exists in how she perceives freedom. Moll struggles in the novel to exist as an individual, but she can only do so by conforming to a patriarchal culture that is being subjected to the indirect effects of colonial authority displaced from its seat of origin. Moll does not consciously trade her individuality; she essentially becomes a representation of the social sensibility that was developing in Britain, along with the desire for land and ownership.

Section 5

Escaping Crime and Servitude: Life in a Colony

Moll's career as a criminal exposes her desperation and poverty and how she gradually becomes addicted to wealth. First she steals out of necessity and then out of habit. When the banker, her fifth husband dies, and the umbrella of economic security is lifted, she gradually loses her remaining financial resources and is driven to a life of crime. The Governess, as Richetti points, "becomes Moll's instructor and protector in crime" (120). Moll is enabled by her to steal and becomes a member of the network of thieves. She becomes part of a female sub-culture" that runs "institutions within institutions" which "mimic, and thereby undercut the legitimate operations within society." Her criminal actions reveal the paradox of a victim dependent on circumstance and a criminal free from pressure to commit the crime. "Moll as she begins her criminal career exists to enact that paradox rather than to present the psychological reality or the social quality of desperation"(123). But this does not address how Moll is never free from the pressures of bourgeois society. Moll admits that she would "gladly have turn'd" her interests to "any honest Employment" if it was given to her. But the governess who could have helped her knew little of any "honest Business" and Moll who was by now well past middle age did not think herself capable of using her physical appearance to trap a gentleman (186). Moll's character not only reflects the social sensibility, it now enacts the consciousness of that sensibility. She keeps moving in world of crime because other ways of earning money are not those that put her up on the pedestal of being a gentlewoman and is left to use her skills as best as she can to survive. If habit prompts her to continue as a criminal, it's because her powers of reflection have worn off and she

“quickly” forgets the “Circumstances that attended” the crime (194). She is now led in a mindless stupor, participating in the world of crime because she has lost the capacity of constructive thinking. She has “no more thoughts of coming to a timely Alteration of Life;” just sheer negativity and hopelessness. Money is no longer the reason for her continuance in crime. She has been reduced by degrees to a position from which she operates without emotion, not because it is non-existent but because she has not been allowed to form lasting bonds in productive, meaningful human relationships. She exists as a protean entity, as Karl points out that Moll has no real idea of who she is: “She has little sense of herself moving as an individual in a certain time and place. She has no ideal, no absolute, no remorse, no real pity or compassion: survival is all and for that disguise is sufficient” (93).

Yet Moll does show signs of fear and guilt. When she is put to work by the governess to steal from innocent unsuspecting individuals, she experiences the thrill of disguising herself as a man, among the other identities that she masquerades. Defoe’s penchant for disguise seems to become a recurring theme in the novel like that of Virginia, which rearranges life with fresh possibilities. Initially, Moll’s forays into crime fill her with guilt but she manages to convince herself that the “Devil” is doing the prompting. After her first theft, she admits, “It is impossible to express the horror of my Soul” but then she can scarcely walk, as terror seizes her with the thought of being caught and sent to Newgate (180). However, these feelings of “horror” gradually subside as the battle between poverty and hunger takes over any sense of compunction for her crimes. Though her downward spiral in the world of crime continues for a while, there are moments that save Moll from becoming a hardened criminal. She recoils out of fear at the

thought of murder while stealing a gold necklace from a child and blames the “Devil” before sending the child back home (182).

Backsheider analysis of Moll’s criminal career appears to be convincing when she points out, “Moll is not starving and at several points in her life had earned enough money by making lace or by quilting” (46). Her inability to leave the world of crime stems from her Hobbesian belief of “security and self-preservation.” Backsheider contends, “Moll is more a study of criminal minds and of the addictive nature of human beings than an examination of the effects of poverty.” But this would be true only if we were to examine the addictive nature of crime in isolation. Moll has been conditioned by her environment into wanting a life of comfort that has so strong a grip on her psyche that she cannot break away from it. She has absorbed a cultural sensibility that makes her want to “live easie without working at all” (190). Moll as an individual is not allowed to thrive. Her femininity can only be expressed in relation to bourgeois society. While her disguises make it possible for her to secretly enter another world, as a man or as a grieving wealthy widow, they do not liberate her inner self. If making money by plying the needle, as a child, seemed a respectable way of life, it doesn’t give her the same sense of security or social status that being a gentlewoman entails. As Moglen says, “Writing a story of a female individualist that demonstrates the impossibility of female individualism, Defoe lays bare a central paradox of the ideology that shaped his thinking, as it also shaped his life” (21).

When Moll’s criminal adventures come to a halt with her arrest and imprisonment at Newgate, even her repentance appears to be a disingenuous. Moll has by now perfected the art of disguise, not just in physical appearance but also in hiding her true motives—

feelings of remorse and repentance are overshadowed by terrifying thoughts of being put to death. Moll's complete transformation as an honest penitent remains suspect, despite her claims of the minister extracting a sincere penitence. She had sorrow and humiliation for her "past, and yet had at the same time a secret surprising Joy at the Prospect of being a true Penitent," which held out the "hope of being forgiven;" thereby making the idea of repentance enormously appealing (268). The appearance of her Lancashire husband, though, makes penitence truly possible because she finally sees the chance of a new life with a man. Only a man can authenticate her existence in a penitent world when she is transported with him to the colony of Virginia. According to Backscheider, Defoe's book "includes some propaganda" for the "Transportation Act of 1718"(49). The following passage discusses its significance.

Between 1580 and 1650, some 80,000 people went, voluntarily or otherwise, to be servants in the North America colonies. Between 1651 and 1700, the figure rose to 90,000. Individuals and companies bought servants in England for the colonies; companies sometimes bought entire shiploads of them. Some of these servants volunteered to go to America; in effect, they contracted themselves to a merchant or a ship's captain for passage, and he would then sell them for a specified period of time; in fact, there is evidence that such indentures were acceptable partly because of their resemblance to apprenticeships or to the binding of young people to families as servants....(Backscheider, 49)

Moll and her husband escape servitude in the colonies by bribing the captain of their ship with Moll's stolen goods. They reach North America not as transported felons

but as free individuals, ready to buy a plantation. The life that Moll had always dreamed of now presents itself to her along with a husband.

Chapter 2: Colonialism and The Crisis of National Identity in *The Belle's Stratagem*

Section 1

Colonialism and The Marriage Act of 1753

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, British colonial aspirations greatly suffered with the loss of American colonies. With the political and economic turmoil sweeping Great Britain, there was a surge of patriotism in England as people tried to reassert their national identity. Theater too felt the impact of a heightened patriotic fervor when *The Belle's Stratagem* by Hannah Cowley broke ground with its immense popularity, running a record twenty-eight weeks, after it was first staged in 1780. As a female playwright, Cowley seems to have experienced the vulnerability of being a woman in the eighteenth century and reacted to the politically charged environment. Cowley's husband was serving in the East India Company when he died. Her plays explore changing gender relations and the negotiation of identity by the procurement of financial and emotional stability through marriage. After the success of *the Runaway* (1776), under the famous Drury Lane's theater manager Garrick's tutelage, she was able to strike it on her own when Garrick was no longer on the scene. Her style drew comic elements of the Restoration era from other comedies. *The Man of Mode* by George Etherege, *The Country Wife* by William Wycherly, and *The Rover* by Aphra Ben being a few of them. The Marriage Act (1753) had weakened the position of women in society, and Cowley probes its repercussions on women. While earlier eighteenth-century comedies like *The Conscious Lovers* by Richard Steele emphasized a person's inner worth over material value, the "laughing comedies," like *She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith, *The School for Scandal* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and *The Belle's*

Stratagem by Hannah Cowley took class distinctions as a part of society and debated issues of culture and national identity.

The Belle's Stratagem also reflects the patriotism of the English, as well as the author's personal experiences of country and city life. Cowley who was raised in Devonshire moved to London after marriage, and with her husband away in India, she found the time to socialize and write about her observations of English society. The characters in this play portray the cultural mindset of her acquaintances and friends. Letitia and Doricourt, around whom the drama takes place, are representations of eighteenth century fashionable society. Her caricature of Doricourt is of a fop full of himself whose appreciation of an Englishwoman's charm undergoes a sudden transformation when Letitia drops her mask. However, Cowley ends enough bombast in the end to make it sound hollow and insincere. Cowley also develops a subplot of a couple caught in the buzz of London fashionable life—Lady Frances trying to negotiate an equal partnership with her husband Sir George Touchwood. Cowley's explores the dynamics of the relationship between Sir George and Lady Frances against the background of the 1753 Marriage Act. Lady Frances' success in bringing about a genuine change in Sir George is disputable. Lady Frances' compromise ultimately does not ignore her husband's wishes.

In *The Belle's Stratagem*, both Letitia and Lady Frances have to manipulate social realities to earn their future happiness. Letitia has been betrothed as an infant and been raised to believe that Doricourt would be an ideal match as a husband. While Lady Frances is already married but feels deprived of a normal social life by the overbearing demands of her husband. Letitia's education seems immaterial in securing the romantic

interest of a reluctant fiancé but her skill in witty repartee and staging a masquerade enable her to overcome Doricourt's obsession with European women. Behind the drama of Doricourt and Letitia and Sir George and Lady Frances lies the social reality of gender relations, the insecurities of England as a colonizing nation, and how women negotiate a partnership in marriage with men. Doricourt has returned from France, which had colonies in Africa. His travels have exposed him to the possibility of having multiple romantic liaisons. Letitia, too, is well versed with the Mogul culture, where rulers kept many more than one wife. When she mentions the "Mogul seraglio" it brings up images of a man with many wives— stereotypes from stories that came from Indian colonies. Misty Anderson in *Female Playwrights and Eighteenth Century Comedy* opines that Cowley uses "women and marriage" in comic events and the reference to the "mogul seraglio" makes a farce of marriage for "heroines to participate in marriage's fantasy of personal and social fulfillment"(71). It allows Letitia to indulge in her own fantasy of marriage. But even women of fortune like Letitia had an uncertain monetary value. Anderson states: "Cowley tried to prop women's uncertain status as a contractual subject on the discourse of nationalism"(70). She briefly draws our attention to Letitia's father, Hardy's comments on the "colonial and foreign others" in relation to Britain's economy, while most critics read the play in conjunction with Britain's changing marriage and property laws and how they affected the status of women in society. I extend these arguments and examine the reasons why Doricourt's transformation does not seem authentic, and Letitia loses her independent judgment as a woman. I place his transformation in the context of changing social perceptions being affected by England's

role as a colonizing nation—how that influenced domestic commerce and gender relations.

Section 2

Social Mimicry, Colonial Influence, and National Identity

There is a social sensibility at work that guides Letitia's performance. Cowley presents an affluent middle class engulfed in a mesh of appearances and social exchanges full of pompous `mannerisms. According to Bolton, even if husband and wife were supposed to be a "single social unit: in practice they were often divided at odds with one another"169). The "tension" was often "assuaged" by women being "transformed into obedient subjects-even as such performances raised the specter of duplicity," but Cowley's play is supposed to challenge a woman's response to male authority. However as Bolton suggests:

Cowley's *Belle Stratagem* makes visible the impossibility of mimicking feminine identity without simultaneously engaging issues of class and national identity:

Letitia's performance as country bumpkin destroys English modesty by translating English reserve into a hoydenish disregard of polite (upper-class) behavior; her performance of "Foreign Manners" captivates but in glaringly sexual ways; proper femininity can only be equated with English upper class behavior. (170)

Letitia when "mimicking feminine identity" knows her place in the hierarchy of class and power relations. The mimicry carries nuances, which suggest that Letitia is familiar with the boundaries within which she can perform her social role as a woman. Though the play depicts eighteenth-century bourgeois society's fixation on French and Italian culture and the ramifications of the

Marriage Act of 1753, it moves through a gendered discourse, which makes women relevant in a marriage only when they accept a subordinate position and don't question the laws and customs that govern their lives. While Doricourt relishes the prospect, multiple liaisons, Letitia doesn't seem to mind that her future husband has been chosen for her in her infancy. All she is worried about is being "agreeable in Doricourt's eyes" as she discloses the cause of her "fear" to her father (I.iv 249-250). Ironically, while Letitia seeks her fiancé's attentions, Doricourt trounces around in society boasting of his success with women. His comments on the "pair of decent eyes" of French women and "beauty" of Italian women, recall the indulgence of a Mogul prince enjoying a harem of women. His callous indifference toward Letitia is the driving force behind her stratagem to ridicule the presumptuousness of her fiancé and make a mockery of his preference for European women. Doricourt's window of understanding women has a limited perception. His indifference to his fiancé is so deeply rooted in his obsession for French and Italian women that he can't appreciate them beyond their physical appearance. According to Anderson (2002), he pays lofty tribute to continental women based on his understanding of beauty "to be a performance" without any "intrinsic" worth (156). But her suggestion "that something, that nothing," is an "erotic" quality that Doricourt is searching for in Letitia is only partially true—Doricourt's description of an ideal woman defies description. When he counters Saville's argument on the merits of "true, unaffected English beauty" (I.iii.79), his obsession for European women is embedded in a vocabulary that inverts the slave

and master relationship between a man and a woman to achieve a farcical response:

Faugh! thou hast no taste. *English beauty!*
 'Tis insipidity; it wants the zest, it wants poignancy
 Frank! Why I have known a Frenchwoman,
 Indebted to nature for no one thing but a pair of
 decent eyes, reckon in her suits as many counts,
 marquises, and *petits maitres* as would satisfy
 three dozen of our first-rate toasts. I have known an
 Italian *marquizina* make ten conquests in
 stepping from her carriage and carry her slaves
 from one city to another, whose real intrinsic
 beauty would have yielded to half the little grisettes
 that pace your Mall on a Sunday. (I.iii.82-93)

Doricourt's effusive praise of French and Italian women reveals the ridiculousness of his claims: He is impressed with women who treat men like "slaves" and make many "conquests" in love with just a "pair of decent eyes" or the way they step out of "a carriage." The quiet bearing of an Englishwomen in his eyes lacks "poignancy" as he finds nothing tasteful about them but plain "insipidity." Instead of making a genuine effort to know Letitia, he attributes his lack of interest to her shy demeanor. She does not inspire him with the "violent passion," of European women. Doricourt's self-indulgence

prevents him from making an effort in reaching out to Letitia, whom he thinks to be too shy, and is irked by his inability to “draw her into conversation” or meet his gaze (I.iii.97-98). Yet he

is ready to marry her and “secure her felicity” (I.iii.105)—a “felicity” that Letitia is too wary of and sets about to charm and deceive him. It is naturally assumed that after Doricourt marries Letitia, he will be the one securing her happiness. His attitude is that of a person who is confident of his superior position in the hierarchy of gender. He is valuing and judging women as objects. His assurance to Saville of his honorable intentions sounds insincere as he behaves like a lord who has become stronger with his knowledge of all the privileges that men enjoy in foreign countries, as masters of their colonies.

Doricourt’s fashionable society persona introduced in the opening scene between Saville and Courtall describes his foppish, effeminate lifestyle. His attention to appearance and flirtatious “gallantries” with women are a source of envy to friends, most of all to Courtall who feels envious of Doricourt’s social status among women as he complains: “Doricourt has cut us all out! His carriage, his liveries, his dress himself are the rage of the day” (I.ii.95-96)! Cowley’s depiction of Doricourt’s foppishness is reminiscent of Sir Foppling’s penchant for fashion in *The Man of Mode* as is his popularity with women to Dorimant’s libertine lifestyle. The gossip columnist who pleads with the Porter for “a few anecdotes” of his master’s Parisian adventures and news of “his favorite lady in Town, or the name of the girl he first made love to at college, or any incidents that happened to grandmother or great aunts” speak of Doricourt’s fame and status in upper-class society (I.ii.17-20). The Porter blabbing about his master’s

European tours, and idolizing him as more than a “baronet or a bit of a lord” who has traveled beyond London sets the stage for the absurdity that characterizes Doricourt’s obsession with Europe and establishes his the identity as a “master” who bears an important rank. The conversation reveals the subtext of an economic hierarchy where master-servant relationships become symbolic of social status. Doricourt’s French footman mistaking Saville for a trader, and Saville’s bewilderment at his friend’s choice of employing “a flock foreigners” for servants also divulges the extent to which Doricourt pretends to push himself away from his English roots. While he eloquently praises the merits of “French fellows” as servants, he disparages his own “countrymen” as “the worst footmen” and likens them to “the Romans” who “had minds too enlarged and haughty to descend with a grace to the duties of such a station.” (I.iii.12-23) Also implicit in Doricourt’s praise of the complete subservience of French servants are his presumptuous notions of authority. Lisa Freeman (2002) ties this subservience to a “distinct femininity” and presents Doricourt’s favorable perception of an Englishman as a “friend” in “an almost transcendent category of masculinity.” (180) According to her: “Suppressing the deep class division among Englishmen, Doricourt transforms the issue of national identity into a relation of gender”(180). Or more accurately, his gender-based preference is tied to “the issue of national identity.” It is this issue of national identity that becomes so important in the play that one cannot ignore England’s role as a colonizer as it contested its position with other European power vying for the ownership of the same colonies. The Porter’s describes Doricourt traveling all over Europe and dancing with the “Queen of France at a masquerade.”(1.ii.38) But Doricourt discredits an Englishman because he “forms opinions, cogitates, and disputes” (I.iii.29-30.). However, his French

fascination only establishes him as a person inflated with his own ego, unable to see beyond his self-serving affectations. Cowley is contesting Doricourt's superficial French obsession with authentic English identity.

When Doricourt acknowledging the influence of Italian "powers of music" (I.iii.41) and the latest French "fashions," he pretends to be cognizant of England's worth as "sweet follies of the continent imperceptibly slide away whilst senators, statesmen, patriots, and heroes emerge from the virus of Italy and the Frippery of France" (I.iii.51-54).

Section 3

Anxiety and Loss over Colonial Wealth

To Doricourt his impending marriage with Letitia fulfills another purpose—that of keeping an estate between friends. The reason behind his professed noble intentions is the vast estate he would lose if he chose not to marry her. A woman’s property became her husband’s after marriage, and as Earle (1989) affirms, “marriage in reality became a trade-off, between affection, material interests and social ambition (189). Letitia and Doricourt’s future becomes part of a business arrangement between their merchant parents. Doricourt realizes the importance of money involved in marrying Letitia and on the pretext of his “honor” half-heartedly consents to marrying her. His coldness affects Letitia so deeply that she bewails the nature of men to Mrs. Racket, saying:

Men are all dissemblers! Flatterers! deceivers! Have
 I not heard a thousand times of my air, my eyes,
 my shape—all made for victory! and today, when
 I bent my whole heart on one poor conquest,
 I have proved that all those imputed charms amount
 to nothing—for Doricourt saw them unmoved.
 A husband of fifteen months could not have
 examined me with more cutting indifference. (I.iv.144-151)

In a way this “indifference” sets the plot in motion. She is made painfully aware of her Englishness by Mrs. Racket who reminds her of Doricourt being “a man who has courted and been courted by half the fine women in Europe” (I.iv.169-170) and who has little to remember her by since his “first feelings” (I.iv.169-174) were over long ago. But

Letitia's determination to overcome Doricourt's indifference has dual reasons—her father's intimation of the consequence of her refusal and her being “over head and ears in love with him” (I.iv.231) according to Mrs. Racket. Letitia presumes Doricourt's indifference can be turned to love if she makes him hate her! “Because ‘tis much easier to convert a sentiment into its opposite than to transform indifference into tender passion” (I.iv.273). She fails to recognize that Doricourt's attitude toward women is symptomatic of male domination in a gendered hierarchy that represents men as superior and English women as submissive where social expectations have been scripted for her as a woman. The discourse of European women being superior is being drawn out against the perceived docility of English women who must follow their husbands or fathers in order to be recognized as worthy English women whose future is tied to a male to whose expectations a woman must conform. Letitia sees herself in relation to Doricourt engaged in a power struggle and as she wonders why “victory” wasn't hers she reveals an underlying sense of insecurity that is based on male approval.

Doricourt's fixation with foreign women is offset by Sir George's patriotic sentiment for Lady Frances, an “English beauty” from the country (II.i.9). Sir George, unlike Doricourt who views Letitia with “cutting indifference”(I.iv.151) is extremely possessive of Lady Frances and points out that he has “found in one Englishwoman more beauty than Frenchmen ever saw and more goodness than Frenchmen can conceive”(II.i.151). Along with Doricourt's preference for French servants, European women, and male English friends for homosocial bonding, George Touchwood's character provides yet another glimpse of masculine ego in the play. As Anderson notes, like Pinchwife in *The Country Wife*, Sir George wants to keep Lady Frances away from

the glare of “London world” and “rakes like Courtall”(157). Though the marriage contract of 1753 confirmed a woman’s position as a wife, it compromised her economic status. Sir George is able to manipulate Lady Frances and put himself in charge of her decisions, as he is the husband. Initially conceding to Sir George’s authority, being a woman, Lady Frances reconciles to her position as a wife. She allows him to flaunt his self-assured pompous behavior; she is not empowered within a social and legal framework to exercise her choices. In contrast to Lady Frances, Letitia enjoys a hypothetical freedom of choice. But her future hangs in the balance due to Sir Hardy’s business deal with Doricourt’s father. Cowley shows how Letitia is commodified through a contractual agreement, its coarseness coming to light as Sir Hardy offers to “hang the signing and sealing,” on noticing Letitia’s “melancholy” manner (I.iv.229-236). At the same time, in admitting to Letitia that the enormous estate he owns will go to Doricourt if she refuses him, Sir Hardy makes her aware of the implications of her refusal to marry Doricourt. With the knowledge of her future tied to a commercial contract, Letitia is unable to disregard Doricourt’s indifference and her social graces are subject to his approval. The possibility of the penalty she would have to pay if she were to stray away from an arranged match makes her vulnerable to a fiancé, giddy with the fresh varnish of foreign travels, and undermines her inner-worth as a woman. Because Doricourt has “been courted by half the fine women in Europe,” she seeks to redeem her English identity by reconstructing her image in relation to her perception of French and Italian women. Her father, unlike her, appears to be confident about his personal identity in relation to Britain’s economy and its international problems. Wrapped-up in excitement, he exclaims:

That's a pretty question! How do I perceive
 everything? How do I foresee the fall of corn and
 the rise of taxes? How do I know that if we
 quarreled with America, Norway deals would be
 dearer? How did I foretell that a war would sink
 the funds?.... (I.iv.199-204)

According to Anderson, while her father articulates his English identity through his knowledge of the "British economy in relation to its colonial and foreign others" and uses it to his benefit, Letitia understands her "national identity in relation to an eroticized international world and negotiates between these two positions"(157). However, what Letitia actually "negotiates" is her self-worth, and she is willing to compromise her natural identity to gain Doricourt's affections. Her monetary value has been determined by her father, and operates in society as part of her individual worth. But his mention of "America" plays on the English anxiety of losing American colonies, which also underscores a weakening of male authority. Her father's lack of self-confidence affects her too. Perhaps that is why she is only too willing in the end to accept Doricourt's sudden character transformation.

Her split self embodies the economic problem that Doricourt's desire has constructed: the Englishwoman is debased in relation to her exotic other, yet she is also the means of securing wealth through marriage. She uses this tension, like the international dilemmas her father describes, to create value. (Anderson 157)

Letitia's confidence depends on the confidence of Sir Hardy's business with the America. But the loss of business from an American colony jeopardizes her father's

prospects and makes her vulnerable too because her value fluctuates with the worth of her father's stock. Just as Doricourt's indifferent attitude becomes a cause of concern for Letitia, so does Sir George's over-possessiveness become a bone of contention with Lady Frances. Sir George who mostly appears as a jealous husband has some interesting points to make about social identity. Worried about Lady Frances' recent interests in socialization, he confides in Doricourt exclaiming, "such is the blessed freedom of modern manners that, in spite of me, her eyes, thoughts, and conversation are continually divided among the flirts and coxcombs of fashion." (II.i.67-70) Comparing Doricourt's European fascination to Sir George's jealous obsession of his English wife, Cowley presses the argument that healthy sexual relations do not depend on English or French stereotypes. Sir George's admission to Doricourt that he "married Lady Frances to engross her" attention to himself reveals both his power and powerlessness as a man. (II.i.66) His arrogant authority in controlling his wife finds social opposition from Mrs. Racket, who as her name suggests likes to meddle in her friends' personal lives whose role is similar, in a way, to Lady Sneerwell's in *The School for Scandal*. Like Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Racket considers it her pastime to break up marriages and entertain herself with social gossip. But Mrs. Racket is a kinder version of Lady Sneerwell because she actually does Lady Frances a favor as she helps her to resist her husband's manipulations.

What! Do you stand so low in your own opinion
that you dare not trust yourself without Sir
George? If you choose to play Darby and Joan
my dear, you should have stayed in the country;

'tis an exhibition not calculated for London,
I assure you! (II.i.148-152)

Mrs. Racket accusations clearly touche a nerve in Lady Frances because it helps her to reassess her own status in the marriage. She tells Sir George with an air of confidence: "Oh yes! I am going to an exhibition and an auction and the Park and Kensington and a thousand places!" Here she is able to voice the absurdity of being seen with her husband all the time, and thinks it "quite ridiculous," as a married couple "to be always together." (II.i.172-1175)

Lady Frances, though a woman of wealthy means is from the country and, as Ms. Oggle explains to Sir George, is not familiar with London's "fashionable life." (II.i.180) Sir George's insecurities about himself are revealed when he confesses he would "never have had the courage to have married a well-bred fine lady." (II.i.184-185) Such a lady according to him "lives all over the Town. In her mind every sentiment gives place to the lust of conquest and the vanity of being particular. The feeling of wife and mother are lost in the whirl of dissipation." (II.i.192-193). His passionate outburst reveals largely a male perspective of eighteenth-century England. Sir George's sentiments are a reflection of the deceptive practices that accompanied a commercial culture where the rights of women were being crushed in marital contracts and they had little freedom, either as wives or as mothers while they were married. His use of the word "conquest" plays on the notion of a power struggle between the two sexes that conjures up England's war with France over colonies. Also, men and women often found themselves bound in an unhappy marriage and often sought the comfort of adultery. (Earle 2000) But women were passionately engaged in carving a meaningful place for themselves in society. In her

reaction to Sir George's opinion of "well-bred fine ladies," Mrs. Racket voices her sentiments in their defense, calling such a lady a person for whom "nature has done much and education more." She considers a fine lady to have "taste, elegance, spirit, understanding," and be the "life of conversation, the spirit of society, the joy of public"(II.i.202-209). As Lady Francis prepares to extend her identity into that of a fashion conscious lady, Sir George's argument is not entirely without merit. He points to the emptiness in the crass commercialization of pleasures that only seek joy through conquest. Countering the accusations of being "an ill-natured mortal" by Mrs. Racket, he says: "And what is the society of which you boast? A mere chaos in which all distinction of rank is lost in a ridiculous affectation of ease," for in "the same *select* party" he finds all women of different classes behaving in a "universal masquerade, all disguised in the same habits and manners." (II.i.279-286) Sir George is concerned about his rank while Lady Francis is becoming aware of her rights as a consumer of fashion and not a commodity. Sir George's authority over his wife appears to be slipping away and his argument with Mrs. Racket betrays nervousness beyond the confines of his homelife. The struggle for authority, the loss of male confidence, recalls Britain's international drama of losing colonies.

Section 4

Transformation and the Crisis of Identity

A masquerade provides Lady Frances the opportunity to break out of her secluded existence and taste the “high life” of London. It gives Letitia an opportunity to transform her English identity in order to win Doricourt’s affections, and as Wallace suggests, “introduces us to a variety of poseurs—shady characters who exploit appearances to get what they want.” Letitia chooses to adopt a coquettish persona in order to entice Doricourt and keep him guessing about her true identity. She seducing him with witty replies, and as Freeman describes “plays upon Doricourt’s presumption that there is an essence behind every mask to produce herself both as an object of his desire and as an active agent in fulfilling her own desire.” (181) But “fulfilling her own desire” seems to be lost in her stratagem, as her main concern, which she reveals in her song, is to

Touch his feelings, rouse his soul,
 Whilst the sparkling moments roll,
 Bid them wake to new delight,
 Crown the magic of the night. (IV.i.195-198)

Wearing a mask allows Letitia to break out of her shyness, but it she became a liberating as well as a constricting experience. The mask serves to hide and reveal her identity. Letitia gets to be a lady of “wit and vivacity,” and Doricourt assumes she is French. She reveals, wearing the mask:

Why, then I’d be anything—and all grave, gay,
 capricious, the soul of whim, the spirit of variety:
 live with him in the eye of fashion or in the shade

of retirement; change my country, my sex, feast
with him in an Eskimo's hut or a Persian pavilion... (IV.i.317-321)

The masquerade provides a place for dissimulation of personal identity, yet it also constructs an alternate self, which is both liberating and potentially harmful. As a cultural institution, the “masks offered new possibilities of playing with anonymity, and they probably gave a sense of protection, a sense of almost being invisible.” (Heyl 119) To Letitia it offered the possibility to act out Doricourt's foreign fetish. The “Persian Pavillion” is suggestive of a mogul prince surveying his harem. He doesn't know the lady behind the mask, yet “without knowing her” (V.ii.17-18) loves everything about her. As Doricourt's relationship with Letitia blossoms in disguise, Lady France's relationship with Sir George is put to the test. Had it not been for Saville's timely intervention, Lady Frances's ruin at the hands of Courtall was imminent.

While London's cosmopolitan life forms the setting of *The Belle's Strategem*, Doricourt's European travels, Lady Francis' country origins, auctions, and parties speak of the diverse and bustling life of local and international experiences. Wallace offers an interesting description of cosmopolitanism in the play with the perspective that “Cowley's imagery is permeated by references to eighteenth-century globe-trotting.” And we see that

so many characters in this play are in movement. We watch them as they shift geographic location (from country to city), as they travel (to the continent and back), as they traverse the length of the metropolis, and visit tourist sites, auction houses, masquerades, and other diversions. All of this movement brings an open feeling to the text, but it also unlocks the theme of identity: many characters in

this play are depicted as fluid, capable like Quick/Hardy of assuming more than one face. (Wallace)

Against this backdrop of a bustling life, people are busy defining themselves on the basis of their possessions and travels abroad. Identities are being transformed by monetary status and social mannerisms are being presented in relation to acquired wealth. Personal identity becomes a “fluid” commodity, sometimes a disguise, sometimes real. As Cowley explores this relationship between false and real identity, she also does away with the hostility between a open-minded outlook and a narrow-minded insularity.

The masquerade also both questions and authenticates the provincialism of Lady Frances, and Letitia’s rendition of national identity in the context of England’s insecurities and ambitions. Patriotic zeal defines the worth of modesty and reserve in Letitia’s character. Wallace conceives that “cosmopolitanism” actually ‘facilitates the definition of indigenous “Englishness,” which provides for an enhanced sense of the local.’ But Doricourt’s fetish, deeply rooted in foreign fascinations, are a symptom of his own insecurities and Letitia’s masquerade reinforces their presence and overshadows his foreign fetish with a “sense of the local.” Doricourt is so impressed by the masked Letitia that he is willing to forsake “the moiety of the estate” to her father (V.ii.31). Letitia charms him by transforming her identity and the animated response from Mrs. Racket reveals that Doricourt “professed the most violent passion for her and there was a plan laid” which is intended “to cheat him into happiness.” (V.iii.75) Mrs. Racket’s persona also seems to undergo a transformation as she complies with Letitia’s “scheme” of winning over Doricourt and surprises, her friend Miss Ogle who wonders why she “didn’t try to catch the wonderful man” herself. (V.iii.5-11) Mrs. Racket’s admission of being a

widow and pretending to not have the time to pursue Doricourt appears to transform her identity from being meddlesome to being a trifle thoughtful. She deliberately gives a conceited reply as she talks of the “stout young fellows that will hang themselves,” when she marries. (V.iii.14-15) Mrs. Racket seems to be only too aware of society’s drawbacks in its treatment of women, and of the male attitude at large. Her freedom as a widow, challenges the foppish beaux of London.

Even if female fascination with fashionable life becomes a topic of conversation in the play, the men have more than their share of imitating vanities from their travels abroad. As Wallace, points out, “Letitia is utterly charming in her disguise: she is sophisticated, witty, and exciting. More importantly, she is what she really is, if only English decorum had not scripted for her a more modest and less demonstrative role.” (Wallace) But Letitia’s stratagem also parodies her English identity. She takes off her mask, knowing that Doricourt has fallen for the woman who he thinks has either a French or Italian identity, concedes that he has forced her to emerge from her “natural reserve and to throw off the veil that hid” her talents from the world. But her moment of accomplishment astonishes more than it gratifies as she proudly reveals:

You see I can be anything. Choose then my
 character. Your taste shall fix it. Shall I be an
English wife? Or, breaking from the bonds of
 nature and education, step forth to the world in
 all the captivating glare of foreign manners.(V.v.278-282)

She claims to have a fluid persona that she tells Doricourt will be at his disposal. She will be “anything” he wants her to be: the modest “*English* wife” or the foreign

“creature” who will captivate him with the “glare of foreign manners.” Letitia defines the English identity of a woman bound by “nature and education,” tying her modesty to her “education” and natural reserve, also willing to adopt a European identity. Freeman identifies this changeability

with the myth of passive womanhood, for even as it allows for fluctuations in female character, it insists that all such movements and indeed, the category of woman itself, are changelessly directed, shaped, and circumscribed by male desire” (181)

Cowley’s depiction of Letitia’s willful subjection to “male desire” portrays the eighteenth-century feminine stereotype that allowed males to dominate. Male desire dictates female freedom. Women have no authority over themselves. They are “passive” in their acceptance of womanhood bending to the will of “male desire.” This represents a woman’s individuality as a performative identity that directs her “movements” on the premise that men know what’s better for women. The struggle for authority plays out in a masquerade. Letitia’s capriciousness at the masquerade charms and resists Doricourt’s authority when she refuses to take off her mask, but as she drops her mask so does her resistance. In fact, her stratagem transforms her into a woman who feels confident being defined by Doricourt’s whimsical desires. While Cowley’s rendition of Lady Frances’ character has an optimistic tone. Lady Frances’ challenge to Sir George’s authority reflects the strength of female resilience even when women were constricted within a legal framework. According to Probert, the law was cruel to women but there were some improvements from earlier laws. In her study of the impact of the law she discourses:

What we need is a sense of proportion, an appreciation that women were not—and are not inevitably passive victims of either individual men or the collective male might of the law. This is not to deny that women have suffered manifest injustices in the past. It is merely a plea that we accept the possibility that some developments were an improvement. (259)

And Lady Frances exemplifies this development of female liberty within the constraints of her marriage, but whether she gains a reasonable freedom of choice from Sir George's controlling nature remains ambiguous. Cowley's depiction of Sir George's transformation is developmentally weak. Sir George is intent on leaving London, but all of a sudden changes with Saville's enlightening talk of society's claim to his wife as "she was born to be the ornament of courts." His rigid jealousy disappears in an instant with what he claims to be the "force" of his friend's "argument" (V.v.131-139).

Cowley's representation of Doricourt's transformation in his perception of national identity leads to doubtful closure when he declares to Letitia: "Your person, your face, your mind I would not exchange for those of any other woman breathing" (V.v.288-289). The question arises: What exactly will he change that has not been compromised? Letitia charmed him most with her foreign graces, and even when she reveals her identity she does she not speak with any degree of her purported English modesty. She lays claim to her English reserve but that is not what Doricourt witnesses. His professed admiration for "the grace of modesty!" sounds hollow and appears to be rhetorically contrived. Freeman too makes an insightful analysis of Doricourt's response to Letitia's confession, questioning

what he now claims to know? The carefully stylized rhetoric of this final declaration ironically reveals that what Doricourt claims to see is something that by the end of the production can hardly be said to exist, except as either a performative contrivance or an unproductive ideal. (183)

But contrary to what Freeman is claiming to not “exist” actually does.

Doricourt’s fascination with foreign culture that he perceives in Letitia is what he eventually sees. Her stratagem succeeds only as the character behind the mask. She is her original self behind a mask but that “self” becomes doubtful when she drops the mask because she gets stamped in Doricourt’s vision, even when she takes it off. Doricourt’s speech about the “innate modesty” of English women, being the “bulwark” of a “husband’s honor” is less telling of his conversion and more of England’s insecurity about its own image (V.v.320-321). The play reveals through the context of dilemmas with national identity that England was under pressure of carving out an identity, which involves England’s colonial ambitions and trade with Europe being represented through the power play of gender and identity between Doricourt and Letitia and Sir George and Lady Frances.

Cowley’s treatment of national identity in terms of colonialism forms the centerpiece of *The Belles’ Stratagem*. Her presentation of presumed and transformative character recalls Goldsmith’s comedy, *She Stoops to Conquer*, in which Miss Hardcastle’s disguised as a maid overcomes Marlow’s ostensible English reserve and reveals his character to be different from what he usually presents. Cowley’s development of the drama of British identity in *The Belle’s Stratagem* may have had its origins in Goldsmith’s comedy, but her play develops the theme of national identity as a

reaction to Britain's strained relations with Europe and America over colonial wealth and to the Marriage Act of 1753 in greater depth. While Goldsmith's comedy in *She Stoops to Conquer* mostly explores problems of commercial identity against the backdrop of Britain's changing economy, Cowley unlocks the nature of Britain's dilemma with national identity in the wake of its loss of American colonies, and the status of women in society. Her character portrayals make a significant impact on theater history. She paves the way for future debates on women's rights and Britain's identity as a nation. Shouldn't her success as a playwright be based on how her characters embodied the problems of eighteenth-century politics and cultural identity in the context of colonial ambition? The strength and veracity of Doricourt's transformation, or Lady Frances' success in gaining a dignified space to operate as an individual within a marriage, takes not only a historical significance but also an immediate relevance to problems of personal and national identity. The transformative nature of personality in the context of a global economy has universal appeal.

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