

Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to reply.

Moll Flanders' Governess

To the Editor:

I would like to correct some errors of fact in Lois A. Chaber's "Matriarchal Mirror: Women and Capital in *Moll Flanders*" (*PMLA* 97[1982]:212–26). Chaber cites as words and phrases applied to the character known as Moll's governess expressions that are actually used in connection with a subordinate figure: the female pickpocket from whom Moll learns the fine points of her trade. Chaber writes:

Even more genuinely embodying Defoe's ambivalence than Moll's inner voices . . . is the key figure in Moll's new education, the woman she repeatedly calls her "schoolmistress" (pp. 174, 175) and takes as her mentor: "no woman ever arriv'd to the perfection of that art [stealing watches] like her" (p. 175). The governess represents the professionalization of crime; Defoe deliberately dissociates her from Moll's initial temptation into "wrongdoing" (in contrast to Roxana's Amy), and she reenters Moll's life only when Moll, realizing that one needs "a market for [one's] goods" (p. 171) to "turn them into money" (p. 176), acknowledges the importance of exchange value. Moll then undergoes a serious vocational training, observing the older woman at work "just as a deputy attends a midwife without any pay" (p. 175). Moll has truly left the charmed domestic circle for the London cycle of distribution only when she walks into the establishment of this female Peachum. (220–21)

The "schoolmistress" to whom Moll refers is not the governess or a "female Peachum" but her associate the professional pickpocket. It is the pickpocket whose "art" is praised in the second citation. And it is this woman whose on-the-job instruction Moll attends "just as a deputy attends a midwife without any pay." Chaber's errors suggest that the "governess" is herself a pickpocket; in fact, of course, she is an exploiter of thieves—a capitalist, to borrow Chaber's terminology, in the thieving industry.

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Reply:

Kenneth Moler has correctly identified my error of bestowing on the governess that professional admiration of Moll's which actually belongs to her fellow thief. I duly thank him and apologize to my readers. By citing my entire paragraph, however, Moler implies that this error invalidates all that I state therein, and I do not believe it does.

First of all, there are statements within the paragraph that extend beyond Moll's pickpocket technique to the larger issue of her economic education. My comments that the governess teaches Moll the importance of exchange value, creates a market for the products of her "industry," and enables her to enter the commercial arena still stand because they are related to the governess' role as pawnbroker and fence. Indeed, I by no means ignore the governess' status as "capitalist"; by calling her a "female Peachum" I meant to invoke precisely that exploitative function, since the parallels between the underworld organizer and the business-capitalist class are clear in Gay's drama. Of course, my main discussion of the governess as exploiter of labor comes later, on page 221 of the article.

Second, it would be unfair to waive the governess' key role in Moll's criminal education just because Moll actually receives her first technical lessons from this "subordinate figure" (an Artful Dodger to the governess' Fagin). In modern business jargon, the governess is the supervisor of Moll's "training program." Moll emphasizes the governess' supervisory capacity by twice mentioning that the governess "helped [her]" to this instructor (174–75). Later on, in fact, she directly attributes her education as a thief to the governess' efforts, if not as demonstrator then as director—though the governess, we should note, has been an expert pickpocket herself ("born a pick-pocket, and . . . had run thro' all the several degrees of that art . . ." [185]). Referring to the governess (no error here) she asserts: "[I]t was to this wicked creature that I ow'd all the dexterity I arriv'd to in which there were few that ever went beyond me . . ." (185); and Moll further elaborates: "I mention thus much