Manufacturing Virtuous Discourse in Eliza Haywood’s

*The Injur’d Husband* and Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*

Both Eliza Haywood’s *The Injur’d Husband* (1722) and Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) present satirical depictions of courtship rituals and their reliance on authoritative discourse. Authoritative discourse is a type of speech which is presented as the absolute and accepted truth that is considered beyond question or criticism by the characters. The authoritative discourse acknowledged by the characters in each of these novels is that a relationship cannot exist between a man and a woman unless the woman is virtuous. In each of these novels, the virtue of the female characters is determined through the manufactured authoritative discourse of others.

During the initial courtship period, the male characters seek assurance that the woman with whom they are involved is virtuous. They rely on the authoritative discourse of others in this process in order to authorize their relationship. In *The Injur’d Husband*, the rivalry between Montamour and the Baroness de Tortillée for the love of Beauclair leads him to rely on the authoritative speech of Du Lache in his appraisal of their characters. Du Lache, however, is employed by the Baroness to fabricate gossip that will create a public reputation of her own virtue while undermining that of Montamour. When propriety forbids Montamour from making her own case, she disguises herself as the Chevalier Vraiment in order to advocate for herself. In *Moll Flanders*, Moll’s pursuit of a comfortable, upper-class existence demands that she marry well despite a marriage market that privileges men. In order to maintain the virtuous reputation
she needs to continue attracting suitable husbands, Moll relies on a network of other women who assist each other in both manufacturing reputations and covering up misdeeds.

It is my theory that Haywood and Defoe suggest that the concept of virtue as an innate quality is problematic by drawing attention to both the virtuous discourses being circulated and the ways in which their characters must put on repeated, exaggerated performances of their virtue in order to uphold these discourses. In The Injur'd Husband, Haywood describes how easily men are manipulated by the Baroness' artificial performance of virtue and Du Lache's authoritative discourse surrounding her. She also undermines her characterization of Montamour as virtuous by using language that implies that her virtue is often spoken of, yet not necessarily authentic. In Moll Flanders, Defoe shows how Moll repeatedly convinces men of her virtue by pretending to be a virgin or a widow with no extra-marital relationships with help from her various female mentors. Both authors emphasize how these women enlist others in cultivating their virtuous reputations. While the women who have unvirtuous behavior to cover up, like the Baroness and Moll, must actively hire people to create a reputation they know to be false, characters considered to be truly virtuous like Montamour exhibit behavior so thoroughly above reproach that those in her company cannot help but create discourse surrounding her character. Where Montamour is generally believed to be the Baroness' polar opposite, the narrator undermines her characterization through implications that her virtue is a performance as well, but one that includes her private behavior as well.

The authors send the moral message that it is necessary to examine the fluid nature of standards of female virtue. The authoritative discourses presented by each character are subject to a different level of scrutiny depending on male desires. When Beauclair is told that Montamour is unfaithful, he does not carefully examine his source and hastily severs his
relationship with her. When he receives discourses that question the Baroness' virtue, he is skeptical because they would force him to end their sexual relationship. Similarly, the gentleman in *Moll Flanders* believes a flimsy discourse of her virtue in order to continue their relationship. The standards of female virtue are not stable, but are instead mediated by the nature of male desire. The trustworthiness of an authoritative discourse is only subject to skepticism when it conflicts with male desire.

Throughout *The Injur'd Husband*, the narrator tends to describe Montamour in ways that distinguish her as the exact opposite of the Baroness in terms of moral character and behavior. The Baroness' reliance on Du Lache to spread discourse of her virtuous reputation are explicitly stated, while Montamour is thought to be innately virtuous. However, in this early passage, Haywood uses language that indicates that Montamour is possibly taking advantage of the same social gossip as the Baroness: “In the first Place, the Heart of Beauclair had long been devoted to a young Lady fam’d for, and really Mistress of, every Excellence that cou’d adorn a Woman” (12). Montamour is described as being “fam’d” for her reputation for being “adomed” with so many virtuous qualities. Adornments are generally thought of as ornaments that decorate something, but are not necessarily essential to the item on their own. If Montamour’s virtue is an innate quality, it would be unusual to characterize it as a decoration that is not vital to her overall makeup and could actually be easily removed or replaced as with a piece of jewelry. The fact that she is famous for her reputation also suggests that, as with the Baroness, it is at least as important that her reputation is often talked about and complimented as any of her actual behavior. Although Montamour’s reputation does seem to be the result of a careful adherence to rules of propriety, the narrator’s speech gives the impression that this does not preclude the presence of calculated effort on her part.
The emphasis on widespread reputation of virtue perhaps comes from what Thomas McKeon describes as the decline of the belief in “aristocratic honor,” in which virtue is inherently ascribed to the upper class, which coincided with the rise of the novel (133). As virtue becomes something that is not essentialized through class distinctions, determining its authentic presence becomes more difficult as well. If marriage can only take place where female virtue is present, men must establish some method of discerning authentic virtue from the performance of virtue. The method used by the men in these novels is to rely on the authoritative speech of others. Mackie describes it through the rise of expectations of good manners: “The value of manners, then, is secured not in status but in moral virtue, internal to the authentic ground of subjectivity rather than inborn through the temporal chain of inheritance. In the place of authenticating status, the discourse of manners posits authenticating virtue” (Mackie 14). Publicly exhibiting the necessary code of manners in such a way that would cause people to take notice would serve to confirm the possession of virtue.

The alternative to the presence of innate virtue is what Catherine Craft-Fairchild calls the “mask of womanliness” that she finds to be prevalent in Haywood’s work (51). However, she argues that all women, even those exhibiting legitimately virtuous behavior, are forced to wear the mask and carefully negotiate a balance between giving the necessarily convincing and authentic performance of virtue without performing so blatantly that it calls attention to its own existence. Montamour’s performance embodies this ideal. She has become the “mistress” of her virtues, implying her total control over the way in which she exhibits them to others. Montamour, unlike the Baroness, is able to wear the mask “with conviction – for real,” which has the potential to inspire a need in those around her to spread the authoritative discourse of her virtue (Craft-Fairchild 63). Roulston describes the nature of this mask in Haywood’s advice
literature, in which she advocates its use as a form of strategic conformity: whether it is utilized “out of innocence or strategy – the virtuous effect is the same. This deliberate confusion is at the core of Haywood’s strategic representation of wifely performativity” (Roulston 33).

The need to avoid the appearance of calculation in her dealings with Beauclair requires creative action on Montamour’s part when she needs to enlist an advocate for herself in order to facilitate their reunion. In order to avoid the impropriety of either revealing her desire for him by speaking on her own behalf or by asking someone else to do it for her, Montamour instead disguises herself as a man. Beauclair, easily willing to trust the speech of the seemingly trustworthy Chevalier Vrament, very quickly relates the story of his dealings with Montamour and her refusal to reconcile:

But when he found he was beginning to accuse the Cruelty and unforgiving Temper of his Mistress, he cou’d not forbear taking her Part. Ah Monsieur Beauclair! said he, in spite of the Pity due to what I see you suffer, and the Inclination I have to be of your side, Justice now obliges me to engage in the Defence of one I know not, against him whose Friendship I profess an Ambition to become worthy of. I cannot think the Proceedings of that Lady are in the least to be condemn’d; had she acted otherwise, you might indeed have applauded the Effects of a Passion which made you Master of your Wishes, but what must the disinterested part of the World have thought of her Behaviour? (Haywood 88)

Vrament’s (and Montamour’s) argument in support of her behavior revolves entirely around its appearance to those who are “disinterested” in the matter. By this she means those who are not directly involved, but it is an interesting choice of words in that it highlights the prominence of the opinions of society in general above those who may have a vested interest. Though there are
many valid arguments to be made for her behavior that relate to Beauclair’s poor treatment of her, Montamour has created the character of Vayment primarily as an advocate for her willingness to be ruled by public opinion.

This disguise, which at first appears ridiculous in its contrived nature, serves to also point out the ridiculous expectations of the sexual double standard as described by Keith Thomas. Montamour is expected to possess and exhibit “modesty, delicacy, bashfulness, silence and all the other ‘feminine’ virtues...And in courtship women existed to be pursued, not to do the pursuing. Ultimately such conduct was regarded as springing not merely from the usages of society, but from the fundamental attributes of female nature itself” (Thomas 214). With a society placing demands on her exhibition of virtue that forbid her from being too passive by prohibiting a reconciliation or too active by enlisting others for help, she has no option but to step outside of these expectations entirely through her male disguise.

Where Montamour manipulated gender restrictions in order to overcome the effects of female rivalry, Swaminathan argues that Defoe’s female characters “manipulate patriarchal restrictions on their gender in solidarity” (194). This allows them to disobey social limitations because they have a support system in place to either cover up their indiscretion or aid them in their recovery. In a marriage market that privileges male choice, Defoe’s female characters choose solidarity over competition and willingly create authoritative speech that will raise each other’s prospects. When one of Moll’s widowed friends is unfairly jilted by a would-be fiancée, who then proceeds to spread rumors of her impropriety, Moll responds quickly out of friendship and a desire for revenge. She forms a plan in which they will spread false rumors of the gentleman’s deceitful conduct so that, despite a need for suitable husbands, he will be unable to find a woman who will agree to marry him:
As I had put this into her Head, she came most readily into it; immediately she went to Work to find Instruments, and she had very little difficulty in her Search; for telling her Story in general to a Couple of Gossips in the Neighborhood, it was the Chat of the Tea Table all over that part of the Town, and I met with it wherever I visited: Also, as it was known that I was Acquainted with the young Lady herself, my Opinion was ask’d very often, and I confirm’d it with all the necessary Aggravations, and set out his Character in the blackest Colours. (59)

While some women of their acquaintance are let in on the entire plan, others are simply used as tools to aid in the spread of this false authoritative discourse. Moll refers to them as “instruments” first before she describes them as actual people. In a culture in which widespread rumors have the power to ruin a person’s marriage prospects, Moll values people based on their ability to serve as instruments or tools of spreading her authoritative discourse. In addition to spreading the initial rumors about the gentleman, Moll also confirms them personally to those who have heard them second-hand with added “necessary aggravations.” These aggravations serve to ruin his reputation even further, and her description of them as necessary indicates that she believes he deserves to have a bad reputation, even if it is based on falsehood. It also implies that they are necessary to the appearance of authenticity that her discourse requires. To be considered an authority, she must have more knowledge than those who have asked her opinion, so these extra exaggerations serve both her need for revenge and her ability to achieve it.

While in this case Moll was the one enlisted to perpetuate an authoritative discourse, she also benefits from the enlistment of others throughout the novel as multiple women spread stories of her virtue in order to facilitate her relationships with men. In the case of her involvement with the gentleman she has robbed, her governess creates a scheme to get more
money out of him than what has already been stolen by playing the role of Du Lache and spreading reports of her virtuous and chaste nature. Although Moll has already robbed him and is in the process of extorting even more money from him, he agrees to meet with her again because of the work of her governess:

But I took him up short, I protested I had never suffer’d any Man to touch me since my Husband died, which was near eight Year; he said he believed it to be so truly; and added that Madam, had intimated as much to him, and that it was his Opinion of that part which made him desire to see me again; and that since he had once broke in upon his Vertue with me, and found no ill Consequences, he cou’d be safe in venturing there again; and so in short it went on to what I expected, and to what will not bear relating. (197)

Her speech is what determines his future actions, but he has no identifiable reason to trust it. Even though the gentleman knows she has perpetrated a crime against him, he trusts the governess’ report of her chastity because it will authorize him to continue having sex with her. The ease with which the governess establishes Moll’s reputation suggests that she “need only maintain a façade of middle-class respectability. Public demonstrations of virtue are more important than private behavior; thus, this incident demonstrates the value of the female network in seemingly legitimating Moll’s virtue” (Swaminathan 195). The gentleman’s belief in her virtue is also described as his “opinion,” implying that there may be other perspectives on the matter and that he acknowledges that there is evidence that may support other conclusions on her character. He is also unconcerned with his own character, finding no ill consequences for their behavior. Under the sexual double standard, “the emphasis on outward respectability has resulted in the absence of any serious deterrent against successfully conducted clandestine activity”
(Thomas 205). His affair with Moll is successful in that he has not contracted a venereal disease so his activities remain secret, and the fact that it may hurt his wife to have broken their marriage vows is not taken into consideration.

A major contradiction produced by this theory regards the nature of the authoritative speech people choose to trust and what that speech is serving. Female virtue is a requirement of any relationship, but the standards for the discourse supporting its presence change with the relationship that is desired. Beauclair just as easily believes the flimsy claims of Du Lache, a relative stranger, regarding Montamour’s infidelity just as the gentleman believes the governess’ flimsy claims regarding Moll’s virtue. It doesn’t seem as though men are more likely to trust or distrust women universally, but rather that different standards are held depending on the man’s desire in each case. When marriage is at stake, Beauclair is inclined to be skeptical of the virtue of the woman with whom he is involved. He just as easily believes that the Baroness is virtuous because they will only have a sexual relationship due to her marriage. Because she is engaging in sexual relationships with many men, each one believing she is faithful to him alone, the Baroness also requires a stronger method of the creation of authoritative discourse. Du Lache must not only produce positive rumors about her, but also negative rumors about other women in order to create points of comparison for the Baroness’ virtue. The gentleman of Moll Flanders also easily believes, despite his own experience with her, that Moll is a chaste woman due to the governess’ claims because he will accept any pretext of virtue in order to continue their affair. The relatively low stakes in this case take away the pressure to put on a very convincing performance.

In the creation of the authoritative speech that affirms female virtue, women are put in an impossible situation in which they are required to have a strong, widespread reputation, yet that reputation must not be actively sought. To do so would be to reveal that help is needed to create
the appearance of virtue, when the supposedly truly virtuous woman would set such a strong example that people could not help but talk about her. Any hint of artifice, even if it is through the exaggeration of the virtue one actually possesses, becomes a potentially damaging sign of a lack of virtue.
Works Cited


