

RETHINKING POLITENESS IN EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY ENGLAND: MOLL KING'S COFFEE
HOUSE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'FLASH
TALK'

The Alexander Prize Lecture

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HISTORIANS are rightly suspicious of axioms, those capsules of historical 'truth' that pass into the received wisdom about a particular time period. Part of our job is to explode historical myth, to scrutinise and re-evaluate existing versions of the past. Yet how hard it is to think outside of the paradigms that are the legacy of an impressive bibliography and a legion of footnotes. I myself became aware of one particular paradigm regarding the cultural history of early modern England in the course of postgraduate research. I found myself straying across one of those temporal boundaries that arises from the chronological fragmentation imposed by textbooks and course syllabuses. In short, I moved from the pre-Civil-War period, with which I was then more familiar, into the early years of the long eighteenth century. It appeared to me that the literary sources from the late 1600s, which were the subject of my doctoral research, had much in common with the popular literature of earlier periods – the almanacs and chapbooks so well described by Bernard Capp, Margaret Spufford and others.¹ The popular press of the last quarter of the seventeenth century seemed familiar territory: monstrous births, providential occurrences, and various forms of advice to young people were as much the staple diet for readers of cheap print in late seventeenth-century London as they had been in the era of Gouge and Whateley. The observation of such continuities had little relevance, however, since the preoccupation of

¹ Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth Century England* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1989); Bernard Capp, *English Almanacs, 1500–1800: Astrology and the Popular Press* (Ithaca, NY, 1979). A version of this paper was read at the University of Leicester conference organised by Rosemary Sweet and Penny Lane, 'On the Town: Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England' (May 1999). Peter Burke, Anthony Fletcher, Elizabeth Foyster, Jeremy Gregory, Vivien Jones, Alison Rowlands and Heather Shore provided additional remarks and references, for which I am most grateful.

historians studying this later period had changed. Instead of mapping the material and textual continuities between popular seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, which seemed to me to exhibit certain powerful similarities across time, the imperative was now to use such sources to map the changes which forged the eighteenth-century *zeitgeist*, the new 'culture of sensibility'.²

Accusations of neglect regarding the different contextual circumstances in which the printed word was produced will no doubt follow. Who can deny that profound changes were taking place in English society at the end of the seventeenth century? Urbanisation, the continuing expansion of colonial trade, the rise of the middling sorts – the story is well known, and repeated in any history book that covers the period 1660–1800.³ An ever-increasing number of people of 'middling' rank, we are told, profited from trade and were able to purchase a luxurious lifestyle, which in turn fuelled the growth and diversification of a capitalist economy.⁴ Somewhere between Habermas's theory of the bourgeois public sphere, and Paul Langford's excellent account of the expansion of commercial culture in eighteenth-century England, a paradigm was born: that during the 1700s, English people became obsessed with manners and the cultivation of new and ritualised forms of behaviour, necessitated by their co-existence in an increasingly complex urban environment.⁵ The theme of these novel social codes, which encompassed all forms of human action in the public sphere, from conversation to body language (and here Norbert Elias⁶ has been highly influential) may be summarised in one word – politeness.

My dissatisfaction with the paradigm of politeness grew during my research into the early coffee-house periodicals by the entrepreneurial London publisher, John Dunton. Allegedly, Dunton's function in the literary realm was to bear witness to the coming of Addison and

²The phrase is taken from G. J. Barker Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992).

³See for example Peter Earle, 'The Middling Sort in London', *The Middling Sort of People*, ed. Christopher Brooks and Jonathan Barry (1994), 141–58; Penelope Corfield, *Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 1991); Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort. Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, Ca., 1996); John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1997); Stephen Copley, 'Commerce, Conversation and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth Century Periodical', *British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies*, 18 (1995), 63–75; Anna Bryson, *From Conduct to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1998).

⁴Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture* (1988), 13–14, 167–9 and *passim*.

⁵Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere; an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Oxford, 1992); Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People. England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989).

⁶Norbert Elias, *Power and Civility. The Civilizing Process*, II (Oxford, 1982).

Steele.⁷ His periodicals, such as the extraordinary *Athenian Mercury*, were (according to the existing historiography) all about politeness. My reading of seven years' issues of the periodical from the 1690s yielded a somewhat different conclusion: that men and women, under the licence of anonymity, were anything but polite in the frank questions which they put to Dunton's secret society of 'learned men', those self-appointed 'agony uncles', the 'Athenian Society'.⁸ Nor were their questions confined to tea-pouring and polite forms of address, although these were also present in the text. Instead, they took the opportunity, in an era of considerable political censorship, to ask the broadest range of questions about the world around them, how it worked, and what was its meaning. They wanted to know everything, from the mechanics of their own bodies, to the orbit of the earth. Their inquisitiveness extended beyond the minutiae of etiquette, and although they realised the necessity of good relations within their community, in particular the importance of reputation in an economy founded upon credit, this was not the *sine qua non* of their being. Coffee-house conversations, stimulated by reading Dunton's periodicals, must have been more truly eclectic than even Habermas had imagined.

What, then, were the parameters of politeness? How much did it really preoccupy eighteenth-century English people, even those in the burgeoning metropolis and provincial urban centres? If indeed an obsession with manners became one of the defining features of the middling sort, and a characteristic theme of Augustan literature written by highly influential social commentators from Addison to Johnson, what consequences were there in the daily encounters between those who appropriated polite behaviour in varying degrees, or not at all? For the historian, this raises the problematic question of sources – just what was going on in the streets and coffee houses of London over two hundred years ago? Moving, as I am, towards a critique of politeness, there is also the uncomfortable realisation that, in order to test its limits, one must accept the paradigm of its influence as a cultural phenomenon. For the purpose of this survey, however, I shall choose to engage with, rather than reject, the hypothesis that politeness, or rather an awareness of the importance of correct deportment and speech prescribed according to gender and status, was something which was increasingly discussed in the public sphere of print culture. What interests me here is the way in which discussion of this subject generated, rather than precluded, a fascination with *impolite* behaviour. The

⁷ See for example J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: the Cultural Construction of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York, 1990), 12–18.

⁸ For details about the Athenian Society, see Gilbert D. McEwen, *The Oracle of the Coffee House: John Dunton's Athenian Mercury* (Huntington, Ca., 1972).

psychological mechanism behind this phenomenon, I suggest, is comparable with that observed by Lyndal Roper in her survey of witchcraft in sixteenth-century Germany. Professor Roper argues that religious repression, rather than successfully marshalling the populace into piety, had the reverse effect: of nurturing those 'vices' that the church was attempting to suppress.⁹ Could not a similarly repressive civil code of outwardly conformist behaviour in eighteenth-century England nourish an underbelly of impolite resistance? A challenge to the hegemonic status of politeness is the logical corollary to the cautious observation that the middle classes were not inevitably 'rising'. In the eighteenth century, not everyone was going up in the world – neither was it necessarily a more polite place. This may seem to be a truism, yet within the existing historiography, it is almost impossible to find a dissenting voice. Where are the hidden transcripts of impolite thought, speech and action in eighteenth-century England?

The Life and Character of Moll King, Late Mistress of King's Coffee-House in Covent-Garden, published in 1747, is a little-known pamphlet describing the career and life history of one of the more colourful women to have emerged from obscurity in early Georgian London.¹⁰ Born of humble origins, Moll was later known to Fielding and his contemporaries as the proprietor of one of the capital's most infamous coffee houses. This brief account of Moll's extraordinary life promises a revelatory story about a scandalous woman who was notorious by name to Londoners in the early to mid-1700s. As such, it is part of a genre of popular texts from the early eighteenth century in which the central figure was a woman of dubious reputation. The most famous of these was Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, but there are many others. *The Life and Intrigues of the late Celebrated Mrs Mary Parrimore* (1729) is an account of the 'Tall Milliner of 'Change-Alley', a prostitute who received the attentions of Jews, Quakers and Irishmen.¹¹ Another example is the *Life of the Late Celebrated Mrs Elizabeth Wisebourn*, bawd to the infamous prostitute Sally Salisbury.¹² The practice of celebrating legendary women of low birth in ballads and cheap print dates from a much earlier period, to at least the late

⁹ The 'contradictory effects on human beings of disciplinary legislation', and argued as a result that repression is 'part of a double process which also creates, rather than represses, its opposite', in Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil. Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (1994), 146, 160.

¹⁰ Anon., *The Life and Character of Moll King, Late Mistress of King's Coffee-House in Covent-Garden . . . containing a true narrative of this well-known lady, from her birth to her death* (1747).

¹¹ Anon., *The Life and Intrigues of the Late Celebrated Mrs Mary Parrimore* (1729).

¹² Anodyne Tanner, *The Life of the Late Celebrated Mrs Elizabeth Wisebourn, Vulgarly Call'd Mother Wybourn* (n.d., 1721?). For an account of Sally Salisbury, see Vivien Jones, 'Sex Work, Satire, and Subjectivity: Prostitute Narratives', paper delivered at the 'Luxury and Aesthetics: Sense and Excess' conference, University of Warwick, July 1999.

sixteenth century, from that doyenne of Elizabethan lowlife, Long Meg of Westminster, to Moll Cutpurse (in real life, Mary Frith).¹³ Such women lived by their wits, and were associated with sexual licence and criminal activities, yet were often celebrated as unruly popular heroines. What distinguishes the *Life and Character of Moll King* from these and other texts from the mid-eighteenth century is the account it contains of the peculiar 'cant' or slang known as 'flash', a linguistic phenomenon which presents the opportunity we have been seeking to challenge the axiom of polite culture.

Like many of the prostitute narratives mentioned above, the *Life and Character of Moll King* is based upon the life history of an actual person. A summary of Moll's story, and an examination of the broadest possible range of contemporary sources about the landlady and her coffee house, form a necessary backdrop to our enquiry, before we can proceed to consider the significance of 'flash'. According to the *Life and Character*, Mary, or Moll King (her maiden name is unknown), was born in Middlesex in 1696. Her ne'er do well father was a shoemaker, and, when still very young, our heroine was 'obliged to get her Bread in the Streets with her Mother'.¹⁴ As a consequence, Moll was later unable to hold down a job as a servant, since 'being much us'd to the Streets, she could not brook Confinement within Doors'.¹⁵ Her familiarity with urban street life is suggestive of independence and a wild, untamable nature, as well as denoting the more obvious implication of sexual disrepute. Moll's education was 'not more polite, than that of the Nymphs of either *Billingsgate* or *Covent-Garden Market*'.¹⁶ As a young woman, Moll was 'tolerably handsome and very sprightly'. She flirted with many suitors, having many 'Sweethearts' before settling upon her first husband, Tom King. Tom was described in the *Life and Character* as 'a young Fellow of [Moll's] own calling': other contemporary sources confirm that Tom had in fact been educated at Eton.¹⁷ A whiff of scandal accompanied their marriage since Tom and Moll were 'tack'd together' hurriedly at a Fleet wedding.¹⁸ The circumstances are unknown, and their possible reasons for resorting to clandestine marriage are manifold. The social disparity between the pair would

¹³ Bernard Capp, 'Long Meg of Westminster: A Mystery Solved', *Notes and Queries*, new series, 45 (1998), 302-4. My thanks to Professor Capp for this reference.

¹⁴ *Life and Character*, 1-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Thomas Harwood, *Alumni Etonenses; or, a catalogue of the provosts and fellows of Eton College and King's College, Cambridge* (Birmingham, 1797), 293: 'A.D. 1713. THOMAS KING, was born at West Ashton in Wiltshire, went away Scholar, in apprehension that his Fellowship would be denied him, and afterwards kept that Coffee-House in Covent-Garden, which was called by his own name.'

¹⁸ *Life and Character*, 5.

have certainly presented a powerful obstacle to the match in ordinary circumstances.¹⁹

The Kings made sufficient fortune from their coffee house business to enable them to purchase an estate near Hampstead.²⁰ After Tom's death in 1737, according to the *Life and Character*, Moll remarried, a Mr Hoff or Huff, who tried unsuccessfully to lay hands on her money, but Moll kept her property, and her first husband's name, until her death on 17 September 1747. The registers of St Paul's Church, Covent Garden, confirm that 'Thomas King from Hampstead' was buried on 11 October 1737, and that a 'Mary Hoff Widow, from Hampstead in Middx.' was buried on 27 September 1747.²¹ Parish records thus not only verify the existence of Tom and Mary, and their final place of residence, but provide the additional detail that Moll outlived both of her husbands. The register of St Paul's also contains a reference to the Kings' only (surviving?) child, 'Thomas son of Thomas King by Mary his Wife', who was christened on 13 November 1733.²²

The history of Moll's career suggests that she was the epitome of an early eighteenth-century urban woman with little to lose and much to gain, resolutely entrepreneurial and materially successful throughout her different life stages, first as a young married woman, then later as a widow. From a young age, she showed every sign of being an entrepreneurial woman with an eye for the main chance. One of her early trading ventures was to buy a great quantity of small nuts wholesale and then retail them 'after the Price rose surprizingly', making a handsome profit of 'upwards of £60'.²³ Moll's success in selling snacks inspired her next venture. She and her husband rented a 'little house or rather Hovel' in Covent Garden market and set up a coffee house to provide refreshment to the market sellers, charging the going rate of 1d. for admission and a dish of coffee.²⁴ We do not know the precise date on which the coffee house opened. 'Mary King' is one of nine people named among the recognizances (bonds) for victualling licences in the London borough of Westminster for 1728.²⁵ The licensing register for 1730 provides a more positive identification, since it lists

¹⁹ P. Rushton, 'Property, Power, and Family Networks: the Problem of Disputed Marriage in Early Modern England', *Journal of Family History*, 2, no. 3 (1986), 205–19. See also R. B. Outhwaite, *Clandestine Marriage in England, 1500–1850* (Cambridge, 1995), 54–73.

²⁰ *Life and Character*, 13.

²¹ William H. Hunt (ed.), *The Registers of St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden, London: Burials*, Harleian Society, 36 (1908), 359, 429. The date of Tom's death has previously been recorded as 'unknown': see Bryant Lillywhite, *London Coffee Houses. A Reference Book of Coffee Houses of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (1963), 596.

²² *Life and Character*, 22; Lillywhite, *Coffee Houses*, 597.

²³ *Life and Character*, 7.

²⁴ Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee Houses* (1956), 45.

²⁵ G[reater] L[ondon] R[ecord] O[ffice]/WRLV/37/fol. 29.

'Thomas King the Market' among the victuallers in St Paul's Covent Garden.²⁶ Their initial custom was mainly among market traders, but late opening hours made King's coffee house attractive to those who were out at night for pleasure rather than business – people of fashion, hell-raisers, rakes and beaux, who brought with them an entourage of hangers-on and prostitutes. By 1732, King's coffee house had become a fashionable port of call for the drunken sparks of the town. In this year, Fielding's *Covent-Garden Tragedy* posed the question, 'What Rake is ignorant of King's Coffee-House?'²⁷ Moll and her husband soon found that there was not enough space to accommodate the number of people who flocked to their all-night venue. They responded first by buying the house next door, and then a third adjoining property, but even so their coffee house was still full to capacity most nights.²⁸

King's coffee house profited from its proximity to Drury Lane, and was conveniently located next door to the new Covent Garden Theatre, which opened in 1733. It was only a few paces from watering holes such as the Fleece, the Rose, and the Shakespeare Tavern in Russell Street.²⁹ At the time, there were several other notable coffee houses in the Covent Garden area, such as Bedford coffee house, Button's (the leading literary coffee house), and Tom's (popular with the nobility),³⁰ but King's had a distinctive character of its own. An engraving by Hogarth in 1738, the year after Tom King's death, verifies its existence, and bears out the reports that it was a notoriously riotous place. 'Morning', set in Covent Garden, is the first of a series of paintings which Hogarth executed on the theme of 'The Four Times of the Day'.³¹ Moll's coffee house is in the foreground of the painting, and is indeed little more than a shack, dwarfed by St Paul's Church to the rear. In Hogarth's scene, it is early morning, and Covent Garden is covered in snow, but, bleary-eyed and dishevelled, a couple of rakes have just emerged from the coffee house and are busy fondling prostitutes, oblivious to the market sellers and churchgoers who pass by. Meanwhile, inside the coffee house, a woman (most likely Moll herself) attempts to restrain a rowdy crew who have drawn their swords. Someone's wig is knocked off in the fight, and Hogarth captures the moment just as it flies through the air and out of the doorway.

Another glimpse of Moll in action is contained within a mock-heroic poem, also published in 1738, under the title of *Tom K—': or, the PAPHIAN GROVE. With the various HUMOURS of COVENT GARDEN.*

²⁶ GLRO/WRLN/1/20.

²⁷ Henry Fielding, Prologue to *The Covent-Garden Tragedy* (1732).

²⁸ *Life and Character*, 7–8.

²⁹ R. Webber, *Covent-Garden: Mud-Salad Market* (Letchworth, 1969), 56, 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth. A Life and a World* (1997), 304–5.

This bawdy, mock-heroic poem, in which whores are elevated to the status and charm of goddesses from classical mythology, depicts Moll coming out from behind the serving counter to greet her customers with a rhyming couplet:

Shall I prepare a Negus, or d'ye choose
To sip of *Turkish Berry* the boy!d Juice.³²

A plate illustration that accompanies this verse shows yet another fight taking place: this time, the bald heads of the gentlemen whose wigs have been knocked off are shown in full view. Moll's only assistant in this general confusion is 'tawney *Betty*', described in an explanatory note as 'the Black Girl that attends with the Coffee'.³³ Thus stark contemporary commentaries were produced, in visual and textual form, which confirm the exotic and unruly character of Moll King's coffee house.

How did King's fit into the broader context of coffee-house society at this time? Coffee houses differed greatly in the social composition of their clientele and the nature of transactions which took place on the premises.³⁴ Lectures in natural philosophy could be heard at Man's near Charing Cross or Garraway's in Exchange Alley, while the Grecian coffee house in the Strand was closely associated with the Royal Society.³⁵ Child's in St Paul's churchyard was frequented by the clergy, and the Marine coffee house by merchants. Moll's was clearly one of the seedier coffee houses, yet it was popular and attracted fashionable men-about-town.³⁶ Hogarth's painting of King's coffee house shows gentlemen in fine clothing (perhaps even courtiers) as customers. Finely clad gentlemen are also shown in the only surviving illustration of the interior of King's coffee house – the plate illustration to the mock-heroic poem, the *Humours of Covent Garden*. King's coffee house seems to have had an unusually wide social mix of male customers, from courtiers to Covent Garden market traders and pimps. Moll kept her business at one remove from actual brothel-keeping, but her coffee house was closely associated with (and profited from) prostitution, a link which was certainly made by contemporary commentators. Hogarth's

³² Anon., *Tom K—s: OR, THE PAPHIAN GROVE. With the various HUMOURS OF COVENT GARDEN, The THEATRE, L— M— ton's , &c.* (1738), 29–30. A caricature of the landlady from *Covent Garden in Mourning, a Mock Heroick Poem* (1747) is reproduced in E. J. Burford, *Wits, Wenches and Wantons. London's Low Life: Covent Garden in the Eighteenth Century* (1986), 52.

³³ *The Paphian Grove*, 53.

³⁴ Stephen Pincus, 'Coffee Politicians Does Create: Coffee Houses and Restoration Political Culture', *Journal of Modern History*, 67 (1995), 807–34.

³⁵ Larry Stewart, *The Rise of Public Science: Rhetoric, Technology, and Natural Philosophy in Newtonian Britain, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, 1992), 143.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 144–5.

painting of 1738 firmly associated King's coffee house with whores, while the reputation of Moll King's as a place where drunken sparks consorted with prostitutes at all hours of the day and night continued even after the landlady's death. The hero of Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748) retired there at two o'clock in the morning after a drunken binge ('Banter and I accompanied Bragwell to Moll King's coffee-house, where, after he had kicked half a dozen hungry whores, we left him asleep on a bench').³⁷

King's coffee house became one of the favourite targets of the Middlesex J.P. Sir John Gonson, a fanatical whore-hunter and zealous supporter of the Reformation of Manners campaign. Hogarth depicted him arresting a prostitute in her room in Drury Lane in the *Harlot's Progress* (1732).³⁸ According to the *Life and Character*, Gonson brought twenty indictments against Moll for running a disorderly house, but the landlady usually escaped prosecution because of a lack of incriminating evidence.³⁹ Moll and her husband removed the rope ladder to their upstairs bedroom during business hours, and prostitutes at Moll's had to retire to a suitable 'bagnio' (one of the nearby Turkish baths) with their clients. As a result, Gonson failed to find anything suspicious on the premises during his regular spot-check visits.⁴⁰ Moll perhaps had too much commercial sense to allow her business to be closed down under suspicion that she was running a bawdy house. The words of Moll's namesake, Moll Flanders, seem particularly apposite in this instance: 'THUS my Pride, not my Principle, my Money, not my Vertue, kept me honest.'⁴¹

Surviving court records confirm that Moll was a continual headache to the guardians of the king's peace. Middlesex quarter sessions records indicate that 'Mary, wife of Thomas King, yeoman' was charged jointly with Maria Johnson on 29 August 1732, for an assault which took place upon 'Jane Walthoe, spinster' in the parish of St Paul's, Covent Garden.⁴² The case was eventually settled on 10 January 1733, when the accused paid a fine of twelve shillings. 'Mary King late of the parish of St Paul Covent Garden in the County of Middlesex Widow' was

³⁷ Tobias Smollett, *Roderick Random* (1748), ed. David Blewett (Harmondsworth, 1995), 278.

³⁸ Sir John Gonson, 'Knighted May 14, 1722, of the Inner Temple (at Whitehall)', in *The Knights of England*, II (1906), 282. Gonson's name appears as one of the presiding Justices of the Peace for Middlesex during the 1730s; see for example P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice]/KB10/fol. 23. See also Robert Shoemaker, *Prosecution and Punishment. Petty Crime and the Law in London and Rural Middlesex, c.1660-1725* (Cambridge, 1991), 86, 249.

³⁹ *Life and Character*, 16-17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴¹ Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722), ed. G. A. Starr (Oxford, 1981), 61.

⁴² GLRO/MJ/SR/2579/fol. 55.

also indicted for assault, this time upon one William Lewis, on 30 January 1738, although there is no record of this indictment proceeding further through the courts.⁴³ If this is indeed Moll King, the same woman named in the indictment of 1733, her description in the 1738 case as a widow would be consistent with the timing of her first husband Tom's death in October 1737. The name of 'King, Mary Wife of Thomas' also appears in the index of indictments brought before the King's Bench during the 1730s.⁴⁴ One indictment dates from the period of Moll King's second marriage to Mr Hoff. This time it was for running a disorderly house, and it was issued to 'John Hoffe of the parish of Saint Paul Covent Garden within the Liberty of Westminster in the County of Middlesex Yeoman and Mary his Wife' on 23 January 1739.⁴⁵ The plausibility that this was indeed Moll, charged jointly with her second husband for profiting from running an immoral and disorderly coffee house, is heightened by the precise detail of their abode in Covent Garden, the timing of the indictment (issued the year after Hogarth executed his painting of King's coffee house, and two years after the death of Mary's first husband, Tom) and the nature of the charge, which tallies with contemporary observations about the character and infamy of King's coffee house.

Exploration of the widest range of relevant contemporary sources has thus enabled us to confirm both the landlady's existence and the nature of her business. From this, we may conclude that Moll's coffee house served as a space in which the rules of polite conduct were temporarily suspended. One illustration of this, as we have seen, was its strong association with violence and prostitution. Another important aspect of the 'impoliteness' of King's coffee house, however, derived from the landlady's own special contribution to the cultural landscape of eighteenth-century London – her promotion of a form of urban slang known as 'flash'. It is to a closer examination of flash talk that we now turn our attention.

It is well known that the earliest coffee houses were dubbed 'penny universities', in reference to the minimum entrance charge, and the fact that many subscribed to weekly news-sheets and periodicals, which

⁴³ GLRO/MJ/SR/2691/fol. 65.

⁴⁴ See for example PRO/IND 1/6672 Trinity Term, eighth year of George II's reign (9 June–30 Nov., 1734). The name of Mary King is also listed for the Hilary Term in the eleventh year of George II's reign (13 Jan.–15 April, 1738).

⁴⁵ The accused were charged according to the formulaic language of the courts with running a 'certain renoun ill governed disorderly House' where 'at unlawful times as well as in the night as in the day ... [they] remain Tipling Drinking playing Whoring and misbehaving themselves To the Great Damage and Disturbance of all their Neighbours' PRO/KB10/24/1/fol. 43.

were made freely available to customers. In reference to the idea that coffee houses were places of learning, the author of the *Life and Character of Moll King* records that Moll King's coffee house became known as 'King's College', which would have cemented a common identity between Moll's customers, and satirised the notion that people who went to Moll's did so for scholarly reasons. Initiation into membership of 'King's College' depended, it seems, not just upon the payment of a penny, but upon the adoption of a particular set of attitudes and habits, and an encoded form of language. According to the author of the *Life and Character of Moll King*, 'Players' and 'witty Beaux' would accost each other in a London street by saying 'Are you for King's College to Night, to have a Dish of Flash with Moll?'⁴⁶ The purpose of talking in the slang known as 'flash' was to delineate the members of 'King's College' from those outside of their circle. 'Flash' was thus a shibboleth which marked out the fashionable and streetwise *cognoscenti* from other citizens.

The following excerpt is a dialogue in flash talk represented in *The Life and Character of Moll King*. The dialogue is supposed to have taken place between Mrs King and 'one of her best Customers, before her House was frequented by people of Fashion'. The speaker here is Harry Moythen, possibly from the nearby parish of St Martin-in-the Fields,⁴⁷ identified in the text as the man who was 'stabb'd some Time ago by Dick Hodges, the Distiller':

Harry. To pay, *Moll*, for I must hike.

Moll. Did you call me, Master?

Harry. Ay, to pay, in a Whiff.

Moll. Let me see. There's a Grunter's Gig, is a Si-Buxom; two Cat's Heads, a Win; a Double Gage of Rum Slobber, is Thrums; and a Quartern of Max, is three Megs: – That makes a Traveller all but a Meg.

Harry. Here, take your Traveller, and tip the Meg to the Kinchin. – But *Moll*, does *Jack* doss in your Pad now?

Moll. What *Jack* do you mean?

Harry. Why, *Jack* that gave you the little brindle Bull Puppy.

Moll. He doss in a Pad of mine! No, Boy, if I was to grapple him, he must shiver his Trotters at *Bilby's* Ball.

Harry. But who had you in your Ken last Darkee?

Moll. We had your Dudders and your Duffers, Files, Buffers and Slangers; we had ne'er a Queer Cull, a Buttock, or Porpus, amongst

⁴⁶ *Life and Character*, 10.

⁴⁷ Harry Moythen, of the Parish of St.Martin-in-the-Fields, was indicted by John Murphey for assault at the King's Bench in Middlesex on 11 July 1738. PRO/KB10/24/2/fol. 48.

them, but all as Rum and as Quiddish as ever *Jonathan* sent to be great Merchants in *Virginia*.

Harry. But Moll, don't puff: You must tip me your Clout before I derrick, for my Bloss has nailed me of mine; but I shall catch her at *Maddox's* Gin-Ken, sluicing her Gob by the Tinney; and if she has morric'd it, Knocks and Socks, Thumps and Plumps, shall attend the Froe-File Buttocking B[itc]h.⁴⁸

'Flash', our commentator observed, 'can scarcely be understood but by those that are acquainted with it'.⁴⁹ Doubtless the dialogue is the fictitious invention of the author of the *Life and Character of Moll King*, written in order to entertain the reader. The dialogue aimed, however, to convey to the reader the experience of overhearing 'flash' being spoken in a coffee house. The obscure meaning and burlesque manipulation of language was intended to provoke curiosity (a glossary is provided for 'translation' at the end of the pamphlet) and amusement. The author of the dialogue also implied that part of the pleasure gained from actually speaking flash (or perhaps, from reading it aloud?) was that it was both secretive and exclusive, the delicious irony being that it denoted entry into a counter-culture of libertines and wits rather than one of the ancient universities.

A common term for colloquial speech in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, particularly when associated with criminals, was 'cant', which Samuel Johnson defined as 'A corrupt dialect used by beggars and vagabonds'.⁵⁰ Some of the earliest recorded forms of 'cant' date from Elizabethan times, in Thomas Harman's *Caveat for Common Cursetours* (1556) and Robert Greene's *Art of Coney-Catching* (1591). There are similarities between flash and earlier recorded cant vocabularies, which suggests the continuous use of commonly known slang words across time. A *whyn*, for example, had been the cant term for a penny since the 1530s.⁵¹ Thomas Harman's text from the mid-sixteenth century records that the cant term for an orphan girl was *kinchen mort*, while the glossary in the *Life and Character of Moll King* two hundred years later

⁴⁸ *Life and Character*, 11–12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁰ Eric Partridge, *Slang Today and Yesterday. With a Short Historical Sketch and Vocabularies of English, American and Australian Slang* (1933), 3. See also Peter Burke, 'Introduction', in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds.), *Languages and Jargons. Contributions to a Social History of Language* (Cambridge, 1995), 3. Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1 (1755). Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* also defines 'flash' in the sense of 'Empty; not solid; showy without substance', a meaning which it has preserved in modern usage.

⁵¹ A. L. Beier, 'Anti-Language or Jargon? Canting in the English Underworld in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries' in Burke and Porter (eds.), *Languages and Jargons*, 88.

lists the meaning of the word *kinchen* as ‘a little child’.⁵² The lexicon of flash was therefore not entirely new – it drew upon much earlier oral culture – but it appears to have thrived particularly in certain urban spaces, such as Covent Garden market, and among the customers of Moll King’s coffee house. The appearance of the term flash to describe this linguistic phenomenon is verified through its mention in a variety of different sources from the late seventeenth century onwards. The use of ‘flash’ in this sense may be traced to at least 1699, where it is mentioned by the anonymous ‘B. E.’ in *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew, in its several Tribes of the Gypsies, Beggars, Thieves, Cheats, &c.* This was the first dictionary to record ordinary slang, and was designed to be ‘Useful for all sorts of People (especially Foreigners) to secure their Money and preserve their Lives, besides very much Diverting and Entertaining, being wholly New’. The meaning of *Flash-ken* in the *Canting Crew* is given as ‘a House where Thieves use, and are connived at’. The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* records that the archaic use of the word flash was in the context ‘of or relating to thieves, prostitutes, or the underworld, especially their language’.⁵³ This was certainly the sense in which the term was still being used in the early nineteenth-century when a Middlesex magistrate reported ‘I have seen children not more than seven or eight years of age into the trade of picking of pockets, under the eyes of adults . . . and when in the next stage of their education they are introduced to Flash-houses’.⁵⁴

Clues to the original meaning of flash terms in the early eighteenth century are given in the ‘KEY to the Flash Dialogue’, a glossary at the end of the pamphlet about Moll King.⁵⁵ Certain words and phrases suggest their association with the nocturnal bonhomie of coffee houses north of the Thames (Southwark is referred to as *T’other side*). A *Gage of Rum Slobber* was a ‘Pot of Porter’; *Rum* or *Quiddish* meant ‘Good-natur’d’, a *Porpus* was ‘an ignorant swaggering Fellow’. Other flash words seem very familiar. To *hike* was to go home, to *Doss* was to sleep, a *Pad* was a bed, an *Old Codger* was an old man. Flash was associated with small commercial transactions – there are several terms for money in the glossary: *Si-buxom* was sixpence, *Thrum*s was threepence, a *Cat’s Head* was a half-penny. Part of the original purpose of speaking flash, it seems, was in order to make veiled references to criminal activity. Some phrases refer to dodgy deals and swindles performed by London

⁵² Partridge, *Slang*, 45; *Life and Character*, 24.

⁵³ *OED* (Oxford, 1998), 698.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Heather Shore, ‘Cross Coves, Buzzers and General Sorts of Prigs. Juvenile Crime and the Criminal “Underworld” in the Early Nineteenth Century’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 39 (1999), 10.

⁵⁵ *Life and Character*, 23–4.

traders; *Dudders* were ‘Fellows that sell Spital-fields Handkerchiefs for India ones’; *Duffers* were ‘Those who sell British Spiritous Liquors for Foreign’. There are also references to other illicit or immoral activities. *Files* were pickpockets, *Buffers* were ‘Affidavit-Men’ and *Slanders* were dealers, or ‘Thieves who hand Goods from one to the other, after they are stole [*sic*]’.

How do we interpret the production of a ‘flash’ glossary for readers in the early eighteenth century, who presumably were not of the same social or economic milieu as those, like Harry Moythen, who formulated and deployed street slang to veil their illegal or immoral activities? One possible explanation arises from Foucault’s observation that the greater the rigidity of prevailing social norms, the greater the danger, and therefore pleasure, in transgressing them.⁵⁶ The author of the *Life and Character of Moll King* anticipated that the reporting of coarse speech would elicit a scandalised yet fascinated response from ‘polite’ readers (whom he calls ‘Persons of Modesty and Understanding’) – the very people who were prohibited from talking flash. In this case, the author’s profit depended upon readers’ interest in subjects which were beyond the realm of ‘polite’ discussion in the public sphere.⁵⁷ John J. Richetti has observed that eighteenth-century popular fiction could have produced ‘gratifying fantasies of freedom – moral, economic and erotic’ for the reader who was otherwise constrained by social mores.⁵⁸ Vivien Jones has argued in a similar vein that the relationship between eighteenth-century conduct literature and pleasure was problematic and ‘potentially more productive’ than a ‘straightforwardly repressive’ model would suggest.⁵⁹

Where was the source of pleasure for eighteenth-century readers in reading about Moll and her ‘flash talk’? We may infer from contextual evidence relating to broader social and economic circumstances that the publication of the *Life and Character of Moll King* posed a direct challenge to the restraining impact of a ‘culture of sensibility’, since flash talk transgressed the polite codes of social deference and genteel discourse that preoccupied so many contemporary authors. For example, one of the principal rules of eighteenth-century polite society

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, II: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Harley (Harmondsworth 1987), *passim*.

⁵⁷ Brean Hammond, for example, comments that ‘protocols were established governing behaviour in newly emergent public spaces, including the textualized public spaces of established literary genres’, in his *Professional Imaginative Writing in England, 1640–1740: ‘Hackney for Bread’* (Oxford, 1997), 9.

⁵⁸ See John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction Before Richardson. Narrative Patterns: 1700–1739* (Oxford, 1969), 29–30, 35.

⁵⁹ Vivien Jones, ‘The Seductions of Conduct: Pleasure and Conduct Literature’, in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (1996), 108–32.

was the avoidance of references to bodily functions, but this taboo was gloriously disregarded in flash talk.⁶⁰ Thus, the flash term for a woman drinking or wetting her mouth was *sluicing her Gob*. Sex, that ultimate indelicate subject, was referred to openly, and in the bluntly explicit language of the marketplace: in a fine example of synecdoche, a *Buttock* was the flash term for a whore. This overt reference to female sexuality may be contrasted with the synchronic cultural process by which higher status women were being elevated as the harbingers of civility through elaborate and courteous address.⁶¹ Flash had no words for respectable women; it was preoccupied only with lower status women of ill repute and their criminal activities; thus, a *Froe-File-Buttock* was a female pickpocket. Flash words were certainly gendered. Unlike Latin or Greek, flash was a form of obscure speech which was accessible to female 'wits' and women of the town, and it could thus not be used safely by men as a means of excluding women from understanding their conversation. Indeed, it appears as though the credit for encouraging flash talk rests with a woman – Moll King herself. The pamphleteer commented that flash was 'very much us'd among Rakes and Town Ladies',⁶² and the additional *frisson* of a woman indulging in vaguely erotic and burlesque 'plain talk' may well be imagined. The implications of talking flash thus also had gendered dimensions. A gentleman who spoke flash was revelling in its impoliteness; a woman could also use it to this effect, but in doing so she was indicating her questionable virtue.

Another pleasurably subversive aspect of flash was its potential to disrupt status hierarchies. Flash talk was represented as being popular at first, not among genteel fops, but among the lower sorts such as Harry Moythen who frequented Moll King's coffee house in the early days. Flash was infused with the blunt-speaking of street vendors and criminals, but was apparently later adopted by coffee-house customers from among the higher ranks of society. Engaging in 'flash talk' was characterised by the author of the *Life and Character of Moll King* as a subversive act on the part of the elite speaker. We know from the study of modern linguistics that language is stratified according to particular social and occupational groupings, and that the relationship between the language which is peculiar to marginal groups (such as 'thieves, junkies ... convicts, political terrorists, street vandals') and the 'norm

⁶⁰ One of the preconditions of developing civil society is that 'the most animalic human activities are progressively thrust behind the scenes of men's communal social life and invested with feelings of shame', in Elias, *Power and Civility*, 230.

⁶¹ Lawrence E. Klein, 'Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester, 1993), 105–7.

⁶² *Life and Character*, 10.

language' of the dominant culture, is essentially antagonistic.⁶³ Eighteenth-century rakes who by definition did not abide by prevailing codes of normative behaviour were at liberty to engage in flash talk at the coffee houses, since they were sufficiently secure in their status to flaunt linguistic conventions as a mark of their general disregard for prevailing social mores. As Anna Bryson has remarked, 'self-conscious defiance of modesty and decency in speech' was the mark of a libertine, who gained gratification from 'transgressing the rules which, according to the discourse of civility, constrain[ed] the expression of impulse'.⁶⁴ Thus, the decision as to whether to talk flash, and its signification, depended very much upon the context: whether the conversation was located in the street or in a coffee house; the social status and gender of the speaker and audience.⁶⁵ As the author of the *Life and Character of Moll King* stated, if flash were spoken in the wrong context, or if deployed by one of a lower social standing than these fashionable men-about-town, then the speaker risked being 'looked upon not to be very well bred'.⁶⁶

The account of flash in the *Life and Character of Moll King* of course cannot be regarded as a faithful representation of eighteenth-century oral culture. We do not know precisely who, if anyone, was using this slang and in what context. Conceivably, the author could have made up the flash dialogue and glossary entirely by cobbling together extracts from earlier works such as the *Canting Crew*. Words such as *File*, *Fro* and *Buttock* (meaning whore) appear in the 1699 edition of the text by 'B. E.' as well as in the *Life and Character*, although there are a considerable number of new words and phrases in the latter work, such as *Bilby's Ball* and *Darkee*.⁶⁷ The analysis in this paper has concentrated upon the significance of the pamphlet about Moll King as a means of communicating to the eighteenth-century reader the potential for subversive forms of speech, since very little can be inferred about the place of 'flash' in the so-called eighteenth-century 'criminal underworld' (in itself a problematic concept) or its degree of originality or authenticity.⁶⁸ The significance of the publication of the *Life and Character of Moll King* is thus that it gave some degree of legitimisation to, and

⁶³ Allon White, 'Bakhtin, Sociolinguistics and Deconstruction', in *The Theory of Reading*, ed. Frank Groversmith (Worthing, 1984), 125–7.

⁶⁴ Bryson, *Courtesy to Civility*, 251, 253.

⁶⁵ These crucial factors affecting human behaviour are elaborated in Bourdieu's construction of the *habitus* as the variable 'systems of dispositions' characteristic of different groups of individuals in social space. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (1984), 6.

⁶⁶ *Life and Character*, 13.

⁶⁷ B. E., *Canting Crew; Life and Character*, 12, 23–4.

⁶⁸ Heather Shore proposes that the criminal 'underworld' is properly conceived as a network of 'criminal exchange and communication'. See 'Juvenile Crime', 11, 15.

recognition of, the possibility of 'impolite' alternatives to the prevailing normative culture. Representing flash as a fixed text with a printed glossary may, at one extreme, be interpreted as the production of a fictitious guide, intended for those who wished to keep up with the imagined habits of the fashionable beau monde. In this sense, the glossary of flash generated its own inverted code of politeness: the *Life and Character of Moll King* functioned as a low-life version of the periodical publications of Addison and Steele, those mediators of taste and fashion in the public sphere. It was with considerable irony that the author of the *Life and Character of Moll King* described the sample of flash dialogue between Moll's customers, as 'a Specimen of the great Politeness of these sort of Gentry'.⁶⁹

To conclude, there is a great deal of difference between isolating a key word such as 'politeness' as means of gaining insight into long-distant *mentalités*, and transforming the quest for references to such words into a historical fetish. Such an approach elides contemporary resistance to (or even blissful unawareness of) the top-down attempts of 'polite' didactic authors to influence cultural change. The *Life and Character of Moll King*, as I have argued, poses a challenge to the current trend of regarding the growth of a culture of sensibility in the 1700s as axiomatic. Interest in 'flash talk' as a cultural phenomenon among mid-eighteenth century readers raises the possibility that fashionable slang was used in certain urban spaces as a means of cutting across social boundaries. The account of flash talk in the *Life and Character of Moll King* illustrates how codes of polite conduct could generate rather than preclude alternative forms of interaction, of which language was a key part. I have suggested that the text may be interpreted as a 'discourse of impoliteness', one that requires us to rethink politeness itself, not as a uniformly observed set of rules, nor as an attribute which all were striving to attain, but as a potentially repressive social force that eighteenth-century men and women, given the opportunity, took peculiar pleasure in transgressing.

⁶⁹ *Life and Character*, 11.