

# 3

## THE RESTORATION

*(1660-1714)*

## THE AUGUSTAN AGE

*(1714-60)*



**Women**

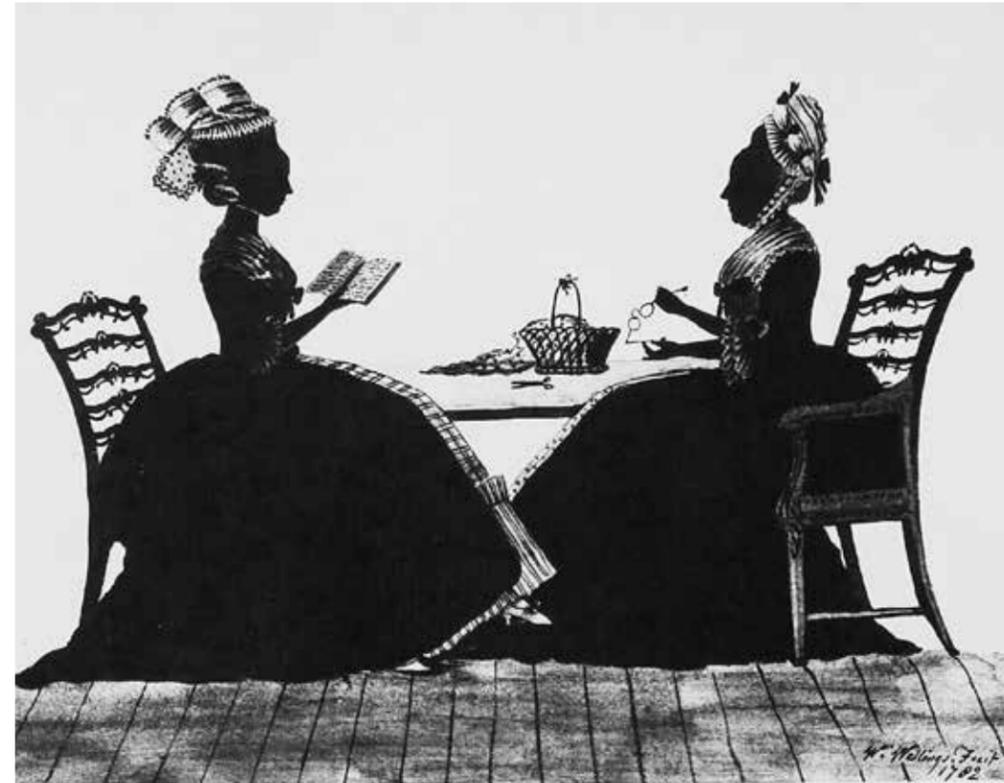
The advent of the Enlightenment in the 18th century slowly changed the rules of Western society and within this society women gradually began to acquire more importance and play a greater role. We can understand this by the way in which novelists started to place women at the centre of their stories, not as weak or silly individuals, but as real heroines, endowed with determination and intelligence. Fiction, however, also shows how far women actually were from any real status of independence and, given the impossibility of supporting themselves by their own means, marriage was considered every woman's vocation. If a woman from the lower classes didn't marry she had few chances of leading a happy life. The situation of upper-class women was also far from ideal. They were often not allowed to choose their own husbands, this being done for them by their parents, usually on the basis of the man's wealth and social standing, even if he were old, young, pleasant or disagreeable. No wonder, then, that many women often found themselves unhappy, dissatisfied and frustrated.

**1** Aphra Behn stands out not only as a rare woman writer in what was traditionally a male-dominated art, but also for the fact that she contributed to creating a new kind of narrative, the novel, paving the way for the successful novelists of the 18th century: Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. Her novel was entitled *Oroonoko*. What do you know about the novel? What does the title suggest about the setting?



Mary Beale, *Aphra Behn* 1600s. St. Hilda's College, Oxford.

**2** The reading public of the time was only partly made up of women. How has the situation changed today?



*Women Reading*, 1782. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

**3** If a woman of that time was alone, without a family, she had few chances of surviving. What about a woman today in the same situation?



Jean Baptiste Greuze, *The Laundress*, 1761. Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

- 4 The destiny of women born into wealth was different: they would have a large house, servants to take care of them, their household and their beautiful clothes. Do you think this differs from the situation of wealthy women today?



► Jean Baptiste Mallet, *The Embroidered Cupid*. Cognacq-Jay Museum, Paris.

- 5 In the 18th century, as in previous centuries, marriages were mostly organised by the family, as illustrated in this painting, *The Marriage Settlement*. Do you think marriage is still as important in your country?



► William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode: 1. The Marriage Settlement*, c. 1743. National Gallery, London.

## Daniel Defoe *Moll Flanders* (1721)

### A simple woman who wanted to be a lady

*Moll Flanders* is the story of a woman who seems to have everything against her. Born in a prison in extreme poverty and then left an orphan with no family to fall back on, she nevertheless dreams of becoming a lady, or a 'gentlewoman' as she calls it. After the death of her nurse, however, her dreams are shattered and she is forced to take up work as a servant, the only occupation possible for a girl in her situation. When she starts working in a rich family home she is seduced by the family's young son. From that moment on her life becomes a series of adventures. She marries several men by whom she has children, she travels to America, where she discovers that one of the men she had married is her half-brother. When back in England she becomes a prostitute and a thief. Only at the end of the novel does she feel remorse for what she has done and finally manages to lead a peaceful life.

Moll's story shows that the only way to become a lady in the 18th century was to marry a wealthy man. A woman could not become rich through hard work. Although Moll is determined to improve her position, the only way she could rise up the social ladder was through marriage, as this was the only honourable role for a middle-class woman of that time. But this was very difficult for a woman like Moll, without any family, friends or relatives to help. Alone and armed only with her beauty and intelligence she had to face a hostile and difficult world.

As a result Moll begins to value objects more than anything else. It becomes essential for her to know the value of things because this is her key to understanding the social position of those she comes into contact with. Because of this there are numerous allusions to objects in the novel, as well as money and contracts. Moll is constantly calculating and putting a price on everything and everyone she meets.

With his novel, *Moll Flanders*, Defoe depicts the social lives and attitudes of his time, the 18th century, and gives the modern reader valuable information, in particular about the life of lower-class women and their problems.



► William Hogarth, *The Rake's Progress* (plate 3 detail), 1733. Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

## Moll Flanders

### TEXT 1

Taken from the beginning of the novel, Moll tells the reader about her early years.

I was continu'd here [at a school for orphans] till I was eight years Old, when I was terrified with News that the Magistrates, as I think they call'd them, had order'd that I should go to Service<sup>1</sup>; I was able to do but very little Service where ever I was to go, except it was to run of Errands<sup>2</sup>, and be a Drudge<sup>3</sup> to some Cook-Maid, and this they told me of often, which put me into a great Fright<sup>4</sup>; for I had a thorough<sup>5</sup> Aversion to going to Service, as they call'd it (that is, to be a Servant), tho' I was so young; and I told my Nurse, as we call'd her, that I believ'd I could get my Living<sup>6</sup> without going to Service if she pleas'd to let me; for she had Taught me to Work with my Needle<sup>7</sup>, and Spin Worsted<sup>8</sup>, which is the chief Trade<sup>9</sup> of that City, and I told her that if she wou'd keep me, I wou'd Work for her, and I would Work very hard.

### OVER TO YOU

#### 1 Answer the following questions.

1. How old is Moll here?
2. What doesn't she want to do?
3. Moll doesn't give any reasons for her 'aversion to going to service'. What do you think they could have been?
4. What work does Moll indicate as an alternative to going into service?
5. We understand from the text the different opportunities of employment available to women at that time. What were they?

### TEXT 2

Moll is still in the institution and tells her friendly visitors she wants to become a 'gentlewoman'.

They meant one sort of thing by the Word Gentlewoman, and I meant quite another; for alas<sup>1</sup>!, all I understood by being a Gentlewoman, was to be able to Work for myself, and get enough to keep me without that terrible Bug-bear<sup>2</sup> going to service, whereas they meant to live Great, Rich and High, and I know not what.

### OVER TO YOU

#### 1 Answer the following questions.

1. Moll wants to be a gentlewoman. What does she mean by the word 'gentlewoman'? What do the others (her friendly visitors) mean by this word?
2. The passage is narrated in the first person. The reader sees events through the eyes of the heroine and shares her attitude to life. How would you define this attitude?

## Samuel Richardson *Clarissa* (1747-48)

Nearly thirty years after Moll Flanders, Richardson (Psee p. 229) tells the story of a woman whose condition is completely different from Defoe's character. Different, but perhaps even more tragic. Clarissa is an epistolary novel, like Pamela. It is made up of seven volumes, and it was probably the longest novel to have been written in the English language until the 20th century.

### Clarissa

Clarissa is the beautiful and honest protagonist of the novel who comes from a middle-class family. In spite of this she has an unhappy life which ends tragically. She rebels against her parents who want to force her to marry a man for whom she feels nothing. In order to escape this dilemma she puts herself in the hands of a young gentleman, Lovelace, and runs off with him. He betrays her trust, however, and the novel ends with Clarissa's death while Lovelace is killed in a duel with her cousin.

*Clarissa* can be interpreted as a document on the condition of middle-class women in the 18th century, women who were fighting their first battles for emancipation. Clarissa, in fact, rebels against her family to uphold her principles of virtue and honesty. But the tragic ending (the heroine's death) would seem to suggest that a woman like Clarissa could never defeat the established system.

Clarissa represents not only a new type of heroine, but she can also be seen as a symbol of virtuosity and purity. She finds herself standing alone against everybody: her family - which represented the main reference point for a young woman of that time - her future husband and the man she looked to for support, Lovelace. In this struggle with and against the world, she is similar to Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, but this is the only similarity between the two heroines. While Moll Flanders is prepared to make every compromise possible in order to have her own way, Clarissa represents the spiritual independence associated with Puritanism, maintaining a code of strict moral conduct.

In the novel, *Clarissa*, there is also a didactic vein: essentially being addressed to women it warns them to be careful in their choices of men and who they trust, putting them on their guard against the deceptions of the opposite sex. It is also an appeal to the middle class in general not to reduce all life's problems down to money. Clarissa's family is obsessed with trying to improve their social standing at all cost, typical of the landowning class of the time, and the price they paid was the death of their daughter.



◀ Louis Edouard Dubufe, *Lovelace Kidnaps Clarissa Halowe*, 1867. Hermitage, St. Petersburg.



## Clarissa

*This extract is taken from a letter written by Clarissa to Miss Howe. The conflict between Clarissa and her entire family, in particular with her mother, becomes clear. If Clarissa refuses to marry the man her family has chosen for her, they won't be able to acquire the estate which would allow them to climb the social ladder.*

1. **is not to be borne:** non è sopportabile.
2. **peremptoriness:** imperiosità.
3. **grasping views:** il suo modo di impuntarsi.
4. **hitherto:** finora.
5. **trial:** prova.

But, why, dearest madam, why am I, the youngest, to be precipitated into a state, that I am very far from wishing to enter into with anybody?

You are going to question me, I suppose, why your sister is not thought of for Mr Solmes?

I hope, madam, it will not displease you if I were?

I might refer you for an answer to your papa - Mr. Solmes has reasons for preferring you -

And so have I, madam, for disliking him. And why am I -

This quickness upon me, interrupted my mamma, is not to be borne<sup>1</sup>! I am gone, and your father comes, if I can do no good with you.

Madam, I would rather die, than -

She put her hand to my mouth - No peremptoriness<sup>2</sup>, Clary Harlowe! Once you declare yourself inflexible, I have done.

I wept for vexation. This is all, all, my brother's doings - His grasping views<sup>3</sup> - No reflections upon your brother. He has entirely the honour of the family at heart.

I would no more dishonour my family, madam, than my brother would.

I believe it; but I hope you'll allow your papa and me and your uncles to judge what will do it honour, what dishonour!

I then offered to live single; never to marry at all; or never but with their full approbation.

If I meant to show my duty and my obedience, I must show it in their way; not in my own.

I said, I hoped I had not so behaved myself hitherto<sup>4</sup> that there was no need of such a trial<sup>5</sup> of my obedience as this.



### OVER TO YOU

#### 1 Answer the following questions.

1. What does Clarissa ask her mother? What is her mother's answer?
2. Clarissa claims that she would not dishonour her family. What does she propose? Is this accepted?
3. What aspects of Clarissa's character are underlined by this extract?
4. What is really 'new' for the time, in your opinion, about the attitude of the heroine?
5. This dialogue illustrates clearly what could be seen as a typical relationship between daughter and mother of the time. Would it be the same today? If not, in what ways would it differ? Discuss in class.
6. For girls: Do you feel closer to Clarissa or Moll Flanders?
7. For boys: Has the liberation of women had any effect on the role of men in society?