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Fashioning the Self: Cross-dressing and Invention in *The Roaring Girl*

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She within lists my ranging minde hath brought,
That now beyond my selfe I list not goe;
My selfe am center of my circling thought,
Only my selfe I studie, learne, and know

- 'Of Humane Knowledge', *Nosce Teipsum* by Sir John Davies

To 'know', or 'studie', oneself was a dominant concern of the Early Modern period. Scepticism and self-doubt pervaded the Jacobean conscience. Montaigne's statements that 'to philosophise is to doubt' (251) and that 'knowing much gives occasion for doubting more' (376) are reflected in much literature and art of the period. Change was tailed by a shadow of cultural anxiety, hidden in plain sight. This anxiety surfaces in the 1533 portrait *The Ambassadors*. Objects crowd this painting: globes, sheets of music, textiles and sundials stand proudly at the centre of the picture. These objects reflect advancements of science, culture and thinking. Yet, at the feet of the subjects, tellingly, looms an anamorphic skull, reflecting anxiety lurking below the surface of material culture and change. Clothing was likewise a site of negotiation for these concerns. With textiles imported from mainland Europe, and material production in England booming, clothing became more accessible and subject to fashion. With tighter sumptuary laws, and an increasing number of punishments for those who dressed against regulation, it is clear that change within habits of dress was seen as threatening. In many sumptuary laws, and polemical pamphlets, social anxieties about class, gender and status manifest materially. This is true, too, within the theatre. Plays such as *Twelfth Night, The Merchant of Venice* and *Gallathea* explored cross-dressing, and reflected contemporary anxieties about what it meant for social order. As Jonathon Dollimore states, to dress was to be 'metaphysically identified' (54): it outwardly signified one's class and status, and was seen as a sign of social order. Productions which explored cross-dressing were attacked by anti-theatricalists, who feared that theatre caused the male players to become effeminate. As such, any play which explored cross-dressing, was participating in a cultural conversation about identity and status, and, in doing so, undermined the metaphysical identifiers which Jacobean society wished to promulgate. Few texts, however, dared disrupt the metaphysical order of social hierarchies in such an inventive way as Dekker and

Middleton's *The Roaring Girl.* Based upon the real-life cross-dresser, Mary (Moll) Frith, the play features a character who goes beyond the idea of 'self-knowledge' and makes strides towards self-invention. The identity which she creates is radically unique, comfortable dwelling within blurred areas of doubt and enigma. Much recent feminist and historicist criticism has sought to place Moll within a wider feminist context. The RSC's 2014 production, for instance, framed her as an originator of the 'Girl Power!' brand of feminism[1]. Whilst her agency in cross-dressing and disruption of gender roles is, to some extent, proto-feminist, I argue this view places too much emphasis on a feminine gender, and assimilates her with a movement, when she is remarkably individual. Moll only seeks to be herself, and, through her dress, to have the freedom to elect who that might be.

Clothing in the Early Modern period was a signifier of class and a symbol of order. As Lisa Jardine notes, it was customary to deduce an individual's rank or status from their clothing. Greater interactions with mainland Europe, however, allowed for more textiles to be imported from the Continent, whilst an explosion in production meant that fashion gained precedent over tradition. Anti-sumptuary pamphlets and writings evidence that, either through honest means, second-hand markets, now popular, or theft, members of lower social classes were now able to dress in such a way that obscured the legibility of their social status (Richardson 19). Luxury objects, which ordinarily were signifiers of status, increasingly moved fluidly through the social classes, sold cheaply when out of vogue. Harrison in 'Description of England' (1577) notes, 'in times past the costly furniture stayed there [in the houses of nobility], whereas now it is descended yet lower, even unto the inferior artifices' (200).

This posed a threat to the social hierarchies Elizabethans had come to view as necessary in maintaining order. As Tillyard identifies, ‘If the Elizabethans believed in an ideal order, animating earthly order, they were terrified lest it be upset, and appalled by the visible tokens of disorder that suggested its upsetting’ (13). The promulgation of sumptuary laws sought to reaffirm hierarchies and reinstate a patriotic mode of dress. In a 1574 proclamation, Elizabeth I introduced new regulations, warning that an ‘excess of apparel’ risked bringing about ‘the manifest decay of the whole realm’ (qtd. in Richardson 6). To dress against regulation was to disrupt social hierarchies and metaphysical order, for, since Elizabeth I was a monarch believed to be ordained by God, any transgression of her laws was seen as an opposition to his will. As Tillyard states, what ensued after disruption of order was chaos; it would naturally follow, then, that any androgynous identity would be unstable and incoherent.

The intrinsic theatricality of crossdressing was noted by Dekker and Middleton; in the dedication of the play, they state that 'The fashion of playmaking' can 'compare to nothing, so naturally as the alteration in apparel' (226). Wrapped up, even within more complex conceptions of cross-dressing, was the idea of deception and disguise: Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* assumes a male identity for the purpose of entering Orsino's court, whilst Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* disguises herself as a doctor in order to test Bassanio's love for her. Yet, it is clear right from Moll's entrance that she does not seek to assume any identity separate from her own, nor does her cross-dressing appear to hide any ulterior motive or malign intent. Moll is forthcoming about her blurred gender identity and role. In Act II, Scene II, addressing Sebastian’s pandering marriage request, she states 'I love to lie a' both sides a' th' bed myself; and again a' th' other side... [I] am man enough for a woman' (Act II, Scene II, l. 35). How 'comfortable' her answer appears is noted by Alexander; she wears her flaws, her 'temper', on her sleeve. Immediately after this statement, Moll’s tailor enters.

> TAILOR. Mistress Moll, Mistress Moll: so ho ho so ho.
>
> MOLL. There boy, there boy, what dost thou go ahawking after me with a red clout on thy finger.
>
> TAILOR. I forgot to take measure on you for your new breeches.

They share a comic interaction and discuss, with ease, the creation of new clothing for Moll. The doubling of 'Mistress Moll' echoes this idea of a dual self who occupies both sides of the bed. The repetition of 'mistress' and 'boy' references a binary system of gender; there is a deliberate play upon the divided male and female self. However, the tailor's statement, 'I forgot to take measure on you for your new breeches' reintroduces the idea of self-invention. Breeches, of course, were masculine apparel. The tailor and Moll interact with a clear fondness; they jest with one another, and the scene therefore has a certain levity. Coming so swiftly after Moll's rejection of Sebastian, it is clear that in fashioning her breeches, she is choosing herself. The idea of her cross-dressing not as a mode of deceit, in the vein of Viola or Portia, but as 'natural' distinguishes *The Roaring Girl* from its contemporaries. Promising to chronicle the life of the real Moll Frith, the play frames Moll not as someone using dress as a plotted means to provoke, or deceive, but someone who is willing to stand up for their stable, individual identity, whose clothing and hiring of a tailor is bound up with their 'comfortable' confidence in existing as a distinct, albeit liminal, figure.

Middleton and Dekker, writing for a Renaissance audience, were well-acquainted with sentiments articulated in the polemical pamphlet *Hic Mulier*, which proclaims that transvestitism 'violates natural order' (12). In the preface to the play, Middleton and Dekker outline a purpose to entertain: 'Such a kind of light-colour summer stuff, mingled with diverse colours, you shall find this published comedy'. Establishing Moll as a comic figure

was contingent upon lessening her threat. For an audience knowledgeable of the contemporary attacks on cross-dressing, viewing her as a character to laugh with, as opposed to be threatened by, required some effort indeed from the playwrights. In 'The Logic of the Transvestite', Marjorie Garber observes that much of materialist, historicist criticism categorises *The Roaring Girl* as an anxious play about 'economic injustices of the sex-gender system' (221). The play's anxiety about clothing and fashion, she asserts, is 'conjoined with a related anxiety about sexuality' (221). The play is concerned with sexuality, of course: it contains many thinly veiled jokes and ironies pertaining to anatomy and a carnivalesque 'circulation of parts'. In *The Roaring Girl,* codpieces are literally passed from tailor to wearer, and phallic jokes are circulated between many of the men in the play. However, I argue that the humour and wit with which Dekker and Middleton deal with these instances of circulation does not point to an 'anxiety about sexuality' (221). Rather, the humorous tone and light touch they use to explore these matters point to a related 'comfortability' which Moll exudes, one which enhances her likeability and diminishes her status as threat, thus enabling her to tackle social concerns in her roaring speeches in a way palatable for a Jacobean audience. The prologue to *The Roaring Girl* states that Moll 'Shall fill with laughter our vast Theatre / That's all which I dare promise' (ll. 10-11). This 'laughter' rises too from the instances where sex and anatomy are confused and conflated. Mary Fitzallard's initial appearance, 'disguised as a sempster' (glossed right away as 'needlewoman') (Act I, Scene I, ll. 1) makes immediate comic use of the metatheatricality of cross-dressing. The 'needlewoman' clarification makes phallic, base humour out of her entrance, which would have been accessible to each member of the increasingly diverse audience. This humour, I argue, was unifying and de-escalated any serious concerns about the ethics of cross-dressing, and, by extension, self-definition. Moll and all the circulations she represents, are, as we learn from the prologue, designed to

entertain. Furthermore, when Mary Fitzallard kisses Sebastian, Moll's dry comment that it 'seems strange for one man to kiss another' (Act IV, Scene I, l. 46) makes light of any (usually deplored) homoerotic subtext associated with cross-dressing. When, in Act 2, Scene 2, Sir Alexander overhears a tailor designing a costume for Moll, he states that Moll is to be a 'codpiece daughter' (Act II, Scene II, l. 86), a humorously narrow circulation of parts designed to make the audience laugh. Though much criticism has sought to assert that these jokes and ironies are 'carnivalised' or 'sinister' (Garber 224), it is important to remember the context of the comedy genre and spectacle of the theatre. I propose, with this in mind, that *The Roaring Girl* unites its socially and economically diverse audience in laughing at the fashioning of body-parts and the self. People wear their body parts like clothes, and freely try on different sexual identifiers. With comic names such as 'Jack Dapper' and 'Laxton', the rigidity of gender roles is made similarly performative and jested at. Unlike many feminist critics, I do not see these references to be 'anxious' but to shed a humorous light upon previously contraband modes of self-experimentation and gender performance. Though Moll's fashioning of the self does not seek to *re*invent, but to assert and establish a confident metaphysical self, some of the audience's concerns about the wider implications of anatomic experimentation are dissembled through a game of humorous anatomic exchange, enough to allow her to be accepted as an entertainer. Although it is doubtful this would have entirely diffused the audience's suspicions, as they were deep seated and complex, she is humanised and made likeable.

Moll's cross-dressing, though functioning primarily as a mode of self-assertion, allows her to transgress social boundaries and move freely within hierarchies which otherwise would restrict her. Throughout the secondary plot, in which several 'penniless gallants' attempt to profit by 'ingratiating themselves with the wives of wealthy merchants',

Moll's costume changes demonstrate her indefinability and ever-shifting self-presentation (Carter 4). Unlike the other female characters, she is afforded a freedom of movement around the streets: she shops, converses amongst the men, challenges them to duels and wins. It is unmistakable then that she transgresses boundaries which were, as much feminist criticism emphasises, patriarchal, but as I emphasise, also classist. With a sympathy and understanding of circumstance remarkable for a society in which the class system was believed to be ordained by God, Moll stands up for the dignities and rights of concubine women and paints them in a sympathetic light. Whether Moll Frith worked as a concubine is a subject of debate. Studies by Gustav Ungerer have found evidence that she worked as ‘a pickpocket and self-promoter’ but little to suggest she was a prostitute, though these rumours followed her at the time (46). She is called a ‘mermaid’ by Sir Alexander in the first act (glossed as ‘whore’), but Dekker and Middleton refocus this assumption. When confronted, Moll suggests that desperation and poverty are causal factors in the prostitution of women: scorning the 'golden witchcrafts' and 'best flatteries' (Act III, Scene I, l. 88) and lamenting the fates of the 'distressed needlewomen' and 'trade fallen wives' (l. 90) who have suffered at the behest of a patriarchal society, Moll creates an interesting reversal of the roles of men and women, which points also to an increased social mobility. Most obviously, she states, 'I scorn to prostitute myself to a man / I that can prostitute a man to me' (l. 103), not only inverting gender positions but social rank. When it is clear that Moll is a far superior fighter than the phallically named Laxton, she mockingly responds to his begging pleas for pardon that she is but his 'hired whore, sir' (l. 116), and wins money from him. He yields his 'purse and body' (l. 117), which she states are 'now at my disposing' (l. 118), and we see a transference of power from the allegorically named Laxton, a symbol for male status and social pride, to Moll, who has obtained this higher identity and social rank through cross-dressing: remaining authentic

to her conception of herself. Summarising Wilfrid Hooper's discussion of the Tudor sumptuary laws, Carter writes, 'Early modern women saw themselves knitted into a hierarchy with roles that had been ordained by God. Clothing made this hierarchy visible' (8). Moll's sartorial shapeshifting challenges this hierarchy, instead enabling her to stand up not merely for herself but for a greater social mobility and rejection of conventional roles.

In his study of the real Mary Frith's career, Gustav Ungerer describes how she first appeared in London as a 'not-very-successful pickpocket' (47). Ungerer deduces that over time, Mary Frith reinvented herself to fit the role of a street-performer. Carter suggests that she was simply a self-promoter, 'unwilling to depend on others' (5), who created a spectacle of herself for financial gain. Similar to Dekker and Middleton's Moll insofar as she believed she 'must work for [her] living' (227), this Mary likely worked as a prostitute and appeared, from Ungerer research, to have a less defined code of moral practices. By contrasting the real Moll with the playwrights' Moll, it is clear to see that both women have fashioned a new identity; however, it is also apparent that Dekker and Middleton's Moll is less morally dubious, and more solid in her selfhood and beliefs. In the prologue, Dekker and Middleton assert that Moll 'flies / With wings more lofty' (ll. 25-6). Thus, her redress of social and patriarchal hierarchies and unflinching moral concerns are, to some extent, endorsed by the two playwrights. It is clear that her greater self-knowledge and more stable morality is a conscious departure from the trope of the Roaring Girl, or the 'reinventing', unstable self of the real Moll Cutpurse. Through rejecting the more bawdy, lewd behaviours of the real Moll, the Roaring Girl in this play defies expectation, and her self-knowledge rings as more authentic. Through cross-dressing, Moll is a shapeshifter, but morally she remains true; her strong sense of self is manifested both in her adamant, defiant dress, and her moral standing. Though some have suggested that Moll actively tries to recruit Mary Fitzallard and is more

interested in starting a movement than emerging as an individual, I suggest that she only utilises the tools at her disposal to help fulfil a heterosexual marriage which she only disapproves of in the context of herself. Moll approaches the question of marriage on a case-by-case basis. She is less interested in instructing other women in how (or whether) to approach marriage, and more interested in whether it is right, individually, for her: Moll does not scorn 'all men' for all women, only for herself (Act III, Scene I, l. 105). Dekker and Middleton deliberately align the two Marys through their names, though, as we know, Moll Frith is not in disguise, whilst Mary Fitzallard pointedly is. In order to protect Sebastian and Mary, their 'hands of heaven tied', Moll states, 'I pitied her for name's sake, that a Moll / Should be so crossed in love .... / My tailor fitted her: how like you his work?' (Act IV, Scene I, ll. 67-72). I suggest that she protects Mary and her desire for marriage as she knows she has the power through cross-dressing to do so, in the same way as she declares, having been confronted with a gang of cutpurses, that she wishes to use her 'knowledge in those quick villainies to save / Your friend of quick danger. Must you have/ A black, ill name because ill things you know?' (Act V, Scene I, ll. 361-3). Moll is thus a moral protector who uses dress to act upon what she thinks is right, traversing social and patriarchal hierarchies and existing as a morally sure, sexually dubious individual who accepts Mary's choice to marry Sebastian, in the knowledge that marriage is wrong for her own personal circumstance. Dekker and Middleton have created in her a character who emerges distinct from her two namesakes, thus proving that she is not a character to be conflated, feared, condemned, or to be advertised as the leader of any particular movement. Rather, she acts against determined roles (Mary Fitzallard represents the alternative, perhaps pre-destined route into marriage Moll could have taken) and subverts expectations, remaining, always, authentic to her metaphysical self.

In conclusion, Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton have created in Moll a character who self-elects. A character who is not 'lost' for her sartorial daring, but 'comfortable' existing in areas of ambiguity and readily transgressing boundaries when her strong sense of selfhood and moral surety provoke her to do so. As Dollimore points out, contemporary writings on selfhood asserted that 'to know oneself was to know [one's] order', never mutable, but metaphysically fixed (54). *The Roaring Girl* challenges, theatrically, this message, in providing an example of a woman who chooses her own destiny, is morally strong in the face of prejudice against her chosen self-expression, and stands up for the rights of other women, and people, around her, Though not her intention, Dekker and Middleton, through her character, highlight the potential and complex moral powers of cross-dressing in a society which feared it and placed it within a binary moral code of good and evil. Her identity is not one of absences, as Dollimore asserts was often the case for Renaissance women, but one she herself actively constitutes (63). Fears relating to this active performance and constitution of gender are deescalated through humour, allowing room for the audience to view Dekker and Middleton's ‘Roaring Girl’ is a strong, self-knowing moral figure, who is comfortable dwelling in realms of ambiguity, but whose selfhood is stable, and elected. Not punished for her sins, as many cross-dressers were in Renaissance society (think processional rituals of humiliation, jail time and condemnations from James I himself), Moll fashions for herself a stable identity which should not be reduced to a mere emblem of the 'Girl Power!' feminist cause[2]. Of course, her morality leads her to naturally advocate for women, but she advocates too for self-determination, social mobility and election. She is therefore a far more complex, individual character than Viola or indeed Portia. She defies rigid categorisation.

Notes

1. In a promotional video for the RSC'S 2014 production, directed by Jo Davies (The Swan Theatre), actress Lisa Dillon says: ‘when the Spice Girls coined the phrase “Girl Power!” they had no idea what they were talking about. Moll Cutpurse, Mary Frith, is the original “Girl Power!”, as far as I’m concerned’ (‘Exploring the Character of Moll Cutpurse’)
2. In Jane E Howard's 'Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England', she explains: 'David Undertown has argued that there was a marked increase in the years immediately after 1600 in the use of the cucking school and charivaris, especially in communities where traditional modes of ordering society along vertical lines of hierarchy, deference, and paternalism were being disrupted and displaced by what we associate with the more modern horizontal alignment of people within classes and with the rise of postcapitalist economic practices' (422). It is all the more remarkable, then, that Moll goes unpunished.

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