

# Transforming the presentation of gender: epicene and the roaring girl



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' Oh London.... Thou hast all things in thee to make thee fairest, and all things in thee to make thee foulest: for thou art attir'de like a Bride, drawing all that looke upon thee, to be in love with thee but there is much harlot in thine eyes.' (Dekker).

The plays produced during the early 17th century signified a turning point in the portrayal of the women within literature. Female sexuality and agency were beginning to be seriously explored due to proto-capitalist city economy providing more women with economic independence, and thus, a greater degree of personal freedom. One could argue that this is reflected in *The Roaring Girl* by Dekker and Middleton and their representation of women through Moll Cutpurse, a female character that occupies a position of total opposition to patriarchal structures of the 17th century. But, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Jacobean theatre is progressive in its representation of women. Many writers viewed the consumerism that emerged with the economic rise of London as a problem rooted in women, they regarded the ' city women' as being unvirtuous, as evident in Jonson's *Epicene* where women are portrayed as deceitful and mercenary characters. The economic upheaval and urban growth during this period were beginning to alter the way gender was perceived, these changes also bred patriarchal anxieties and opposition that is evident within the art produced by Jonson, Middleton and Dekker.

During the 19th century Baudelaire popularized the literary figure of the flâneur " Who confounds dominant uses of the city by casually strolling through it" But one could argue that the ' stroller' character who possesses total freedom of the city can be traced back to the Jacobean ' roaring boys'

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whom Orgel defines as “ characteristically upper class or gentry, their riotous behavior as assertion of aristocratic privilege.” It is Dekker and Middleton’s appropriation of the ‘ roaring boy’ persona through the character of Moll Cutpurse that enables an exploration of the moving gender boundaries caused by London’s embracing of the mercantile, capitalist economy. Like the flâneur Moll moves around the boroughs of the city of London with ease from the bustling high street to the open space of Gray’s Inn Fields. She befriends courtiers, through her relationships with Sebastian Wengrave and Jack Dapper, the sons of landed gentry, and she also boasts of her affiliation with the pickpockets of London “ I have sat amongst such adders.” Moll further occupies the typical position of the educated young man about town through her display financial independence, as demonstrated in her desire to buy a “ shag ruff.” Moll’s ability to traverse both the physical boundaries between neighbourhoods and the more abstract class boundaries cements her position as ‘ the stroller.’ A controversial position for a woman to occupy and one that requires Moll to be denied her femininity throughout the play. She is repeatedly called “ a creature” or “ a monster,” Sir Alexander insinuates that she is a hermaphrodite “...her birth began/Ere she was all made. Tis woman more than man, man more than woman.” Thus, while Moll does successfully co-opt the position of “ the roaring girl” throughout the play and is able to gain power and authority that she would be denied if she presented herself as the Jacobean idea of womanhood, she is still denied her feminine identity. Thus, one can argue that her site she occupies within the gender politics of the play is not of a reforming nature, but is rather gender exceptionalism.

Similarly, Jonson also explores the shifting gender roles within the city caused by the economic upheavals occurring within London and English class system, albeit framed through a misogynistic mind set. The verbose women within *Epicene*, specifically the Collegiate's, while not as independent as Moll Cutpurse, are actively engaged within the economic and culture aspects of the city. Newman argues that "...the talking women represents the city and what is large part motivated the growth of the city - mercantilism and colonial expansion." Women as the epitome of consumerism is particularly palpable in Truewit's argument against marriage " These women are consummate consumers of poems and plays in the same breath as gloves and garters." Jonson depicts the Collegiate's as insatiable consumers through their ruthless colonization of Morose's household, permeating his house with noise, which he compares to " Another flood! An inundation! I shall be o'erwhelmed with noise." Women are also depicted as sources of economic power with *Epicene* repeatedly stating that now she and Morose are married that she will buy a carriage - a status symbol representing wealth - and Mrs Otter expounds at length about the economic control she exercises over her household and her husband " Who gives you your maintenance?" Arguably, Jonson's alignment of femininity and finances while degrading, does demonstrate effectively the shift felt in the hierarchy of England due growth of the middle class, as Orgel notes " Women and children...become both a medium for exchange and the cultural metonyms for the working classes generally." Jonson's unfavourable depiction of the covetous talkative women is therefore not only a manifestation of gender anxiety but also of class anxiety. The invasive presence of women within the

play reflects the nobility's perception that their political and cultural institutions were being taken over by the lower classes.

Judith Butler described gender as a series of "performative acts" and that the act of drag or cross-dressing makes the audience "see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes...their fabricated unity." While *The Roaring Girl* and *Epicene* are plays predominantly concerned with the patriarchal anxieties stemming from upsetting the gender norms of the period, one can interpret aspects of the text as explorations of the artifice behind gender. In both *Epicene* and *The Roaring Girl* cross-dressing is a trope that features throughout and is utilised by the authors to interrupt the normative Jacobean gender boundaries, the most prominent example being the titular character of *Epicene*, who throughout the majority of the play occupies two opposite poles in the spectrum of feminine virtue. When she is introduced *Epicene* represents the feminine ideal, predominantly through her silent and submissive persona. *Morose* both deifies her "divine softness" and yet also reduces her to an object through his clinical listing of her good attributes and his desire to "Try her." After the marriage, *Epicene* then reveals that this is a façade, revealing herself as a loud woman and ingratiating herself with the Collegiate's while disrupting *Morose's* household. Simultaneously but not coincidentally, *Epicene* becomes a locus for sexual perversity with both *Daw* and *La Foole* claiming to have had sex with her. Suggesting that for the Jacobean's is a woman lacked virtue in one aspect of herself, she probably lacks virtue in other areas.

Jonson, however, implodes this binary through the reveal of Epicene as a boy and also reveals the false presumptions of the other characters. For how can Epicene be the epitome of unvirtuous womanhood, when she is in fact not a woman? Epicene's portrayal of womanhood is of corrupted femininity as performed by man, whereas *The Roaring Girl* is centred on perfected masculinity as performed by a woman. Orgel posits that "Moll is surrounded by men who are less than men," their names insinuate emasculation, for example Laxton is associated with the phrase 'lack-stone' that suggests he has no testicles. Moll also over-powers men throughout the play - she bests Laxton at a duel, she saves Jack Dapper from being arrested and foils Sir Alexander Wengrave and Trapdoor's plot to arrest her. She occupies a place with considerable power over multiple powerful men. However, unlike Epicene who only emerges as a sympathetic character when their femininity is denied, Moll is still allowed to express herself as a woman. In the final act she appears wearing a "female dress" and Sir Alexander expresses an attraction to her. Yet, she still retains her autonomy regardless of her clothing through her refusal to marry. Moll is able to pick aspects of masculinity and femininity that she wishes to express and it is through this complex and fluid relationship between character and gender that Dekker and Middleton create, certain preconceptions about gender are dissected and their artifice is revealed.

To say that women in Jacobean theatre are portrayed either favourably or unfavourably is reductive as it ignores the contextual complexities that influence the authors. While misogynistic elements are evident, it is in these city plays that a more modern and complex interpretation of women in

literature begins to emerge. In the London that is reflected in their work, Jonson, Dekker and Middleton represent women are forces of industry, who eschew cultural norms successfully, and are treated seriously - albeit not respectfully. By concentrating on an individual's performance within a public space, how an individual interacts with the environment they inhabit the authors put the gender expectations, and also the class expectations, of their contemporaries under scrutiny and in turn, reveal the pretence behind class and gender constructs.