

To what extent does 'the roaring girl' pose a challenge

Literature



Jean Howard, a critic greatly acclaimed for her studies on the politics of gender and sexuality in Jacobean drama, once posed the intriguing question: 'How many people cross-dressed in Renaissance England?'¹ She points out that the disruption of the semiotics of dress, gender and identity during the seventeenth century resulted in " a sex-gender system under pressure" and a patriarchal culture concerned with profound anxieties and contradictions.

The Roaring Girl brilliantly dramatizes the issue of cross-dressing which becomes main theme in the play, written by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker and performed in 1611. The play engages with this controversial issue predominant in Renaissance England, concerning gender roles and the nature of masculine and feminine. There was a significant growth in transvestism, with female transvestities on the streets of London and male transvestites on stage.

My essay will assess how gender affects the operation of the sexual system, by looking at how sexual practices and desires are represented in the play and points of conflict within the sexual economy rendered visible. I will discuss the character of Moll and evaluate her association with Mary Frith- a notorious real life London character of the seventeenth century and embodiment of a proto-type heroine of the Women's Movement. She is the main gender ideology that sexualises the desiring, speaking, publicly visible woman who poses great threat to a man's gender dominance and to patriarchal constructions of 'the good wife'.

I will discuss the extent to which Moll challenges the gender roles of the time and how, by becoming " Masculine in case, even from the head to the foot;

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masculine in moode, from bold speeche, to impudent action" 2she is enabled to rebel against the play's representations of sexuality, marriage and gender, inciting a fear and anxiety in society. Even the title of the play points at a challenge in Renaissance gender roles.

The title- " roaring girl" was adapted from the slang term " roaring boy", which was applied to young men who caroused publicly, brawled and committed petty crimes. It's indubitably a title perfectly suited to this play of ambivalence- one which combines complex attributes of femininity and masculinity to create " a monster" (The Roaring Girl 1. 2 125-4) called Moll- " A scurvy woman.. nature brought forth/ To mock the sex of woman". The image of Molly on front cover of the first publication of the play is at first glance, most definitely a man. She wears a hat, over her ruffianly short hair, wears breeches and exposes her legs, carrying a sword by her side and smokes a pipe, her attire presenting a distinct picture of virile masculinity and desexualized femininity.

Such transvestism crossed society's visual boundary between female and male categories: " cross-dressing as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principals of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike. " 4 According to her detractors Moll is an unnatural, corrupt, monstrous " man-woman" feared by those around her. Her cross-dressing subverts the to the gender order which has imposed artificial boundaries between each gender, clothing being the one rendered most visible.

King James was so disturbed by female accessorizing with male attire that he asked the Bishop of London in 1620, "to inveigh vehemently... against the insolencie of our women and theyre wearing of brode brimmd hats, pointed dublets, theyre hair cut short or shorne, and some of them stillettaes or poinards".⁵ Howard attributes this anxiety in society to the possibility that women might assume masculine roles and privileges as easily as a doublet and sword. Moll is "a thing/ One knows not to name" (I. 2. 128-9). To name is to classify and Moll exudes all classification.

The name 'Moll' in itself is a refusal to name her, as it is a by-word of 'woman'. Sebastian asks "Why is the name of Moll so fatal, sir?" Sir Alexander explains the implications of the name as it was a popular name in London at the time as "More whores of that name than of any ten other" (2. 2. 155). On the basis of her name and clothes, Moll is deemed as sexually provocative by her detractors - she sings and plays upon a viol in 4. 1 where jokes are made upon her taking down the gentleman's instrument and playing upon it, which is described by censorious dames to be "an unmannerly instrument for a woman".

Laxton makes overt sexual advances towards Moll on account of his perception of her as morally loose and unchaste. Although Moll shares her name with Sebastian's true love, Mary Fitz-Allard these characters are directly juxtaposed heroines- a complete antithesis of each other. One conforms to the female gender role while the other quite clearly goes against it. Mary Fitz-Allard cross-dresses as motive of disguise to get her man, whereas Moll dresses as vocation. In 4. 1 Mary, Moll and Sebastian are all

wearing men's clothing. Sebastian kisses Mary, stimulating his homoerotic desires.

We realise he finds Mary more sexually attractive as a man: " MOLL: How strange this shows, one man to kiss another. SEBASTIAN: I'd kiss such men to choose, Moll; Methinks a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet". (4. 1 45-47)

Laxton poses a challenge to the conventional male characters of the play as he lacks many masculine qualities. His name foregrounds him as a figure of 'lack' and the recognition of this lack permits his entry into the socio-economic world of patriarchy and commerce. Laxton is infact " lack-stone", a man without testicles.

Sir Alexander questions his desire of " a stone", an obvious hint at his homoerotic tendencies. Moll challenges the male prejudices of the female gender in her struggle for female independence and equality between sexes. She identifies the 'gallants', who pursue city wives for sexual satisfaction- Sebastian, Jack Dapper, Goshawk, Greenwit and Laxton, as arrogant of gender and rank. She is not afraid of entering into free speech and disallows the sexual innuendos in the linguistic style of men to compromise her modesty. She engages in conversation like an equal, subverting the 'seen but not heard' association with women of the time.

She speaks and acts in woman's defense, blaming men for women's lack of sovereignty. Her defeat of the gallant Laxton is a superb part of the play and a defining moment in Moll's challenge on gender roles. She threatens him to punish him capitally and mocks the frustration of Laxton's lecherous intentions: " Draw, or I'll serve an execution on thee Shall lay thee up till

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doomsday". 6 She attempts " to teach thy base thoughts manners: th'art one of those/ That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore" (3. 1 71-2) and fights him in a duel, according to the male code of ritual combat and by beating him, subverts them.

She forces him into begging for his life and gains power over him- reversing the role of the male and the female. She shows rich indignation of men who brag of fictitious sexual conquests and the pride in her own celibacy gives her authority to speak against them: " If she can but cast a liberal eye upon thee;/ Turn back her head, she's thine". Moll however, realises and sympathises with those " Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives" (94) who are forced into prostitution. Moll recognizes that the law is on the side of man- and in challenging the law she is simultaneously challenging the role of the man in law.

She is set up by Sir Alexander, who lays out a watch he intends for her to steal, allowing her to incriminate herself. His prejudices against the female sex as thieves and whores are proved unworthy and his plan backfires, as Moll simply observes the time and leaves it. Moll also poses a threat to the Renaissance institution of marriage by rebuking the cultural imperatives followed by women to marry and reproduce. Sir Alexander is strongly against her marrying his son: " Heyday, breeches! What, will he marry a monster with two trinkets? What age is this?

If the wife go in breeches, the man must wear long coats like a fool" (2. 2. 76-8) Sebastian pretends to be in love with Moll in order to make his father see how much better off he would be with Mary. Sir Alexander is meanwhile

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in complete ignorance of the fact that she has no intention of entering into marriage with his son. Her sharp distain for the constitution of marriage originates from the gender hierarchy present and the wife's subornment and inferiority to her male counterpart:

" I have no humour to marry. I love to lie o'both sides o'th'bed myself; and again, 'th'other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll ne'er go about it' " (2. 2 35-8) Moll's counterpart Mary Fitz-Allard is presented as the ideal woman, who conforms to the ideals of the Renaissance woman as passive, silent and submissive who succumbs to convention. Moll outlandishly subverts convention and as 'roaring girl' of the streets and taverns, she strides about London with a sword and tobacco pipe, drinking, smoking and brawling with cutpurses, presenting a direct challenges the role of the man and woman in society.

She is the central character and unifying agent in the play, around which the intrigues and various interests resolve. Sebastian's plan to outwit his father depends on her kind help. All other characters exist as personifications of the hierarchal gender roles that Moll challenges so vehemently. She is based on a real-life character while the other characters are made to present society's position on gender. Moll is the characterization of the real Mary Frith who exists at the centre of this complex world.

She is Venus in " doublet and breeches" (Gomme 1976: Preface, 1. 14), a figure who not only provokes erotic desire and sexualised aggression in others, but as an erotic subject in her own right she threatens the male conventions for managing sexual desire. 7 Moll is a revolutionary figure in

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gaining opportunities that women were denied at the time. She experienced a female independence and freedom no woman of her time has had. She succeeded in challenging the rigid gender roles of her time, bending them to her liking but she did not make a permanent impact.

In spite of Moll's "strangeness", she proves her true worth and virtue and Sir Alexander welcomes her as a would-be daughter in law in the end. As Mary Beth Rose observes, Moll is excluded from the "new comic society" which is restored at the end of the play with the matrimony of Mary and Sebastian. Moll, in accordance with the other characters' realise her own "strangeness" (385), denying her "full social acceptance" (386).⁸ Moll is 'outside society'. She is a liminal lower-class outsider who made her protestations against a hierarchal and unequal society, but she does not have the power or authority to fully challenge its' foundations.