

1995

The Sexual Identities of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton's The Roaring Girl and in London

Susan Krantz

University of New Orleans, skrantz@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/engl_facpubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Krantz, Susan E. "The Sexual Identities of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton's The Roaring Girl and in London." *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Reforme* 19.1 (1995): 5-20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English and Foreign Languages at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

The Sexual Identities of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* and in London

SUSAN E.
KRANTZ

Summary: *Moll Cutpurse dramatically demonstrates the insufficiency of gender categories both in **The Roaring Girl** and in her life. The fictional Moll's sex/gender ambiguity is explored through three distinct sexual identities (prostitute, hermaphrodite, bisexual ideal) and is further complicated through her heroic personation. Ultimately, the playwrights replace negative social readings of Moll's sexuality with a positive ideal, albeit an incomplete one. When the real Moll appeared on stage, she not only usurped the male actor's prerogative, she also rejected her fictional rehabilitation. Through her overtly sexual language, her cross-gendered performance, and her transvestite costume, she recuperated transgression as social signifier.*

Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* has received its share of attention in the ongoing academic discourse on cross-dressed females in the Renaissance transvestite theater. The play differs from most of its contemporaries, however, in that it features a hermaphroditically attired heroine drastically unlike the romanticized disguised-as-a-boy female leads of romantic comedy; moreover, the characterization of Moll Cutpurse in the play is complicated by the actual Moll Cutpurse, who tested and crossed the boundaries of the male theater by appearing on stage as herself — a cross-dressed virago — at the Fortune playhouse following a performance of the very play that featured her as character.¹

Christened Mary Frith, Moll Cutpurse, as her portrait on the frontispiece of the printed version of *The Roaring Girl*² testifies, consciously inverted and/

or rejected traditional gender signifiers in her apparel: her cropped hair, her pipe smoking, her drawn sword, and her French slops mark her for notice, not for transvestite “passing.” Neither in the fictive London of Dekker and Middleton’s play nor in the actual London of the early seventeenth century does Moll’s costume generally serve as a disguise.³ In fact, despite the frontispiece depiction (which portrays her in trousers), both the play and an extant arrest record for Moll describe her propensity to combine male and female attire. On January 27, 1611/12, *The London Correction Book* records various charges against Moll and recounts her previous arrest and conviction for appearing on the stage of the Fortune “about 3 quarters of a yeare since.” The current charges against Moll include one for cross-dressing: “she was since vpon Christmas day at night taken in Powles Church wth her peticoate tucked vp about her in the fashion of a man wth a mans cloake on her to the great scandall of diu[er]s p[er]sons who vnderstood the same & to the disgrace of all womanhood.”⁴ The court “reads” Moll’s appearance as lewd and immodest and so questions her regarding prostitution and procurement: she was “pressed to declare whether she had not byn dishonest of her body & hath not also drawne other women to lewdnes by her p[er]swasion.” But, despite having “voluntarily confessed” to other charges equally serious (like blasphemy, public drunkenness, and cutting purses), Moll “absolutely denied y^e she was chargeable wth eyther of these imputac[i]ons.” “Diuers understood” that she was not a man, but the court really had no term for what she was, so it reinscribed her behavior in terms that corresponded to the established cultural binary of gender. As a compromised female, Moll is assumed a prostitute.

Similar to the actual Moll’s appearance at St. Paul’s, the character Moll first appears in *The Roaring Girl* hermaphroditically attired: *Enter Mol in a freese Ierkin and a blacke saueguard* (2.1.155).⁵ (A safeguard is a kind of overskirt, designed primarily to protect the outer skirt from dirt when women go riding; the jerkin, of course, is a man’s jacket). Although clearly costumed female from the waist down, Moll is “male” from the waist up, and she further compromises her female identity in the play by equipping herself with traditionally male and symbolically phallic objects — a tobacco pipe and a short sword. These are the “signs” of Moll that the other characters in the play as well as the larger audience must attempt to “read.”

And readings have been plentiful and various. Mary Beth Rose (re)places *The Roaring Girl* into one of its historical contexts — the early seventeenth-century debate on female cross-dressing — and concludes that the transvestite heroine, despite her sympathetic treatment by Dekker and Middleton, cannot

be absorbed into Jacobean social and sexual hierarchies.⁶ Viviana Comensoli points to the inadequacies of the other marriages in the play to help clarify the apparent dichotomy between Moll's conventional views and her unconventional behavior.⁷ Both Jo Miller, in "Women and the Market in *The Roaring Girl*," and Jean Howard, in "Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," see the play as being more successfully transgressive: for Miller, Moll successfully demonstrates the flaws in the system of exchange that markets women; for Howard, Moll represents a significant reversal of authority in a play in which "the resistance to patriarchy and its marriage customs is clear and sweeping."⁸ Stephen Orgel also considers Moll's character in terms of the marriage market, an institution he believes Dekker and Middleton reconfigure on stage to accommodate the mannish female: in the world of the play, "acting like a man is clearly better than acting like a woman, both more attractive and . . . more likely to lead to an honourable marriage."⁹ A similar but more radical reading is offered by Jonathan Dollimore: "the female transvestite of the early seventeenth century positively disrupts [the binarism of gender] by usurping the master side of the opposition" and thus "represents a subversive reinscription within, rather than a transcendence of, an existing order."¹⁰ Howard's latest study examines sexual desire and anxiety in the play and finds Moll's often contradictory representation signifying both female desire and male homoeroticism.¹¹ Together, Orgel, Howard and Dollimore compellingly redirect critical investigation of the sex / gender tensions in the play.¹² Earlier readings of *The Roaring Girl* as transvestite text not only reinscribed (and therefore reaffirmed, even if negatively) the binarism of gender — *male* and *female*, they also minimized the significance of transgression by accepting the cross-dressed woman as normal and arguing the desirability of cultural reform that incorporates and empowers the outsider: the transvestite female is, after all, simply a female who wants the independence and/or privileges of the male. But even the more recent readings, while recognizing the power of the female transvestite on stage *as* transvestite, present the power as subversive rather than oppositional or alternative and locate it within the relatively safe limits of the culture — a culture that allows boys to cross-dress on stage and to "double-cross" when playing female cross-dressers — and, further, they minimize the theatrical normalizing of the stage transvestite. If the female transvestite, as Dollimore argues, "usurps the master side of the opposition," and so "positively disrupts" the binarism of gender, why does this positive transgression result in the recuperation of cultural "normalcy" — in the celebration of heterosexual marriage that makes sexual-

ity and reproduction essential to the definition of gender identity? And why does a positively reinscribed culture view with derision the transvestite transgression of the actual Moll on stage and imprison her for it?¹³

These questions are further complicated in *The Roaring Girl* because the transvestite heroine herself does *not* marry at the end of the play, although her agency is key to the marriage that takes place; in fact, the social unacceptability of her potential marriage allows for the comic duping of Sir Alexander (the father who acts as the traditional block to the lovers) and his subsequent reconciliation with his son Sebastian. Further, the hero Moll undergoes no dramatic change in the play; like Prospero, she choreographs rather than participates in the action. Her delight in cross-dressing is the most prominent element of a constant personality — a self-fashioned sexual enigma. She neither assumes nor doffs her hermaphroditic/ transvestite costume (although she frequently changes clothes) in the course of the play; instead, her figure dramatically exemplifies a category crisis by insisting that the gender categories — the comfortable binarism of male/female — are insufficient.

But is there a “third term” we can call Moll? What alternatives do Dekker and Middleton suggest to the London court’s reinscription of the actual Moll as prostitute? And will recuperating those alternatives reveal or conceal Moll Cutpurse—either the character or the person? Finally, do the playwrights locate Moll within or without the cultural binary or gender?

The play, in fact, is obsessed with ways to read Moll’s sexual identity; as I noted earlier, the character is completely static in terms of either internal or external conflict. Instead Moll gains dramatic complexity through the interplay of at least three different sexual identities and through the character’s refusal to identify herself in sexual terms. To the characters in the play, she is sometimes female, her sexuality determined by the polarizing discourse which places her at either extreme on the spectrum of heterosexuality — whore or virgin.¹⁴ Sometimes she is identified as “monster,” the physical hermaphrodite whose sexual indeterminacy implies threatening bisexual power.¹⁵ Moll, on the other hand, displays the familiar attributes of the dramatic hero — physical prowess, a noble spirit, and a moral certitude — that succeed only because she removes herself from questions of sexual identity. In addition, the playwrights infuse the character with an almost mystical power that transforms the hermaphrodite from a social threat into an ideal of transcendence, a *coincidentia oppositorum*, expressed through the completeness achieved by combining the idea of female and male into one being.¹⁶

Because her hermaphroditic costume calls public attention to herself,

some characters echo the London court's misreading of the actual Moll and assume that the fictional Moll is sexually promiscuous. Thus, Mistress Openwork suspects Moll to be one of her husband's whores. And the stupidly macho servant Trapdoor mistakenly assumes that sex can and will usurp class — that the power of his penis can turn his mistress into his servant: "when her breeches are off, shee shall follow me," he tells Sir Alexander (1.2.226). But the longest and most in-depth misreading of Moll as whore involves the gallant Laxton, a somewhat sexually ambiguous character himself. Named to suggest the impotence of the *castrato* (lack stone[s]), Laxton proves lecherous but sexually ineffective throughout the play. At his very first meeting with Moll, he boldly propositions her with the promise of money. But even before speaking with her, he reads her "manly spirit" in terms of purchased female favors and consequent reproduction:

Lax. Hart I would giue but too much money to be nibling with that wench
 . . . me thinkes a braue Captaine might get all his souldiers vpon her . . . if
 hee could come on, and come off quicke enough.

(2.1.166-71)

And, at his first opportunity, he believes he enjoins her to a sexual contract:

Lax. . . . prethee, sweete plumpe *Mol*, when shall thou and I go out a towne
 together.

.

Moll. What to do there.

Lax. Nothing but bee merry and lye together . . . Nay but appoint the place
 then, there's ten Angels in faire gold *Mol*, you see I do not trifle with you."

(2.1.245-60)

Although the play clearly and forcefully denies any merit to Laxton's reading of Moll as prostitute and posits as fact her chastity, it does not place her among womankind; rather it places her as champion of women and chastity — a cross-dressed Diana (or a Venus Armata) who punishes men for their mistreatment of women. Cloaked and armed, she confronts Laxton and draws:

In thee I defye all men, their worst hates,
 And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts,
 With which they intangle the poore spirits of fooles,
 Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallne wiues,
 Fish that must needs bite, or themselues be bitten,

.

Tis the best fish he takes: but why good fisherman,

Am I thought meate for you, that neuer yet
 Had angling rod cast towards me? cause you'l'e say
 I'me giuen to sport, I'me often mery, iest,
 Had mirth no kindred in the world but lust?
 O shame take all her friends then: but how ere
 Thou and the baser world censure my life,
 Ile send 'em word by thee, and write so much
 Vpon thy breast, cause thou shalt bear't in mind,
 Tell them 'twere base to yeeld where I have conquer'd.
 I scorne to prostitute my selfe to a man,
 I that can prostitute a man to mee.

(3.1.88-108)

Almost every commentator of the play quotes this forceful oration to demonstrate Moll's social consciousness of the shared female experience of sexual exploitation as well as her championing of greater power and freedom for women in society.¹⁷ However, Moll makes it perfectly clear that, although she feels sympathy for the exploited female and indeed will champion her cause (just as she champions other causes later in the play), she is *not* among those she describes. Subject neither to the economic nor the social forces that cause women to compromise their sexual standards, Moll certainly is not subject to male flattery. In beating Laxton, she proclaims herself above the baser world — the world of prostitution and other male-female sexual assignations — the world that misunderstands her, but she offers no convincing alternate reading for herself. In fact, she misreads Laxton — he did not assume her a loose woman because of her mirth, nor did she arouse his lust with jesting. He read the outward signs: "I must look for a shag ruff, a freeze ierkin, a short sword, and a safeguard, or I get none" (3.1.31-32). And she further complicates our reading of her by usurping the male prerogative of hiring a prostitute — a prerogative that she has just excoriated — again insisting that her life and her morals are unrelated to those of other women.

Not everyone in the play assumes that Moll's hermaphroditic attire signifies female wantonness. Some read the visual metaphor of cross-dressing literally and so categorize Moll as the "third" sex, the physical hermaphrodite. Viola in *Twelfth Night* uses the physical hermaphrodite as metaphor to describe the imperfection of her transformation into Caesario — a "man" with the heart and stomach of a woman — when she calls herself "poor monster" (2.3.34). But for Viola the metaphor remains a private observation, since her outward transformation into a man is quite successful. For Moll, the vehicle of

the metaphor is public and dramatically realized — the hermaphroditic costume that defines Moll has too much substance, is too real, for some characters to translate it into anything but the sexually aberrant and physically deformed monster. Thus Sir Alexander describes Moll to his cronies in much the same way that an outraged and bewildered Phillip Stubbes describes women in men's apparel in his *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583): "Wherefore these Women may not improperly be called *Hermaphroditi*, that is, Monsters of bothe kindes, halfe women, half men."¹⁸ Sir Alexander literalizes the metaphor of the cross-dressed female as monster even further by describing her physical formation in the womb and the resulting deformities after her birth.

Alex. A creature . . . nature hath brought forth
To mocke the sex of woman.— It is a thing
One knowes not how to name, her birth began
Ere she was all made. Tis woman more then man,
Man more then woman, and (which to none can hap)
The Sunne giues her two shadowes to one shape;
Nay more, let this strange thing, walke, stand or sit,
No blazing starre drawes more eyes after it.

Davy. A Monster, tis some Monster.

(1.2.130-38)

Sir Alexander's image is reminiscent of the rough woodcuts of monstrous births that preface so many ballads of the times. Later, Sir Alexander reveals further his anxiety over Moll's sexual identity. He calls her "codpice daughter," and speculates that her codpiece performs its appropriate function of calling attention to what it conceals — male genitals: "will he marry a monster with two trinckets?" (2.2.72-73). Alternately, Sir Alexander's anxiety over what is below Moll's waist is revealed in terms of another monster: "This wench we speake of, straies so from her kind, / Nature repents she made her. Tis a Mermaid" (1.2.214-15).¹⁹

The possibility of Moll's physical hermaphroditism also attracts the curiosity of other characters in the play. Mistress Gallipot and Laxton briefly review Moll's transvestite and hermaphroditic reputation throughout London:

Mrs. G. Some will not sticke to say shees a man and some both man and woman.

Lax. That were excellent, she might first cuckold the husband and then make him do as much for the wife.

(2.1.186-89)

Laxton's joke is revealing for it maintains the hermaphrodite as sexual monster while recuperating the gender binary of male and female. Randolph Trumbach points out that in the seventeenth century the paradigm that related sex to gender was "three biological sexes — man, woman, and hermaphrodite" — but only two genders, male and female.²⁰ His point is reiterated by Stephen Greenblatt who notes in his discussion of Jacques Duval in *Shakespearean Negotiations* that the sexual prodigy reaffirms the "normal":

Discourse on hermaphroditism and discourse on normal sexuality and childbirth do not conflict for Duval; on the contrary, they are the same discourse, for the knowledge that enables one to understand the monstrous conjunction in one individual of the male and female sexes is the identical knowledge that enables one to understand the normal experience of sexual pleasure and the generation of healthy offspring."²¹

Ultimately, the monster is a social outcast with no gender identity of its own — readable only in terms "normal," the hermaphrodite is at best an unfortunate abnormality. Historically, the sexual abnormality was also normalized socially. The courts assigned a gender, either male or female, to the hermaphrodite "according to the preponderance of the sexual organs."²²

The term *monster* then serves as insult, but cannot function as gender identifier in this play, because it disallows the possibility of positive transference from the literal to the metaphoric — from essentializing genitalia and/or sexual intercourse to symbolizing gender indeterminacy as a self-fashioned construct. If Moll is not a literal hermaphrodite, and the play's conclusion shows Sir Alexander apologizing for misreading Moll, then her hermaphroditic costume indicates something else — either a transgressive desire or a transcendent symbol. Like her insistence that she is different from other women, this something else is not easily understood by the "normal" characters in the play. Greenblatt may be correct in his claims that the real monster in early modern Europe serves to reinscribe the normal person; however, the self-fashioned monster depends on an aesthetics of perversion or transcendence that remains inexplicable to the normal person.

Dekker and Middleton choose the aesthetics of transcendence and depend on the other significant cultural identity of the hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe — the neoplatonic ideal of bisexual oneness that intellectualizes hermaphroditic self-sufficiency — for a positive reading of their sexually ambiguous character. Edgar Wind comments on the pervasiveness of the ideal: "Among French humanists of the sixteenth century *L'androgyné de Platon*

became so acceptable an image for the universal man that a painter could apply it without impropriety to Francis I" (213-14).²³ This ideal is also the "faire *Hermaphrodite*" of Spenser's *Fairie Queene* (3.12.46a). Consider Spenser's bisexual Venus in Book IV:²⁴

The cause why she was couered with a vele,
Was hard to know, for that her Priests the same
From peoples knowledge labour'd to concele.
But sooth it was not sure for womanish shame,
Nor any blemish, which the worke mote blame;
But for, they say, she had both kinds in one,
Both male and female, both vnder one name:
She syre and mother in herself alone,
Begets and eke conceiues, ne needeth other none.

(4.10.41)²⁵

Although Spenser specifies that Venus's veil covers both kinds of sexual organs, in actuality he removes sexuality from his Venus. Self-sufficient, she is socially asexual. Renaissance Platonists intellectualized Venus in other combined forms. Clearly, the Hermes-Aphrodite union produces Hermaphroditus, who during the Renaissance can be elaborated either through the Ovidian portrayal as physical monster, or through one of the alternate portrayals as symbol of harmony.²⁶ In addition, the armed Venus who takes on the guise and the role of her opposite, Diana, also finds considerable play in Spenser and in the cult of Elizabeth, both before and after the queen's death. One of the most powerful elaborations of that cult reveals the manly female, the armed queen at Tilbury, a sixteenth-century Venus Armata. Even though the most famous picture celebrating Queen Elizabeth as heroic virago is a Stuart creation by Thomas Cecil (1625), poets and ballad-makers from 1588 on record the queen visiting her troops and equipped with the accoutrements of war.²⁷ A 1603 engraving by Crispin Van de Passe after a portrait by Issac Oliver, uses as gloss a pun on Virgil's description of the Venus/Diana figure from the *Aeneid*: "Virginis os habitumque geris, divina virago."²⁸ I am not suggesting that Dekker and Middleton turned a notorious underworld figure into a goddess or an allegorical queen of England. What I am suggesting is that they used a pervasive intellectual symbol — the hermaphroditic ideal²⁹ — to avoid socio-sexual issues that could not be resolved positively and without irony in terms of city comedy and had no place in romantic comedy. And because a positive cultural reading of the heroic virago existed in contemporary literature and political ideology through the poetic elaboration of mytho-

logical figures, Moll's cross-dressing could be normalized into the outward sign of a noble and courageous spirit. Thus, Moll's hermaphroditic costume becomes the symbol of transcendence.

In the prologue to the printed version, Middleton begins the mythic reconstruction of Moll Cutpurse. He confesses that this play avoids issues not suited for a "modest assembly" — that the play consciously transforms the social and sexual transgressiveness of the actual Moll into other terms:

worse things I must needs confesse the world ha's taxt her for, then has beene written of her; but 'tis the excellency of a Writer to leaue things better than he finds 'em . . . we rather wish in such discoueries, where reputation lies bleeding, a slackenesse of truth, then fulnesse of slander.

("To the Comick Play-readers," ll.18-28)

He also supplies the mythological premise for those other terms, the hermaphroditic neo-platonic third term: "*Venus* being a woman passes through the play in doublet and breeches" (ll.13-14).³⁰ This hermaphroditically costumed Venus is reminiscent of Spenser's bisexual Venus who "needeth other none." We learn from Moll herself that she is "man enough for a woman" and likes "to lye aboth sides ath bed [her]self." The character's own terms of sexuality are terms of self-sufficiency. The woman Moll is man enough for is Moll; the man Moll is woman enough for is also Moll. By sleeping alone, she lies on both sides of the bed, and "needeth other none."

The *Prologus* continues the introduction of Moll as transcendent by contrasting her with other roaring girls in and around London: "None of these Roaring Girles is ours; shee flies / With wings more lofty" (ll. 25-26). And, throughout the play, references to Moll's bravery, courage and noble spirit are defined in terms of her costume. Trapdoor tells Sir Alexander, for instance, that Moll will visit his son in "a shirt of male" (3.3.18 and 20), punning of course on her man's apparel as armor. And in his very next line, he alludes to Virgil's *Venus Armata*, the Venus in breeches who assumes the guise of Diana, when he refers to her as the Moon — the most commonplace symbol of Diana. At other times, the cross-dressed Moll is called "braue Captaine male and female" (3.3.170), is compared to a soldier (2.1), is complimented for her "heroicke spirit and masculine womanhood" (2.1.32). All of these references, despite their comic context, depend on the "divine virago" subtext.³¹

Moll's character depends on other intellectual and mythological combinations that Renaissance writers manipulated in their attempts to define the unusual, both real and ideal. As a Cutpurse by reputation, Moll herself brings

up the connection to Mercury when describing another of that tribe who uses a wand or walking stick to lift rings from a goldsmith's stall. She call his stick a caduceus, the symbol of Mercury, god of thieves, father of Hermaphroditus, and companion to Venus. Mercury as god of thieves is such a commonplace that for many Moll's reference to the caduceus operates as a synecdoche. Moreover, the combination of Venus and Mercury as astrological influences on the character of a female underworld figure is readily apparent. The biographer of the actual Moll, writing shortly after her death, admits that he does not know the month of her birth; nonetheless, he proceeds with confidence to outline her horoscope as "*Mercury* in conjunction with, or rather in the house of *Venus* at her Nativity":

This Planet *Mercury* you must know . . . is of a Thievish, Cheating, Deceitful Influence. . . . For the other of *Venus*, most Men and Women know without teaching what are her properties. She hath dominion over all *Whores, Bauds, Pimps, &c.* and joined with *Mercury* over all *Trapanners and Hectors*.³²

The astrological reading — Renaissance substitute for sociology and psychology — seems ready-made to explain the actual Moll Cutpurse; but Dekker and Middleton's Moll Cutpurse demands a less transgressive inscription. From Mercury/Hermes she seems to inherit eloquence, craftiness without deceitfulness, and musical ability. And, just as she was recreated as a chaste Venus/Aphrodite in her heroic championing of women against Laxton, so her character inverts the negative aspects of Mercury: Hermes traded his lute for the caduceus; the stage Moll retains her viol while the thief carries the caduceus. And rather than the conjunction of Mercury and Venus constructing Moll negatively as an entrapper of innocents or a bully, the same qualities are reinscribed positively, so that she recognizes and exposes the thief and the blusterer. It must be emphasized, however, that she accomplishes these good deeds *because* she is the child of Venus and Mercury. She entraps the entrapper and bullies the bully. So she trips up the braggart Trapdoor, and later entraps him into exposing himself as a counterfeit, just as she entraps the cutpurse in her midst. In dramatic terms, the trickster of city comedy acquires an ethical dimension.

At every opportunity, the playwrights displace the negative social readings of Moll and replace them with the positive ideal. By privileging the intellectual reading of Moll as symbolic hermaphroditic ideal over the social/sexual readings of Moll as whore or monster, the playwrights deemphasize questions of sexuality. As Middleton insisted in the Preface, it is the "excellency of the writer to leave things better than he finds 'em," and where he and

Dekker found Moll's character defined in terms of sexual binaries — male or female, normal or monster — they left the transcendent synthesis.

But this identity of Moll remains only one of several. It is in the interplay of all these identities that the character Moll is socially rehabilitated for an audience already familiar with the actual Moll through her scandalous reputation. Yet the rehabilitation is in itself complicated and problematic, and Middleton calls attention to its incompleteness or insufficiency in the epilogue, knowing that the character "Cannot pay full [the audience's] expectation" (1.34). Perhaps as Dawson argues, by leaving questions of gender unresolved, the playwrights demonstrate their "awareness that theatrical images are a matter of exchange and that what is evoked in the theater is a fluctuating, unstable currency."³³ Perhaps the several readings reveal instead the problems of combining the genres of city comedy and romantic comedy, and unlike Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*, taking both of them seriously. What is clear by the end of the play is that Moll is not threatening to the culture -- that, when she has the most power, she uses it to support conventional social values, not to disrupt them. Should we read this as a plea for greater social tolerance, or as an avoidance of confronting issues of social difference, or as another instance of dominance containing its opposition? In one sense, by making Moll transcendent the playwrights have begged the question: the character does not need or desire incorporation into a society that she herself terms the baser world; nor can she transgress against a society she is above. Like the monster hermaphrodite who is reinscribed in terms of the male and female gender binary and, by becoming socially normalized, loses his/her identity as a third sex, the metaphoric hermaphrodite Moll Cutpurse loses her social identity as a third gender by becoming intellectualized into the ideal synthesis.

Ultimately, the characterization of Moll Cutpurse in *The Roaring Girl* may do more to conceal the actual Moll than it does to reveal her. However, the actual Moll, as the playwrights promised, appeared on stage at the Fortune following a performance of *The Roaring Girl* and provided one more reading of the character by serving as visual comparison and verbal commentary. She appeared cross-dressed, "in mans apparell & in her boote & wth a sword by her side," and she usurped the male actors' prerogative by performing for the audience. Again, the *London Correction Book* captures the impropriety: "And [she] sat there vppon the stage in the publique viewe of all the people there p[rese]nte in mans apparell & playd vppon her lute & sange a songe." Even more scandalous was her unrehearsed behavior; she made "imodest & lascivious speaches" and invited those curious and prurient in the audience to her lodgings

where, she promised, she would expose herself to prove her female sexuality.³⁴

The actions of the real Moll Cutpurse reject her fictional rehabilitation as either a supporter of conventional societal values or as a non-threatening androgynous ideal. By offering to prove her sex as female, she, like those who call her monster, again essentializes genitalia, but she forces the audience to juxtapose her normal sex organs with her "abnormal," transgressive appearance and behavior. The real Moll recuperates transgression as social signifier and uses it to define her gender identity. Dekker and Middleton may have intended to advocate an increased social liberality when they chose to depict Moll as hero in their play; but, if they did, they mistakenly assumed that the marginalized would want to be incorporated into the center. The real Moll accentuates her marginal status and uses it instead to decenter society. Society, of course, retaliated, and Moll was sent to serve a short sentence in Bridewell. But we know the story of her actions because she *repeated* the transgression — appearing about three-quarters of a year later at St. Paul's with her "petticoate tucked vp . . . in the fashion of a man." Arrested again, Moll's actions reveal the real significance of the transvestite/hermaphroditic costume — to disrupt society and to challenge its categories, and, by so doing, to offer itself as a transgressive aesthetic that creates the terms by which it must be read.

University of New Orleans

Notes

1. Anthony Dawson has most recently considered the relationship between the stage Moll and the actual Moll in "Mistress Hic & Haec: Representations of Moll Frith," *SEL*, 33 (1993): 385-404. Dawson believes that the antithetical views offered of the character Moll as virtuous and the actual Moll as disreputable serve to demonstrate "how the theater may intervene in the cultural arena, participating in a contest for the power to fabricate cultural meanings" (398).
2. P. A. Mulholland in "The Date of *The Roaring Girl*," *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 28 (1977): 18-31, believes the frontispiece represents an actual likeness. Whether it does or not, it certainly reflects the conspicuousness of Moll's appearance. The frontispiece is reprinted in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958) at the beginning of *The Roaring Girl* in volume 3.
3. Mary Beth Rose in 1984 was the first to note that female cross-dressing in the play was unusual because it was not done for the purpose of disguise. Her article, "Women in Men's Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in *The Roaring Girl*," *ELR* 14 (1984): 367-91, is reprinted in chapter 2 of her book, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988). References in this article are to the book.

4. The original charges against Moll, "*Officium Domini contra Mariam FFrith*," can be found in the *Consistory of London Correction Book* for November 1611 to October 1613 (ref. DL/C/310, fol.19-20), housed in the Greater London Record Office, County Hall, London. A complete and restored transcript can be found in Mulholland, "The Date of *The Roaring Girl*," p. 31, and in Appendix E of his edition of the play (P. A. Mulholland, ed., *The Roaring Girl*, by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker [Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1987]). All references to the charges are to Mulholland's transcript in "The Date of *The Roaring Girl*."
5. Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, "The Roaring Girl," in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958) [1]-112. All subsequent references are to this edition. See also Cyrus Hoy, "The Roaring Girl," in *Introductions, Notes, and Commentaries to Texts in "The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker"*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 23.
6. Rose, pp. 90-91.
7. Viviana Comensoli, "Play-Making, Domestic Conduct, and the Multiple Plot in *The Roaring Girl*," *SEL*, 27 (1987): 260-62.
8. Jean Howard, "Crosdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39 (1988): 439; Jo Miller, "Women and the Market in *The Roaring Girl*," *Renaissance and Reformation*, n.s. 14 (1990): 11-24.
9. Stephen Orgel, "The Subtexts of *The Roaring Girl*," in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. Susan Zimmerman (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 24.
10. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 297.
11. Jean Howard, "Sex and Social Conflict: The Erotics of *The Roaring Girl*," in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 170-90.
12. Although it devotes little time directly to Moll Cutpurse, Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), also provides insight into cultural constructions of transvestism and contributes notably to recent critical response to the play.
13. Mulholland, "Date," p. 31.
14. For a good overview of the virgin/whore, saint/sinner duality in early modern discourse, see Rose, chap. 1.
15. As John Friedman in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), Stephen Greenblatt in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), and others have rightly noted, in Medieval and Renaissance thought the term *monster* did not always carry the same negative connotations it does today. I choose to use it here because it was the most commonly used term to describe the hermaphrodite at the time of the play, and because in that particular case of physical abnormality, the negative connotations often pertained then as now.

16. See Stevie Davies' introduction to *The Feminine Reclaimed: The Idea of Woman in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986) for a good discussion on *coincidentia oppositorum*.
17. See especially Rose, pp. 81-82 and Howard, "Crossdressing," pp. 437-38.
18. Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), *The English Experience*, no. 489 (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1972), F[5].
19. Sir Alexander might very well have used mermaid here because he envisions the hermaphroditic Moll as male on top in this instance. Since the reference appears before he thinks to tell Trapdoor that she wears breeches sometimes, chances are that he is thinking of her in a hermaphroditic costume much like the one she first wears — a jerkin and safeguard. But the hermaphrodite as mermaid/monster works either way. Compare Richard Niccols, *The Furies* (London, 1614), STC18512:

T'is strange to see a Mermaid, you will say,
Yet not so strange, as that I saw to day,
One part of that which 'bove the waters rise,
Is woman, th' other fish, or fishers lies.
One part of this was man or I mistook. . . .
The head is mans, I iudge by hat and haire,
And by the band and doublet it doth weare,
The bodie should be mans, what doth it need?
Had it a codpiece, 'twere a man indeed.

([A6'-A6'])

20. Randolph Trumbach, "London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Staub (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 113.
21. Greenblatt, p. 77.
22. The legal practice of normalizing the sex of a hermaphrodite as either male or female according to the more pronounced of the sexual characteristics originated in England during the thirteenth century (*Fleta*, Bk.I, chap. 5; qtd. in [George] G[ordon] Coulton, *A Medieval Panorama* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939], p. 138n). Sir Edward Coke reaffirmed the practice in *The first part of the Institute of the lawes of England: or a Commentarie vpon Littleton* (London, 1628) 3,a. Coke's commentary is quoted in the *OED* under *hermaphrodite*.
23. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958; 2nd ed. revised, New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 213-14. Raymond B. Waddington in "The Bisexual Portrait of Francis I: Fontainebleau, Castiglione, and the Tone of Courtly Mythology," in *Playing with Gender: A Renaissance Pursuit*, eds. Jean Brink, Maryanne C. Horowitz, and Allison P. Coudert (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) takes issue with Wind's contention of propriety although he does accept the pervasiveness of the Platonic androgyne in art. Waddington translates the legend attached to the portrait that empifies the transcendence of the king as hermaphrodite: "your great king surpasses Nature" because Mars, Minerva, Diana, Mercury, and Amor all join in one person (99-101).

24. Spenser's use of the Platonic hermaphrodite is well documented. See especially Stevie Davies (note 14); Donald Cheney, "Spenser's Hermaphrodite and the 1590 *Fairie Queene*," *PMLA*, 87 (1972): 192-200; A. R. Crillo, "The Fair Hermaphrodite: Love-Union in the Poetry of Donne and Spenser," *SEL*, 9 (1969): 81-95; and Lauren Silberman, "The Hermaphrodite and the Metamorphosis of Spenserian Allegory," *ELR*, 17 (1987): 207-23.
25. Edmund Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (New York: Penquin, 1978).
26. See Lauren Silberman, "Mythographic Transformations of Ovid's Hermaphrodite," *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 19 (1988): 643-52.
27. See Gabriele Jackson, "Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons, and Shakespeare's Joan of Arc," *ELR*, 18 (1988): 55-56; Susan Frye in "The Myth of Elizabeth at Tilbury," *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 23 (1992): 95-115, argues the mythic, non-factual nature of the cross-dressed Queen at Tilbury. Her article also reprints the Thomas Cecil portrait of the queen on horseback. The original is housed in the Ashmolean Museum. Regardless of the date of certain pictorial representations, however, Elizabethans were familiar with Queen Elizabeth as heroic virago. Jackson has shared her work in progress with me that explores the *heroic virago* theme in Renaissance texts and convincingly places Elizabeth in that tradition.
28. Virgil's line reads, "gerens os que habitum virginis, et arme Spartanae virginis" (*Aeneid*, Bk 1, 315). A copy of the engraving can be found in Margery Corbett and Michael Norton, *Engraving in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Descriptive Catalog with Introductions*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 282-83.
29. For a good overview of works that incorporate the hermaphroditic ideal, see Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Woman-kind, 1540-1620* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 140-41. I am indebted to Stevie Davies' readings of the ideal in *The Feminine Reclaimed*. (See note 14). Also important in establishing the nature of the ideal is Marie Delcourt in *Hermaphrodite: Myths and Rites of the Bisexual Figure in Classical Antiquity*, trans. Jennifer Nicholson (French edition, 1956; London: Studio Books, 1961).
30. Dawson claims that "Moll is no Venus" because "her chastity remains well protected by her own skillful maneuvers" (397); however, the Venus Armata figure accommodates his objections.
31. The references also imply another mythic construction of the heroic virago, the Amazon. Although the term *amazon* is not used in the play, it is interesting to note that Moll teaches Sir Alexander the lesson of the vanity of wealth, the same lesson the Amazons taught Alexander the Great. Friedman retells the story of Alexander and the Amazons (p. 170).
32. *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, Commonly Called Mol Cutpurse* (London, 1662) pp. 10-11.
33. Dawson, p. 402.
34. See Mulholland's reprint of the charges, p. 31.