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Roaring Fissures:

Marginal Success in Middleton and Dekker's *Roaring Girl*

Laila Abdalla

Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* (1611) takes place in a deeply complicated London. The city's populace includes at least four classes and perhaps more than two genders, and every individual within these groups seems to be negotiating the same cultural transformations that were taking place in England during the early 1600s. In the "real" England, shifting economic practices in particular seemed to be impinging on every echelon and gender. In the play-London, the cross-dressed eponymous heroine lurks at the sidelines of a similarly-impacted environment. Like the society of the play, Moll's persona is multiple: she is simultaneously native to the noble, gallant, shopkeeper, and lower classes, and to both the male and female genders. At the same time, and precisely because she is so complex, she is perceived as a freak by each of these classes and genders. The play proves the individuals within these groups to be imperfect and failing, if in varying degrees; in contrast, Moll is faultless and successful. But while the classes and sexes are endemically immoral, they are nevertheless the cultural norms. And conversely, while Moll is the most moral and can belong to all classes and genders, she is liminal to any one class or gender exclusively. Thus a paradox emerges: the fact that she embodies many oppositions and can simultaneously participate in all strata and genders makes her particularly suited for, perhaps even representational of, this new London. These same elements, however, prevent her from belonging exclusively anywhere. Behind a façade of communal integration, Moll exists in the margins as a pariah.

Moll's speciousness arises primarily from her conflation of classes and contestation of gender. The medieval expectation was, generally speaking, that these categories were naturally

inherent and mutually exclusive. By the early seventeenth century, however, they were feared to be constructed and fluid. The era's satiric and political commentaries note the crumbling class distinctions and often blame them on contemporary economic practices. Philip Stubbs, for example, excoriates middle class women who attempt to look upper class in part because their class-climbing impoverishes the very class they seek to attain: "Notwithstanding that their parents owe a brace of hundred pounds more than they are worth, yet will they [overdressed women] have it *quo iure quaue iniuria,* either by hook, or crook, by right or wrong as they say, whereby it commeth to pass, that one can scarcely know who is a noble woman, who is an honourable, or worshipful woman, from them of the meaner sort" (Stubbs Sigs. F4v-F5v). Likewise, a 1623 Privy Council order states,

> The Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Commons of the City of London … remonstrate that the freedom of London which was heretofore of very great esteem is grown to be of little worth by reason of the extraordinary enlargements of the suburbs where great number of trades and handicraftsmen do enjoy without charge equal benefit with the freemen of the City of London. And that the city['s] … newly erected tenements … daily draw multitudes of people especially of the meaner sort and many loose persons … and by occasion of these new erected buildings the markets in London are forestalled and the prices of all victuals raised. (Public Record Office, Privy Council Register, 29 Nov., 1623, qtd. in F.J. Fisher 176)

Both rebukes pinpoint a mutually destabilizing relationship between shifting class lines and the current economy.

Similarly, between the 1580s and 1620s, religious and cultural commentaries complained of eroding gender distinctions, especially as represented in female cross-dressing. <1> These texts again frequently suggest novel economic practices as underlying factors. Thomas Adams bemoans the gender disorder within Bedlam [i.e. London] in his sermons:

> The Proud is the next *Mad-man*, I would have you take view of in this *Bedlam*. The *proud man*? or rather the *proud woman*: or rather *haec aquila*, both he and she. For if they had no more evident distinction of sex, than they have of shape, they would be all man, or rather all woman: … *Hic Mulier* will shortly be good Latin, if this transmigration hold ... [There is] such translations and borrowing of forms, that a silly countryman walking the City, can scarce say, there goes a man, or there a woman. Woman, as she was an *humane* creature, bore the *image* of *God*; as she was *woman*, the image of *man*: now she bears the image of *man* indeed, but in a cross and *mad* fashion; almost to the quite defacing of the *image* of God. (STC 124, original emphasis)

Transvestism afflicts class (naïve countrymen are confused in the city), as well as gender (women become mutants of the social, natural and divine orders). Likewise, William Harrison's cultural tract, *The Description of England* (1587), associates the vanishing differences in class and gender with each other: "In women it is most to be lamented that they do now far exceed the lightness of our men ... and such staring attire as in times past was supposed meet for none but light housewives only is become a habit for chaste and sober matrons. What should I say of their doublets with pendant codpieces on the breast … I have met with some of these trulls in London so disguised that it hath passed my skill to discern whether they were men or women" (147). <2>

"Light housewife," "matron," and "trull" are descriptors of financial as much as social standing, and Harrison is frustrated by the linked diminishment of differences in rank and sexual identity.

It is evident from such tracts that during the late 1500s/early 1600s, London was perceived to be involved in an economic crisis. Joan Thirsk notes that London's population rose from two and a quarter million in 1520 to three and a half million by 1603: "The employment of all these additional workers cannot … be separated from the problems of feeding, clothing, and housing them. These, indeed, were the matters that first evoked anxious, urgent concern … people noted first of all how extra mouths consumed precious resources that were becoming scarce" (159). Whether this crisis was limited to the era or even new is debatable, but certainly there is an increasing polemical awareness of it. John Stow, for example, critiques the growth of the commodity-driven market and the proliferation of objects that had little to no practical use:

> About the Year 1580, from the city of *Westminster* along to *London*, every Street became full of [Milliners Shops]. Some of the Wares sold by these Shop-keepers were Gloves made in *France* or *Spain*, Kersies of *Flanders* Dye, *French* cloth or Frizado, Owches, Brooches, Agglets made in *Venice* or *Milan*, Daggers, Swords, Knives, Girdles of the *Spanish* Make, Spurs made at *Milan*, *French* or *Milan* caps, Glasses, painted Cruces, Dials, Tables, Cards, Balls, Puppets, Penners, Inkhorns, Toothpicks, Silk-Bottoms and Silver-Bottoms, fine earthen Pots, Pins and Points, Hawks-Bells, Saltcellars, Spoons, Dishes of Tin. Which made such a Shew in the Passengers Eyes, that they could not but gaze on them, and buy these Knickknacks, though to no Purpose necessary. (II. 4Av)

The Marxian definition of commodities as both "objects of utility and bearers of value" here becomes reclassified, for Stow accuses London of divorcing the commodity from any sense of "utility" and transforming it into a false witness of value. Other contemporary social observers go further, positing that these empty signs of affluence often functioned rather to *prevent* usefulness. The vogue for stiffened ruffs during the period, for example, caused wheat and corn to become employed predominantly for making starch. In 1585, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, solicited Parliament to support a bill (BL Landsdowne MS. 43, no.73) against the making of starch: "Is it not a very lamentable thing that we should bestow that upon starch to the setting forth of vanity and pride which would staunch the hunger of many that starve in the streets for want of bread?" (qtd. in Thirsk 88).<3> Thus the perception, if not also the reality, was that the shifting distribution of wealth was reconfiguring London in abnormal ways and *The Roaring Girl* represents this reconfiguration. The play illustrates the shifting of classes, and an accompanying re-visioning of gender, and showcases Moll as an emblem of this reconfiguration.

* * * *

The play suggests that class and gender have become quite malleable, as feared by Stubbs, Harrison et al. It also suggests the responsibility for this lies with a commodity-driven market and a systemic profiteering, similar to those lamented by Stow and Cecil. All classes and both sexes of the play participate in the city's economic infrastructure, whether "legitimately," as in the gentry's marriages or the shopkeepers' sales, or illegitimately, as in the gigolos' pursuits or the cutpurses' practices. And each echelon and gender is also guilty of prioritizing profit and sublimating all else to its service. The upper-class Sir Alexander Wengrave originally rejects Mary as a daughter in law because the marriage obligates him to pay out rather than fill his moneybags. The gallants likewise make money their chief motivator: Laxton has no genuine

amorous interest in Mistress Gallipot but he banks on her desire for him to despoil her financially. His financial bankruptcy, and moral, perhaps even physical castration, are evident in the connotations of his name. "Lack-stone" lacks money, land, courage, moral fortitude and perhaps even sexual ability, or "balls," as the sixteenth-century euphemism "stones" would suggest. And yet he rightly perceives that money is the controlling power behind all these advantages, including, or perhaps even especially, sexual potency and desire: "Money is that *aquafortis* that eats into many a maidenhead: where the walls are flesh and blood, I'll ever pierce through with a golden auger" (2.1.195-97). Laxton, as his name suggests, most probably lacks an "auger" capable of piercing much. Nevertheless, his single ability to obtain and spend money endows him as a functioning member in sexual exchanges.

Money and eroticism are interdependent and indistinguishable in London, as evidenced when Laxton construes his sexual reaction to Moll in terms of financial transactions: "Heart, I would give but too much money to be nibbling with that wench" (2.1.188); later he offers her ten angels for a rendezvous. His relationship with Mistress Gallipot is more indicative. Extracting money from her is his climactic achievement, and his foreplay consists of arousing her with erotically-charged financial demands yet never quite satisfying her. He romances her through a discursive coupling of courtly and erotic desire with market rhetoric, in the process dissolving any distinction between the two: "I *protest* I'm in *extreme want* of *money*. If you can *supply* me now with any *means*, you do me the greatest *pleasure*, next to the *bounty* of your *love*, as every *poor* gentleman *tasted*" (82-85, emphasis added). It is hard to know where the wooing ends and the request for money begins. Laxton's erasure of boundaries is evidently neither surprising nor unusual, for Mistress Gallipot fathoms his 'sweet nothings' and responds in like manner: "What's the sum would pleasure ye, sir? –Though you deserve nothing less at my hands" (86-

87).

Laxton is a gallant but the middle class likewise substitutes financial dealings for human relationships. Mistress Openwork sums up how the constant flirtation that occurs between her class and the gallants' is nothing but a commodity-driven enterprise for both. The gallants may extract money from the shopkeepers but are "idle, simple things: running heads; and yet – let 'em run over us never so fast – we shopkeepers, when all's done, are sure to have 'em in our purse-nets at length" (4.2.54-56). Mistress Gallipot 'buys' her would-be lover, Laxton. She is actually a bad businesswoman here, for she invests in a profitless venture, and were it not for Laxton's greed, she may never have divested herself.

Because profit is Mistress Gallipot's chief concern, when her paths to desire and money diverge rather than converge, she effortlessly calculates which to pursue. Laxton solicits thirty pounds from her, implying that his services in her bed depend on it, and prompting her to consider pawning her childbed linen. She hesitates only out of the apprehension that the sheets would be recognized, and that her peers would subsequently surmise she had needed to sell them. Such a misinterpretation would cause her to be "undone." She uses the term to refer not to her exposure as an adulteress, but to the fact that "it may be thought / [Her] husband's bankrupt" (3.2.73-74). For her, a reputation of financial solvency is more precious than one of parsimonious chastity, a far cry from the priorities of more typical early-modern dramatic heroines, such as Desdemona or The Duchess of Malfi. The loss of the former reputation carries a very real threat, for if Gallipot is believed to be bankrupt, he becomes vulnerable in the marketplace, and the results would be financially disastrous. The loss of the latter reputation is simply a cause for public derision, more so for her spouse than herself, and this consequence Mistress Gallipot does not even pause to consider. In fact, the only reason she terminates the

liaison with Laxton is because his acquisitiveness begins to encroach seriously on her finances. While he humiliates her sexually, she retains her desire for him. When he blackmails her and attempts to best her as a merchant, driving up the price for his silence on a nonexistent pre-contract of marriage between them, she calls off the sale and their "affaire," such as it is. "What, a hundred pound? He gets none! (4.2.265). The sexual encounter is a commodity for Mistress Gallipot, and Laxton is desirable/reasonably-priced at thirty pounds, but not at one hundred.

The playwrights also suggest that materialism dominates the class system itself. Each echelon seeks to appear as solvent and ascendant, regardless of the truth. Acquired commodities, such as clothing and tobacco, become the signals of status. <4> The upper classes consolidate their status by either acting to prevent spending or by spending on such empty signifiers of wealth as feathers and large ruffs. The gallants access the affluence of the shopkeepers to appear financially solvent. The pretence allows them to live on credit and be received into noble company. The shopkeepers go hawking and their wives take on lovers from higher echelons in order to publish a much desired, escalating position in society. Laxton, ironically enough, bemoans how the repeal of the sumptuary laws in 1603 has allowed the citizen classes access to the signs of high birth, namely, rich fabrics and ostentatious coaches (3.1.13-15). He deplores the rise of the *nouveau riche*, while he, being *nouveau pauvre*, is forced to prostitute his body and his affections to them to survive. He commodifies himself because they purchase commodities and he needs money, and they purchase this commodity because its/his presence amongst them suggests the new and higher class to which they aspire. The two classes are mutually dependent for social survival, and yet each despises the other. The cutpurses, in turn, don the garb and mannerisms of the gallants to intermingle and steal without detection. As Adams and Harrison feared, status is becoming visibly commodified and class demarcations blurred.

The pursuit of money has also rendered gender, perhaps even biological sex, as pliable as class. "Feminine" and "masculine" gender traits are often revealed as performative when they are blurred of distinction in London, yet this understanding of gender is censured in the play. Moll disapprovingly accuses women of a lust that is masculinzing in its power and autonomy: "I am of that certain belief that there are more queans [whores] in this town of their own making than of any man's provoking" (2.1.319-21). Likewise male virility has become impotent and effeminized; women turn themselves into queans because "the gallants of these times are shallow lechers: they put not their courtship home enough to a wench … Many a poor [female] soul would down, and there's nobody will push 'em!" (316-23). Although women seek seduction, most men 'lack stones' for it. Mistress Openwork browbeats her husband, and Mistress Gallipot complains that spouses now are "apron husbands: such cotqueans" ["men who meddle with female affairs" (145 n.)]. She berates Gallipot for not being sufficiently macho -- "Your love is all words; give me deeds! I cannot abide a man that's too fond over me – so cookish! Thou dost not know how to handle a woman in her kind" (3.2.24-7) -- and holds London "city humors" (4) to blame. The shopkeeper women's overwrought virility and dominion within both the marketplace and marriage is matched by Sir Beauteous Ganymede's effeminacy, Jack Dapper's effete vanity, and the gallants' impotence. Left unchecked, fiscal priorities generate adulterous, masculine women and emasculated, effeminate men, and the play mocks both.

They playwrights satirize the widespread nature of the disappearing genders, classes, and mores, but they also focus with approbation on Moll, a woman-man who may comfortably and naturally inhabit each class. The inspiration for this main character is a contemporary real-life Londoner named Mary Frith, also known as Long Meg of Westminster, the Roaring Girl, and Moll Cutpurse. She was known to appear in public wearing male clothing, and was a popular

figure of almost legendary proportions at the time. Several biographies about her life appeared both during and soon after her lifetime, including the anonymous "The Life of Long Meg of Westminster" (1620). Often the "real" Mary was perceived as a nuisance; she was brought before the ecclesiastical court to answer charges of public misconduct, including cross-dressing, going to alehouses, patronizing tobacco shops and playhouses, drinking and singing in public, and prostitution: "She confessed in addition to blasphemy, drunkenness, and consorting with bad company, but 'being pressed to declare whether she had not been dishonest of her body and hath not also drawn other women to lewdness by her persuasions and by carrying herself as a bawd, she absolutely denied that she was chargeable with these imputations'" (Consistory of London Correction Book," qtd. in Orgel 12). <5>

Middleton and Dekker thus base their imaginary character on a well-known woman who comes complete with a reputation for social misconduct, suggesting that this wonderous yet "real" creature ma be the natural consequence of the carnivalesque city. In breeches and socially adept, she is best and most extensively suited to embody the discords of London. Her peers interpret her combination of mighty opposites as an attack against natural and transcendent categories. Her action and appearance lay bare the malleability of class and the performativity of gender, even if she does not intentionally seek so to do. Her compatriots perceive this exposure as a threat, primarily in terms of lawlessness, monstrosity and hermaphrodism, and refuse to accept her in any one class or gender. Their refusal forces the roaring girl to construct her own spaces at the edges and to inhabit the margins of all classes and both genders, but never to belong natively or exclusively to any one. Orgel elucidates the word "roaring": "As the term was initially used, roaring boys were characteristically upper-class or gentry, their riotous behavior an assertion of aristocratic privilege. It was behavior that, though uncivil, was also conceived to be

natural in men" (13). Boys may be boys, and upper-class boys may most certainly be upper-class boys, but lower-class girls may not be upper-class boys; in such contestation, the term "roaring" becomes heavily invested with ideas of elision between classes and gender. Moll is the walking truth about the current society, and a forecast of its best possible future should it continue to serve the capitalistic drive, but she is also its freak. Most Londoners, refusing to acknowledge the future, deny her; after all, there have to be classes for an individual to rise from one to the other, and there have to be two genders for one to exploit the other.

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Moll's deconstructive depictions of class and gender, however, are indeed central issues, for the play seeks to redefine them from monstrous faults to necessary mutations. Over the past quarter-century or so, *The Roaring Girl* has come in for a lot of critical attention. The criticism almost always discerns a compensatory game being played out between Moll's contradictions and those of her compatriots and her environment. Patrick Cheney (1983) defines Moll's gender contestation as "hermaphrodism," which he analyzes within the romance tradition of the neoplatonic ideal. Marjorie Garber (1991) opts for a Lacanian approach to the play, proposing that Moll appropriates the attributes of masculinity to demonstrate the effeminacy of male characters. Garber does note the role of the market place, suggesting that it drives the "fetishization of commodities … [which acts as] the cover for the fetishization of body parts" (224). Jean Howard (1992) demonstrates that the play validates male homosocial bonds over heterosexual marriage and represents female participation in a market economy as unnaturally masculine. Stephen Orgel (1992) perceives Moll as being both man and woman, even sexually. Moll overturns typical gender roles, but in the final count she is "a good bourgoise. Her function is to … defeat the patriarchal menace in favor of patriarchal virtues … [including] a life of

chastity" (24). Valerie Forman (2001) uses a Marxist approach to discuss the consequences of rampant commodification. Kelly Stage also sees contradictions as being part of the fabric of the play, arguing that the clash occurs mostly between different kinds of spaces: "Moll's placelessness in her own world and her ability to manipulate the social show the play's construction of urban space (London) as a network of disparate social structures" (417). Stage does define "men and women" as one of the "structures" that Moll navigates, but her analysis falls short of fully fathoming the city's gender issues and the consequences of such navigation on Moll herself.

Howard has noted Moll's characterization as being so "thoroughly … enmeshed in contradictions [that it is] a sure sign it is doing the work of mediating complex social tensions." She concludes that Moll is both a "reformer and a radical" ("Social Conflict" 182). True, but the fact that Moll is a *combination* of these two functions is at least as significant, and her visible hybridization of gender is but the most blatant in a series of contradictions. She is also concurrently violent and peaceful, prurient and innocent, erotic and asexual, a foe and a friend, a reformer and a conformer, a rogue and a gentleman, a swordsman and a matchmaker, a brawler and a music-maker, and, ultimately, classless and contained, male and female. Her successfully melded oppositions mirror her socio-political environment: she is what London is. Tragically, however, this very success comes with the consequence of a liminal existence and a sterile future. Almost all members of the city resent or disapprove of her effortless complexity, perceiving her as a freak and attempting variously to exploit or ostracize her, or both.

Moll is not entirely innocent in this conflict, since she takes great delight in visibly conflating what have been traditionally regarded as "incommensurable" and essential realities. She is a woman, but at times she wears men's clothes, and at others she wears both male and

female clothing simultaneously. She appropriates symbols of the biology of both sexes, positioning the feminine shape of the viol de gamba between her legs, but also wielding a phallic sword with natural dexterity when she fences. She fiercely maintains her chastity, but she also wanders openly and without chaperone in public like any man. While the classes have limited contact with each other, she roams freely between them and shows qualities of all of them. The following discussion assesses Moll's cross-dressing and ambiguous understanding of gender before demonstrating her native yet foreign condition to both sexes and all classes.

It is Moll's transvestism that most concretely signals Londoners' obfuscation of genders and classes. All genders and classes, flawed though they are, identify her as aberrant because of her attire. The aristocratic Sir Alexander Wengrave describes her as a natural disaster, "a thing / One knows not how to name …. / 'Tis woman more than man, / Man more than woman, and ... / The sun gives her two shadows to one shape," Davy Dapper deduces her to be "a monster" (1.2.129-34), Mistress Gallipot sees her as "both man and woman" (2.1.209), and Moll's own servant, Trapdoor, calls her a "whorish master and mistress" (5.1.66). Her hermaphroditic appearance is immediately identified as an affront to nature and an indication of sexual availability. Moll's triumph over Laxton in a duel leads him to perceive her as a "familiar" (3.1.125), i.e. bestial and associated with witchcraft, another popular, early-modern "unruly-female" fault. In fact, quite often she is reproached in culturally popular paradigms of carnival inversion. Watching her being fitted for breeches Wengrave exclaims, "Heyday, breeches! What, will [Sebastian] marry a monster with two trinkets [testicles]? What age is this? If the wife go in breeches, the man must wear long coats like a fool" (2.2.76-78). The exchange of the gown for breeches and the distaff for a sword are two of the most prominent images of female/male inversion in popular charivari and "world upside down" illustrations and literature. <6> In her

visible and blatant amalgamation of polar opposites, Moll becomes defined as a culturally familiar bogey-“woman-man” by her compatriots.

Mostly, however, the roaring girl’s cross-dressing operates in reverse. Moll indeed ruptures social demarcations of gender in her clothing and conduct, but the play suggests that the environment that permits money to dissolve distinctions will ultimately produce mutants. Moll’s “aberrations” thus often function to showcase the perceiver’s own economically-caused gender- or moral-deformities. Wengrave commits a serious inversion when he rejects Mary as a suitable wife for Sebastian because she comes without a sufficient dower, sacrificing the ancient laws that stabilize and propagate society to the new law of ‘money-above-all.’ Sir Davy Dapper acts unnaturally when he plots his own son’s lynching and salivates at the prospect of Jack being wounded in the process. Mistress Gallipot is reprehensible in her financially contingent desire, quasi-“masculine” control of her spouse, and illicit financial support of her lover. The storekeeper Gallipot’s comprehension of love is so entrenched in merchandising that he cannot but perceive all relationships as turning on owner and object. He objectifies his wife as a garment when he pleads with Laxton, “pray, sir, wear not her, for she’s a garment / So fitting for my body, I’m loath / Another should put it on” (3.2.250-52). Laxton is grotesque because he has mismanaged his funds and must now leech off women. <7> Moll’s abnormalities are thus matched, if not outstripped, by those of her critics. The distinctions between human and commodity, moral and immoral, and legitimate and illegitimate, have become blurred, and Moll’s gender-bending is quite harmless by comparison.

But for others, Moll’s outfits often signal sexual availability, and by extension, a whorish disposition. Laxton (2.1.187-97), Wengrave (2.1.154) and Trapdoor (3.1.184-85), to name but some, discern her as sluttish. Trapdoor goes as far as to associate her clothes with her body,

blurring any distinction between three very different things. For him, clothes are the body, and the body is the moral condition. His slippage reveals the simplistic, reifying and materialistic equation held by society: "Her black safeguard is turned into a deep slop, the holes of her upper body to button-holes, her waistcoat to a doublet, her placket to the ancient seat of a codpiece; and you [Wengrave] shall take 'em [Moll and Sebastian] both with standing collars" (3.3.25-29). Moll's apparel has transformed her into a sexually open grotesquery. This monstrosity is not only female, for it has buttonholes, but also male, for it has collars that stand. When she couples with Sebastian, there is illogical perversion, for how can two standing collars and no plackets interact? The image is covertly homoerotic which, for Trapdoor and Wengrave, hints at an additional perversity. Their perception of her is certainly dehumanizing, demeaning, and obscene; and it once more reveals the paradoxes and perversities of London and its citizenry, rather than Moll.

In truth, Moll is not only chaste, she appears to have little interest in sex. She demonstrates her asexuality in various ways, telling all she "loves to lie o' both sides o'th'bed" (2.2.36) alone. Although she is the object of a variety of sexual puns, many of which are openly addressed to or at her, she declines to respond. Despite her fashion choices which invite sexual interest, she herself never exhibits any. In fact, unlike everybody else, she rarely even initiates salacious wordplay or engages in any flirtation. Trapdoor lasciviously propositions her to "wap" and "niggle" with (5.1.189) [slang for 'fuck'] him, but she curses and hits him, refusing to engage in prurience by even translating for the others. Significantly, Moll's language usually becomes sexual only when she is forced to establish her purity; she understands that sexuality is a weapon, and she refuses to be victim, but she is not averse to using it against others for self-defence. When Mistress Openwork refuses to sell to Moll because she suspects her of bedding

Master Openwork, Moll retaliates by accusing her of lechery: "You, goody Openwork, … prick out a poor living / and sew[] many a bawdy skin-coat together, Thou [art a] private pandress between shirt and smock" (2.1.236-38). Moll's lewdness is in indignant defence of her own honor. Being a woman who has been accused of whoredom, she knows that women are most susceptible to these kinds of accusations, and while she does reject this social paradigm as unwarranted and unfair, she is not above exploiting it when she is made victim of this kind of attack. Moll maybe a feminist before her time, but she is also not averse to employing sexist strategies in defence of her own chastity, so much does it mean to her.

Moll's chastity is confirmed most when she rejects Laxton's easy assumption that she is a whore. She vindicates her virtue significantly only after she defends womankind's more general position in a hostile world. The defense occurs after she trounces him at swordplay. She begins by denouncing him and his class as arrogant and misinformed before directing her attention to reputation, that most ambiguous of early-modern indicators: "How many of our sex by such as thou / Have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name / That never deserved loosely or did trip / In path of whoredom beyond cup and lip?" (3.1.81-84). Here she critiques the unjust practice of assessing female chastity through a reputation primarily fabricated and traded, i.e. commodified, by males. She proceeds to defend women who fall victim to fluctuations of wealth, a commonplace in this market economy: "In thee I defy all men, their worst hates / And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts / With which they entangle the poor spirits of fools: / Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives - / Fish that must needs bite, or themselves be bitten - / Such hungry things as these may soon be took / With a worm fastened on a golden hook" (92-98). She underscores the culture's disgusting trade in female vulnerability by giving voice to the pathos of those forced to sell their bodies in the market that is society, and the

hypocritical response of this market.

Moll finally draws Laxton's notice to her personal situation. Her defence is impassioned, and deserves to be cited in full:

> But why, good fisherman,
>
> Am I thought meat for you, that never yet
>
> Had angling rod cast towards me? - 'Cause you'll say
>
> I'm given to sport, I'm often merry, jest;
>
> Hath mirth no kindred in the world but lust?
>
> O shame take all her friends then! But howe'er
>
> Thou and the baser world censure my life,
>
> I'll send 'em word by thee, and write so much
>
> Upon thy breast, 'cause thou shalt bear't in mind:
>
> Tell them 'twere base to yield where I have conquered.
>
> I scorn to prostitute myself to a man,
>
> I that can prostitute a man to me! (101-12)

Moll's declaration emphasizes a feminine strength and autonomy that are non-sexual, and she bears these qualities out when she threatens to write her female innocence in Laxton's own blood upon his own [male] body. The objectification of his body as a page upon which she may publish her innocence repays his earlier objectification of her body in his desire. The blood-letting echoes, and also avenges, a form of rape, and the use of her sword to dismember his sexual interest in her suggests a form of punitive, and also self-preserving, castration. Her act reproves his, and by extension the hegemonic, trade in female reputation, and she emphasizes this excoriation in the concluding lines: she has indeed demeaned Laxton to a prostitute's level

by making him vulnerable to her.

Moll can never, however, fully escape the contradictions implied in her hermaphrodism, even in her own thinking. This paradox again emphasizes the conflicted nature of the capitalist system. Indeed her outer merging of gender performance is chaste, effortless and justified, but her inner understanding of the economy of gender is uneasy and muddied. At the end of her speech to Laxton, she abruptly undermines her defence of female agency and strength. Even as she reiterates her validation of female "wit and spirit," she inexplicably redefines the feminine as hierarchically inferior to the masculine: "She that has wit and spirit / May scorn to live beholding to her body for meat, / Or for apparel, like your common dame / That makes shame get her clothes to cover shame. / Base is that mind that kneels unto her body / As if a husband stood in awe on's wife; / My spirit shall be mistress of this house" (133-39). Moll has heretofore been perceptively compassionate about the commodified female in a market economy. Now, however, she is repulsed by the "common dame" who sells her body to clothe herself, and she resorts to the dualities of mind / body and man / woman to illustrate her censure. In spite of having just vehemently expounded her superiority to Laxton and others like him, she now articulates a version of the world in which men are naturally superior to women: submitting the mind to the body, or the male to the female, is as "base" and deviant as a husband being in awe of his wife.

Moll further complicates the issue by asserting that her "spirit" will rule her "house" as naturally as a husband rules his wife, in the process giving rise to several contradictory questions: Does spirit indicate strength of personality, as in the first line of the passage (133)? Or is it synonymous with soul, as in the last line (139)? Is Moll's "spirit," in either or both of its connotations, masculine by inference? Or is it feminine since she refers to it as "mistress?" Are

genders naturally opposed with the male intellectually superior to the female? Or are gender roles designed and imposed by a patriarchal society that exploits these people it designates as vulnerable? Is the mind male like a husband? Or is it a natural female feature? And where is Moll in all this gender slippage? <8> These questions and confusions all arise from Moll's deconstructed gender identity, and they are ultimately irresolvable. The conceit paradoxically clarifies her as the site of conflicts, a biological site that reproduces the conflict in the geographic site of London, and yet also one that is marginal and positioned at the outskirts of gender and society.

Moll thus simultaneously belongs to, yet is alien from, the female gender. For her part, she defines herself as a member of what she terms "our sex" (3.1.81), and she seeks to serve it; she helps the young couple Mary and Sebastian to overcome the Senex Wengrave, and she befriends all women when she denounces and retaliates against the practices that victimize them. Women, however, never fail to excommunicate her. Mistress Gallipot abhors Moll's visible conflation of the sexes, Mistress Openwork suspects her of playing false with her husband, and both refuse to have anything to do with her. Even Mary cannot abide her. In spite of such resemblances as their name, their transvestism (Moll helps Mary dress as a man as part of the trick on Wengrave), and their frustration at the patriarchal limitations they encounter, the two women are unable to interact and skirt each other throughout. While Sebastian lauds Moll as a facilitator of his and Mary's union, Mary can only reply, "No poison, sir, but serves us for some use, /Which is confirmed in her" (4.1.82).

Moll's expulsion from the female community is corroborated by very limited communication. Mary and Moll do not address each other in their major scene together. In fact, only one spoken interaction unfolds between Moll and another woman in the play, and then the

subject is Moll's eviction. In 2.1, Mistress Openwork speaks Moll's exile, and not surprisingly, it is in economic terms:

Mistress Openwork: Get you from my shop!

Moll: I come to buy.

Mistress Openwork: I'll sell ye nothing; I warn ye my house and shop.

Moll's ability to pay ought to confer upon her the right to function within Openwork's commerce-society. Nevertheless, the latter snubs Moll because she suspects her of being "one of [her husband's] haunts" (226). Further disparate from the citizen wives, Moll has small involvement in financial escapades. Mistress Gallipot embezzles from her husband, but Moll does not even consider filching Wengrave's chain and diamond when he attempts to entrap her. She does own capital but spends little time thinking or speaking about it; she never exhibits an interest in spending or amassing it. Moll, in fact, is one of few individuals in the play who gives away money, and the only one who does so with no consideration of a return, as when she moves to offer charity to the 'soldiers.' Despite defining herself and acting as a chaste woman, her gender conflation, the sexual threat she appears to represent, and her lack of obsession with money serve to distance her from London's women.

Likewise, Moll is simultaneously native to and alien from the men: like a man, she earns and spends her own money, directs her own actions, fences, wears breeches, and has a [fabricated] "gentleman's … unmannerly instrument" (4.1.85, 96) or a "yard … [and] two trinkets" (2.2.84, 76) between her legs. The fabricated nature of her lacking penis functions as an ironic signifier of the male gender, since Laxton, with all his lacks and fabrications, is also taken to signify the male gender. Her easy and successful appropriation of the phallus also exposes the spurious nature of the phallocentric law. Moreover, in comparison to her moral, and perhaps

even biological strength, the men fare as poorly as the women. Sebastian aside, upper class men are unethical and shallow, the gallants impoverished and impotent, the merchant men unperceptive and sexually feeble, and the pickpockets immoral and quite unsuccessful at picking pockets. These men view Moll variously as a whore or "mad," but she still manages to ally herself with them, helping one to dupe his father and achieve his beloved, another to avoid the police, and still others to evade pickpockets.

Class-wise too Moll has a foot in every level and can perceive and accomplish what others cannot. She aids the upper class, functioning as the catalyst in the denouement of the marriage plot, yet she is not upper class. She is comfortable swaggering and interacting with the gallants, as apparent in 2.1, and going on excursions with them. True she exposes their parasitic practices, but she also protects them from the thieving "soldiers" and from pickpockets. Yet clearly Moll herself is not a gallant. She seems to fit in with the merchant class most. Like the shopkeepers, she labors for her capital and evidently earns enough to engage in activities of middle-class affluence: she attempts to purchase a shag ruff, gauges the quality of tobacco, resembles "a young barrister" (3.1.49) in her male attire, attends the theatre, and possesses enough money to employ a man servant. However, the merchant class marginalizes her; the women cannot abide her, and they allow their husbands little contact with her. Moll also aids the lower classes (Trapdoor) and demonstrates empathy for them (the poor soldiers). She is furthermore acquainted with the substrata of the rather complex criminal underworld, the "commonwealth of rogues" (5.1.131). In fact, she is first to detect that Trapdoor and Tearcat are not real soldiers, accomplishing this task by analyzing the content and rhetoric of their reports. Moll has some features in common with this stratum, for she is socially marginalized like them, and her career as a performer probably places her better here than with the middle class.

However, if she is criminal, it is not in the way they are; moreover, she is sufficiently wealthy, and such dissimilarities render her peripheral to the class. Moll thus belongs everywhere and yet simultaneously nowhere.

Moll's gender and class indeterminacies endow her with a wide spectrum of perception, which, in turn, allows her to function as a reformative power. She is herself chaste, virile, honest and autonomous, yet she effortlessly recognizes the adulterous woman (Mrs. Openwork), the effeminate man (Laxton), the dissembling beggar (Trapdoor) and the entrapped victim (Mary), upbraiding the first three and rescuing the fourth. She herself has never been a 'foist' (pickpocket), but her experience of pickpockets and her familiarity with the gallants prevent a crime in 5.1. The second foist exclaims, "Zounds, we are smoked!" (294), and indeed Moll has "smoked" (i.e. exposed) them. Her privileged position in society grants her admittance to all levels and enables her to 'smoke' the cutpurses and defend the gallants when it comes to theft, "smoke" the gallants and defend the honor of the women when it comes to reputation, and 'smoke' the women but defend her own innocence when it comes to chastity. In direct contrast to her verbal exclusion from the female gender, her wide-reaching social placement allows her to speak to all men, including canting (speaking in slang) with the lowest class. No other character is able to converse with all levels of the city or to be so completely a microcosmic expression of the environment.

By the same token, no other character is as friendless within and alien to each of these genders and levels; Moll has the most extensive contact with people and yet no friends. She is at best a novelty, and at worst an item for exploitation or rejection. The greatest inversion of the play is that Moll belongs to the city because she incarnates its contradictions, and yet, because of that fact, she cannot be autochthonous to one gender or echelon. She remains an alienated,

"unnatural," and paradoxical creature. She seems to be walking example of what Michel Foucault has called a "heterotopia" i.e. a site of paradox. Heterotopias are these spaces that lurk at the margins of the hegemonic culture, representing the unrepresented, or inverting the normative, and thus exposing the illusions that patch over the fissures and contradictions in the ideology of a culture. "We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another … These spaces [i.e. heterotopias] … are linked with all the others, however contradict all other sites … All the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted [in these heterotopias]. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (23, 24). Moll is such a site, and she performs this function for the rest of the citizenry. She is certainly linked with all genders and classes, but she also contradicts them. Her appearance and actions represents the issues within the rest of the citizenry, even as she contests and inverts them. As such, she is the opposite that defines the norm, *even* while she represents the norm. Foucault likens the functions of these heterotopias to what occurs when one sees oneself in a mirror: "The mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there" (24). Moll reflects to the other citizens their own mistakes, and thus even though she is chaste, honest, kind, intelligent, courageous and excellent in most ways, she becomes anathema for them. They make her a "hetertopia of deviation: those [sites] in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (25). The irony is clear; Moll's behavior may be deviant in some ways, but she is moral; the others' behaviors are more deviant and they immoral. The tension between the site and its countersite, or the inhabitants of London and Moll, is a

necessary one for the Londoners, and a constructed one. The citizens can absolve themselves from their depravity by investing them in Moll then exiling and punishing her. Spatially, they can make her the counter-site, without which the illusion of the normative site cannot exist. Such a structuralist view is necessarily a view, that is, there is no essential or real condition that requires the normative site to define itself through the process of marginalizing the counter-site. It is simply a desire of the normative culture to absolve itself of its sins while it continues to sin. Moll may be perceived as the social freak, and she may be, for the others, a heterotopia that challenges and contests London society and London gender, but she is in actuality, the norm of contemporary London.

If Moll is indeed a heavily ironic negotiation of London's contradictions, her final friendless and unmarried statuses encapsulate the ultimate tragedy of this novel culture. The final scene confirms Moll's concurrently integral yet external function within the community. Due in some part to her intelligence and courage, the plots come to typical comedic resolutions. Sir Alexander confesses that "ancient goodness, grace, and worthiness" (5.2.179) render people deserving, not money, and he endows Sebastian with his inheritance. Sebastian and Mary's relationship is re-instituted as the avenue to a future of love and propagation. The shopkeepers' lives are disentangled when the wives abandon the gallants and return to their husbands. In spite of these final and conservative denouements, however, London is ultimately not returned to harmonious order. When Noland asks Moll when she will wed, she replies, "When you shall hear / Gallants void from sergeants' fear, / Honesty and truth unslandered, / Woman manned but never pandered, / Cheaters booted but not coached, / Vessels older ere they're broached; / If my mind be then not varied / Next day following, I'll be married" (217-24). This prophecy echoes the ambiguity of that of Lear's Fool, and it confirms in a comic way the tragic contradictions of

the new London. In this city, gallants are still bankrupt and vulnerable, deceptions still abound, and women still commodified. As Lord Noland responds, her fantasy may come about only at "doomsday."

Only Moll's contradictory qualities can always successfully negotiate the requirements of this novel world, and her cross-dressing signals in an external way a nature that is constituted to deal with these conflicting and disparate elements. Tragically, then, Moll befits the world best, but without marriage/sexual congress or even a community, she will not propagate. Her 'deconstructive' hermaphrodism, her dissolution of not just male and female but every class and every hierarchical binary, ultimately condemns her to a sterile solitude and a lonely and futureless liminality. Moll has mutated. She is the fittest and she has survived the best. But it seems that she is already headed for extinction. She is fundamentally good, but she is just as fundamentally not the stuff futures are made on.

Notes

1. The relationship between early modern anxiety and cross-dressing has been well documented by the cultural materialist and new historicist scholarship of the past three decades or so. Jonathan Dollimore, for example, has elucidated the extensive challenge cross-dressing offered Renaissance norms: "Cross-dressing spelt 'confusion' in the far-reaching, devastating, religious sense of the word. Intense anxieties about social change and its unsettling of gender and class hierarchies ... were punitively displaced… on to the issue of dress violation, especially women dressing in men's clothes" *Radical Tragedy* xxxv-vi). See also Dollimore's "Subjectivity, Sexuality, and Transgression" and the work of Lisa Jardine, Sandra Clark, and Mary Beth Rose.
2. For further examples of polemical depictions of a causal relationship between cross-dressing and societal disorder, see the contemporary, anonymous text "*Hic Mulier*."
3. Thirsk furthermore illustrates how pin-manufacturing impacted London's economy in ways which prioritized profit over fundamental humane concerns. Pins were valuable "in an age of conspicuous consumption, when changing fashions in dress were followed by people of all classes" (78). The Dutch were producing better and cheaper pins than the English, and thus England banned foreign pins in 1563. A proclamation in 1564 allowed them back in, as did a statute in 1565. In 1571 and throughout the rest of Elizabeth's reign, they were prohibited again. However, in 1608, the prohibitive law (BL Landsdowne MS.152, fo.319) made clear that pins were nevertheless being imported, and "legislation could not intimidate merchants in the face of insistent market-demand" (81). Evidently parliamentary control over the market was neither all that rigorous nor

successful, and laws regulating the economy were being flouted and broken at every turn. In practice, if not in theory, profit making was priority.

4. It is not accidental that much of the play takes place in a market space. The shops mentioned are an apothecary, a sempster [i.e. tailor] shop, a feather shop, and a tobacco shop. These shops, especially the latter three, sell the non-practical commodities so sought out by the era. In fact, the list here does not differ greatly from the one mentioned by Stow above. Valerie Forman perceives that the endemic commodification in *The Roaring Girl's* society creates a domino effect within statuses. She argues that the play is full of "series of exchanges [that] transform[ ] one commodity into another, creating a series of interchangeable equivalences out of not only objects, but desires and social relations themselves" (1533).
5. The Epilogue of *The Roaring Girl* advertizes Mary's forthcoming performance on the very same stage on which the play was being performed: "If what both [i.e. the playwrights] have done / Cannot full pay your expectation, / The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence, / Shall on this stage give larger recompense" (33-36). For more information about the real-life Moll see Orgel 12-22 and Simon Shepherd 67-92.
6. As they are in this play, in mediaeval and Renaissance skimmingtons, male and female social roles were exchanged as mocking punishment of hierarchical inversions. A dominated man was forced to carry a distaff while the wife held a weapon. See D.E. Underdown 129. For two narrative examples of this image see "*Hic Mulier*" 268 and "*Haec Vir"* 279. In the latter the masculine woman is addressed as "most courageous counterfeit of Hercules and his Distaff." See also Natalie Zemon Davis.

7. Marjorie Garber agrees that Moll appropriates the attributes of masculinity to demonstrate the effeminacy of most of the male characters, arguing that Moll goes so far as to have a metaphorical penis fashioned for her by a tailor. She concludes that the play is not so much about "women's emancipatory strategies [as it is about] the sexual inadequacies of men" 221.

8. This ambiguity between female and male, submissive and dominant, recurs when Moll refuses marriage. She insists that she likes to occupy both sides of the bed, stating "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 ... I have the head now of myself and am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing place where a maiden loses one head, and has a worse i'the' place" (2.2..37-45). The contradictions abound: is Moll a woman or a man or does she slip between the two? She refuses to submit as a wife even as she insists that women must obey men. Is it natural to be the head of herself? Does she confirm or critique gender hierarchy? The answers do not resolve into a single, logical position.

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