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Moll Cutpurse: a radical performer or a typical cross-dressed woman of the early modern era?

Par Pauline Durin

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1 According to Diane Elizabeth Dreher, "androgyny liberates individuals from conventional stereotypes, offering them a wide spectrum of behaviour and expression."[1] Indeed, cross-dressing Shakespearean characters like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* or Viola in *The Twelfth Night* experience freedom of movement and of speech thanks to masculine clothes before putting on feminine garments again and usually concluding the play by getting married. Yet, among those heroines, one stands out precisely because cross-dressing is not an episode of the play for her but a distinctive trait of her personality: Moll Cutpurse in *The Roaring Girl* by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton (1611).[2] This character was inspired by Mary Frith (1584/85-1659), a well-known figure in early modern London and a thief. She was sued on January 27th, 1612, for appearing on the stage of the Fortune in a man's apparel and for being immodest in her speech. Just like her real-life inspiration, Moll Cutpurse wears masculine clothes, drinks, and smokes, and has a sword she frequently uses throughout the play. She helps two lovers, Sebastian and Mary, to oppose Lord Alexander, Sebastian's father, who forbids their union. Sebastian first has his father believe that he shall marry Moll if he cannot have Mary, before Moll helps the two lovers see each other and get married.

2 Never in the play does she abide by prescribed feminine behaviour and she alternatively puts on masculine or feminine garments. Moll's performance consequently often puzzles the other characters who do not know how to characterize her, and even more

[1] Diane Elizabeth Dreher, *Domination and Defiance: Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2015, p. 116.

[2] This argument is supported by Kelly J. Stage, "*The Roaring Girl*'s London Spaces", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 49, n°2, 2009, p. 417 and by Mary Beth Rose, "Women in Men's Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in *The Roaring Girl*", in Jennifer Panek (ed.), *The Roaring Girl: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co, 2011, p. 228.

interestingly, she often puzzles critics too. Many words are used to describe her: her nickname is “the roaring girl”, to some she is a virago,[3] a hermaphrodite,[4] a woman-in-men’s-clothing,[5] a transvestite heroine.[6] Why such a definitional difficulty? Is Moll meant to be defined at all?

3 This article shall explore Moll’s performance of gender using Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) to better understand how her performance is not carnivalesque but rather an invitation to question gender norms. In a first part I shall explore Moll’s gender performance and her questioning an order without ever abiding by it. Then, I will show how gender performance calls sexuality into question. Finally, given that she is not merely a fictive character, I will study her as the embodiment of debates of the early modern period.

Gender performance

4 Moll is first presented as an object of curiosity: she is the reason why spectators come to see the play and the prologue creates suspense around her character, announcing her as “Mad Moll”. Even before she is on stage, it is clear that her appearance and habits are the main cause of stir, as she displays masculine habits.

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[3] Craig Rustici, “The Smoking Girl: Tobacco and the Representation of Mary Frith”, *Studies in Philology*, University of North Carolina Press, vol. 96, n°2, 1999, p. 164.

[4] Susan E. Krantz, “The Sexual Identities of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* and in London”, *Renaissance and Reformation*, vol. 19, n°1, 1995, p. 5.

[5] Kelly J. Stage, *op. cit.*, p. 417.

[6] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, p. 8

She is identified as "She that minces tobacco" (II.1.7).[7] and as soon as she first appears on stage in Act II, scene 1, she uses her sword, a masculine attribute, to fight a man who offended her in a tavern the night before, thereby inducing that she regularly visits taverns although she is not married.[8] The stage direction describes her as following: "*Enter Moll in a frieze jerkin and a black safeguard*." A jerkin is a man's jacket while a safeguard is a skirt women wore when riding in order to protect their clothes from dirt and mud.[9] On that matter, Susan E. Krantz notes:

> 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.[10]

5 We may ponder over this repartition. Given that she is costumed female from the waist down and male from the waist up, must we understand that she puts forward her female sexual identity while asserting a masculine state of mind? She complicates her gender identity throughout the play by navigating, sometimes within a single scene, between feminine and masculine clothes. In Act V, scene 2 for instance, she begins the scene entirely dressed as a man before coming back on stage wearing a feminine wedding gown.

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[7] Thomas Middleton & Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Jennifer Panek, New York, W. W. Norton & Co, 2011.

[8] Authors like Juan Luis Vives yet insisted on fordidding women to go to public places on their own. Juan Luis Vives, *A Very Frvtefvl and Pleasant Booke Called the Instruction of a Christen Woman* [1529], London, Henry Wykes, 1557, p. 133.

[9] Jennifer Panek (ed.), *The Roaring Girl: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co, 2011, p. 26.

[10] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

Not only does she change clothes, but she also uses various names. By the end of the play, most of the characters stop using Moll, including with epithets and simply call her Jack. Judith Butler defines gender performance as made of repetitions of patterns,[11] but Moll's performance is not repetitive at all, rather always changing and fluctuant. It cannot even be compared to the repetition of a previous performance since Moll is an unprecedented character on Jacobean stage. Besides, as women were still not acting in plays by the time of the first representation of *The Roaring Girl*, a boy actor first embodied Moll, thereby reinforcing her gender ambiguity.

6 This blurred gender identity is enhanced by the way the other characters designate her, using expressions that underline their trouble with defining her gender identity. What may first appear as oxymoronic expressions are thus numerous throughout the play. Trapdoor, a spy sent by Sir Alexander to kill Moll and who pretends to serve her to better deceive her, says he does so for "The love [he] bear[s] to [her] heroic spirit and masculine womanhood" (II.1.336-337). He then asks: "What says my brave captain, male and female?" (III.3.179). Sir Alexander, as he fears his son Sebastian might marry Moll and as he sees her having masculine clothes made by a tailor, exclaims: "Here's good gear towards! I have brought up my son to marry a Dutch slop and a French doublet – a codpiece daughter" (II.2.92-94). The expression "codpiece daughter"[12] reveals that Moll's clothes are problematic to the other characters. It draws attention to Moll's private parts, thereby clearly enticing interrogations, not to say intrusive comments. Sir Alexander's focus on her clothes is a way of assimilating them as an embodiment of her gender identity that results in reifying her, as

[11] Judith Butler, "Preface", *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1990], New York, Routledge, 1999, p. xv.

[12] The codpiece was a triangular piece of masculine clothing covering men's genitalia.

she is reduced to her garments. The confusion she raises among the other characters leads to clear contestation of her very humanity. As she is first mentioned and talked about, the old men in Act I, scene 2 are quite depreciative:

> *'A creature,'* saith he, 'nature brought forth
> To mock the sex of woman.' It is a *thing*
> *One knows not how to name*; her birth began
> Ere she was all made. 'Tis woman more than man,
> Man more than woman, and – which to none can hap –
> The sun gives her two shadows to one shape.
> Nay, more, let *this strange thing* talk, stand, or sit,
> No blazing star draws more eyes after it.
> SIR DAVY. *A monster.* 'Tis *some monster* (I.2.128-136).[13]

7 Moll's reification is to be seen through nouns such as "creature", "thing" and "monster". She is an object more than a subject and her humanity is denied through the use of "'Tis" instead of another pronoun. Since she cannot be identified as masculine or feminine, she is not identified as human either. This is reminiscent of Jennifer Higginbotham's reflection on the cultural representation of infants in early modern British culture. She presents new-born babies as "problematically gendered and, consequently, as problematically human."[14] She then adds: "To be spoken of as human, I argue, was to be spoken of as male or female."[15] Androgynous appearance is thus conceived as monstrous in the sense that it resists definition, as shown in Philip Stubbes's *The Anatomy of Abuses*, which associates androgynous appearance with hermaphrodites and gives

[13] My emphasis.

[14] Jennifer Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters. Gender, Transgression, Adolescence*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, p. 10.

[15] Jennifer Higginbotham, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

the following definition: "*Hermaphroditi*; that is, Monsters of bothe kindes, halfe women, halfe men."[16] Such dehumanisation is to be observed in the names given to Moll to address her directly. In Act V, scene 2, she appears on stage dressed in masculine clothes and the characters around her call her Jack. As soon as he recognizes her, Sir Alexander chooses to address her not using her name but using the noun of a fault he makes her the epitome of:

> SIR ALEXANDER [*to Moll*]. Impudence, where's my son?
> MOLL. Weakness, go look him (V.1.103).

8 Sir Alexander makes of Moll an allegory, thereby dehumanizing her.

9 Behind this so-called monstrous appearance, and although she is often described as a "mean" subject for a play (prologue, 8), she may also be the embodiment of more lofty references. Her description, including her self-depiction, is quite reminiscent of Plato's description of the androgynous in the *Symposium*.[17] The androgynous are supposed to be a third gender, both masculine and feminine, and Plato describes them as round, with four hands, four legs, two faces, and two genitals.[18] This physical description is similar to Mrs Gallipot's words when she joins men in their fantasies around Moll sexual identity and declares: "Some will not stick to say she's a man, and some, both man and woman" (II.1.196-197).

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[16] Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses*, London, 1583, sig. 38r, quoted in Philippa Berry, *Of Chastity and Power: Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 69.

[17] This is also the interpretation of Patrick Cheney, "Moll Cutpurse as Hermaphrodite in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*", *Renaissance and Reformation*, vol. 7, n°2, 1983, p. 120-134.

[18] Plato, *Symposium*, in Benjamin Jowett (ed.), *The Dialogues of Plato in Five Volumes*, 3rd ed., vol. 1, Oxford University, 1892, p. 558-563, 189c-190. URL.

Plato's androgynous are also described as powerful beings, and Moll can easily beat a man when she fights one.[19] In addition, Plato indicates that Zeus decided to punish the androgynous by splitting them and forcing them to search for their significant halves.[20] Moll declares on numerous occasions that she herself feels that she is complete without having to find a mate. She rejects marriage and declares to Sebastian: "I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman" (II.2.42-43). Thereby, Moll also brings to mind the figure of Hermaphroditus who, according to Ovid, became both male and female after a nymph clasped him against her body in the fountain Salmacis.[21] She appears to embody both genders and, in a way, two partners within one body. Such representations may also explain why Moll is said to have two shadows: "The sun gives her two shadows to one shape" (I.2.133). This is also a feature to be noticed in the biography of Mary Frith, published in 1662, in which she is described as "a perfect ambidexter"[22] for instance. In that, we may say that she is carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense of the word as she is in an in-between state, difficult to define and impersonating two seemingly contradictory notions.[23] Her body, similarly to the grotesque body Bakhtine describes, is "not enclosed, not finished nor ready, it surpasses itself, goes beyond its own limits."[24] It echoes her description: "her birth began / Ere she

[19] See II.1 and III.1.

[20] Plato, *op. cit.*, 190.

[21] Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Data Perseus,* Book 4, v. 274-388. URL.

[22] Anonymous, "The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith", ed. Jennifer Panek, *The Roaring Girl. Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co, 2011, p. 161.

[23] Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *L'œuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Âge et sous la Renaissance*, NRF, Gallimard, 1970, p. 35.

[24] *Ibid*., p 35. "[Il] n'est pas enfermé, achevé ni tout prêt, mais il se dépasse lui-même, franchit ses propres limites". We translate.

was all made" (I.2.130-131). We may also interpret her character as embodying Northrop Frye's *Eros* character, similarly to Puck or Ariel, that "is in himself sexually self-contained, being in a sense both male and female, and needing no expression of love beyond himself"[25] as indeed the play concludes not with her marriage but with her bravados.

10 The power she gains from being a gender ambiguous figure enables Moll to question gender hierarchy as well. Judith Butler presents patriarchal domination as a construction that becomes social reality:

> Domination occurs through a language which, in its plastic social action, creates a second-order, artificial ontology, an illusion of difference, disparity, and, consequently, hierarchy that *becomes* social reality.[26]

11 Given that masculinity was associated with power and femininity with submissiveness, seeing a masculine woman leads men to fear for their privilege and to envisage an upside-down world in which they would be submissive. In Act II, scene 2, as the tailor is taking measurements to make Moll new clothes, Sir Alexander exclaims while spying on her: "Heyday, breeches! […] What age is this! If the wife go in breeches, the man must wear long coats like a fool" (II.2.78-80). Moll threatens masculinity because she embodies it, suggesting thereby that the authority associated with it is not natural or bestowed upon birth. The pun in her name – Cutpurse – leaves no doubt about the castrating fears she arouses in male characters. She uncovers the artificiality of gender hierarchy and

[25] Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective*, New York, 1965, p. 82-83. Quoted by Mary Beth Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 247-248 and by Patrick Cheney, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

[26] Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

the fact that social privilege would derive from natural strength and superiority. She is physically powerful, and beats opponents numerous times throughout the play. In Act II, scene 1, as soon as she has beaten the man who offended her in a tavern the night before, she opposes Laxton, a character whose name once again plays on masculine fears, who suggests she might not have been able to do it:

> LAXTON. Base rogue! Had he offered but the least counterbuff, by this hand, I was prepared for him.
> MOLL. You prepared for him? Why should you be prepared for him? Was he any more than a man?

12 Her rebuttal, in the form of a comparative structure, invites us to question gender difference as the foundation of gender hierarchy.

Questioning sexuality

13 Her performance also questions norms in terms of sexuality. First of all, she has no love interest, which tends to set her apart from other Elizabethan and Jacobean protagonists in comedies. Contrary to other cross-dressing heroines, her masculine performance is not part of a heterosexual romantic plot, quite the opposite. Because of her androgynous appearance, some characters assume that she likes men and women alike. Laxton says of her: “She might first cuckhold the husband and then make him do as much for the wife” (II.1.198-199). Moll cuts such assumptions short as she declares to have no love life whatsoever. Although the word is of course

anachronistic, we might think of her as asexual,[27] all the more as she confides to Sebastian and Mary to be a virgin in Act VI, scene 1:

> MOLL. […] It shall ne'er be said I came into a gentleman's chamber and let his instrument hang by the walls!
> SEBASTIAN. Why, well said, Moll, i'faith. It had been a shame for that gentleman, then, that would have let it hung still and ne'er offered thee it.
> MOLL. There it should have been still, then, for Moll, for, though the world judge impudently of me, I ne'er came into that chamber yet where I took down the instrument myself (IV.1.86-95).

14 However, Moll's asexuality may result from social constraint rather than a matter of characterization. As she already transgresses all norms, sexual incontinence would represent an unforgivable transgression that would prevent her from gaining the audience's approval and sympathy. Mary Frith herself faced accusations of being promiscuous, and although she claimed never to have resorted to prostitution or to have led anyone on that path, she still was perceived as obscene. In a similar vein to her real-life inspiration, as Susan E. Krantz states, "As a compromised female, Moll is assumed a prostitute."[28] In the eyes of the other characters, Moll is a woman who transgresses her female condition and the restrictions that befell women. Yet Craig Rustici notes that Moll may well feel sexual attraction while suppressing her impulses[29]. Indeed, in Act IV, scene 1, as she sings about promiscuous women, she concludes her song with those words: "Hand up the viol now, sir; all this while I was in a dream. One shall lie rudely then; but

[27] This is also the interpretation of Patrick Cheney, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

[28] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[29] Craig Rustici, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

being awake, I keep my legs together" (IV.1.128-130). We may deduce from such a sentence that Moll represses her sexual impulses for the sake of respectability.

15 Although gender performance appears as a source of self-fashioning and expression for Moll, sexuality is used to force a feminine identity upon her and to gain power over such an unruly figure. This is to be heard in Laxton's words as soon as the audience meets Moll in Act II, scene1. Laxton presents Moll as a figure of sexual interest and as having a devouring sexuality:

> Methinks a brave captain might get all his soldiers upon her, and ne'er be beholding to a company of Mile End milksops, if he could come on and come off quick enough. Such a Moll were a marrowbone before an Italian; he would cry '*bona-roba*' till his ribs were nothing but bone. I'll lay hard siege to her. Money is that aqua fortis that eats into many a maidenhead. Where the walls are flesh and blood, I'll ever pierce through with a golden auger (II.2.178-185).

16 Once again, Moll is reified, described as an object, more precisely as food and literally as "good stuff" to be consumed. Her masculinity almost makes her hyper heterosexual, as if she were thereby able to have sex with numerous men, here soldiers, meant to be the epitome of masculinity. Conquering such a character would thus make Laxton more than a man. This echoes sermons of the time that considered cross-dressing as admission of severe lewdness and condemned it because masculine clothes revealed more skin and emphasized curves more than feminine clothes did.[30] Moll's choice to remain single and her being a virgin may thus be a strategy of

[30] Anonymous, *Hic Mulier: Or, the Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to Cure the Coltish Disease [of] the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our Times,* London, 1620, B2.

social survival. Her identity requires the sacrifice of her sexuality. Her celibacy presents her as less threatening than it first appears, as is suggested by Sir Alexander's words when he hears her claiming she prefers to remain single: "The most comfortable answer from a roaring girl that ever mine ears drunk in" (II.2.46-47). By renouncing sexuality, she somewhat lessens her influence over other characters. Yet, Moll's celibacy may actually be interpreted as threatening the patriarchal order Sir Alexander embodies.

17 Protestantism condemned celibacy, because it was too similar to that chosen by Catholic nuns;[31] moreover, heterosexual relations were seen as necessary for a woman's health because of "the womb's need for moisture, usually in the form of hot moist seed".[32] Above all, as Amy Froide exposes: "Since contemporaries believed women were more likely to be susceptible to sin, it was even more important for them to marry".[33] Moll thus embodies another version of femininity on stage as she does not get married by the end of the play, thereby presenting another model of existence within society. Indeed, even though numerous women were single in early modern society, this status was still absent from drama.[34] At the end of the play, when Lord Noland asks Moll when she shall get married, she answers:

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[31] Ursula A. Potter, *The Unruly Womb in Early Modern Drama: Plotting Women's Biology on the Stage*, Kalamazoo, Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2019, p. 2.

[32] Ursula A. Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[33] Amy M. Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 157.

[34] "For instance, in the late seventeenth century over half (54.5 per cent) of the women in London were single. We can say with some confidence, then, that at least one-third of urban women were single in the early modern era", Amy M. Froide, *op. cit.*, p. 3. She also quotes Peter Laslett, "Mean Household Size in England Since the Sixteenth Century", in

> Who, I, my lord? I'll tell you when, i'faith.
> 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 (IV.2.222-230).

18 She refuses to play a prompted role. However, Moll does not put marriage or patriarchal order into question; she simply claims not to abide by it: "I have no humor to marry. I love to lie o'both sides o'th'bed myself; and again, o'th'other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear I am too headstrong to obey; therefore I'll ne'er go about it" (II.2.37-40).

19 Even if Moll expressed desire for another character, the play makes it clear that she would be refused a relationship because of her gender identity. As Sir Alexander fears she might marry Sebastian, Goshawk reassures him:

> No priest will marry her, sir, for a woman
> Whiles that shape's on; and it was never known
> Two men were married and conjoined in one (V.2.108-110).

20 This draws attention to the representation of homoeroticism as a form of anguish on stage in the wake of Moll's performance. Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton bring margins on the centre stage, and thus expose a greater diversity of characters. Moll sheds

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Peter Laslett & Richard Wall (eds.), *Household and Family in Past Time*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 145; D. V. Glass, "Notes on the Demography of London at the End of the Seventeenth Century", *Daedalus*, vol. 97, n°2, 1968, p. 586.

light on a marginal world and thus offers another glimpse at early modern London life. Given that she socializes with "roaring boys" from whom her nickname derives, she appears on stage with rogues, thieves, and young unruly lewd men, among whom Jack Dapper and Sir Beauteous Ganymede. Ganymede's name recalls clear homoeroticism on stage as it is the name of Zeus' lover.[35] Jack Dapper on the other hand appears as Moll male counterpart as he is an overly feminine man.[36] Though Moll may be the focal point of the play, she does not stand as an exceptional figure; instead, her introduction of other characters on stage leads to further reflections about gender, but also about compulsory heterosexuality. Admittedly, transgressive gender performance is not necessarily linked to questions of sexuality; however, Judith Butler exposes how the two notions are intertwined:

> The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire.[37]

21 Moll threatens both heterosexuality as an establish order and gender as a binary dogma. This is all the clearer in Act IV, scene 1, as Moll has Mary dressed as a man in order to escape Sir Alexander's rule and so that the two lovers may meet. As Sebastian kisses Mary, Moll exclaims: "How strange this shows, one man to

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[35] I thank Johann Paccou for the numerous enlightening conversations we have shared on that topic.

[36] James M. Bromley, "'Quilted with Mighty Words to Lean Purpose': Clothing and Queer Style in *The Roaring Girl*", *Renaissance Drama*, vol. 43, n°2, 2015, p. 143-172.

[37] Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

kiss another!" (IV.1.47). She thus draws attention to homoeroticism behind cross-dressing on stage. Sebastian does not deny such image and does not hide the pleasure he takes in kissing a masculine lover: "I'd kiss such men to choose, Moll. / Methinks a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet" (IV.1.48-49). He then adds: "So methinks every kiss she gives me now / In this strange form is worth a pair of two" (IV.1.57-58). It may thus seem surprising, not to say contradictory that despite embodying alternative model on stage, Moll often voices societal stereotypes and judgement. In Act II, scene 1, she mocks Jack Dapper because he buys a feather to refine his style, and she often condemns women for being lecherous, thereby drawing on misogynistic stereotypes. It would be a mistake then to say that she opposes societal norms, in a certain way she even voices social order too often not to be noticed. Therefore, is Moll such a transgressive character because of her mere ability to perform both genders and to play around with heterosexual norms?

Early modern debates

22 Moll's transgressive performance is to be put in perspective with the social context of the XVIth century. Susan Krantz sheds light on androgynous characters in early modern culture and links them to Elizabeth I's representation of herself as a ruling queen. Characters that can be designated as "fair *Hermaphrodite*" or "Venus armata" actually draw on Elizabeth's representation at Tilbury.[38] Elizabeth referred to herself using what Theodora Jankowski calls "sexually ambiguous or frankly androgynous phrases".[39] Moll's virginity and

[38] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, 13.

[39] Theodora Jankowski, *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama*, Urbana, University of

willingness to defend women against oppressive patriarchal characters (Laxton or Sir Alexander for instance) likens her to Venus Armata, about whom Susan Krantz declares:

> 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 – cross-dressed Diana (or a Venus Armata) who punishes men for their mistreatment of women.[40]

23 This may seem quite contradictory to a contemporary audience, but here again, Moll's masculinity may actually make her hyper feminine. To such extent, her performance may be interpreted as run-of-the-mill as it was not so rare in cultural representation. However, Susan Krantz qualifies her interpretation of Moll as a Venus Armata as she explains:

> 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 ideal – 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.[41]

24 I suggest that the play does not shy away from socio-sexual issues, and that the question of how and whether they are resolved remains open to interpretation. Socio-sexual issues are at the very

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Illinois Press, 1992, p. 65.

[40] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[41] *Ibid*., p. 14.

core of the play as Moll embodies debates of the time, directly derived from the European controversy called "The Woman's Question", which examined women, their so-called nature, their place in society and their potential rights.[42] Moll embodies an important controversy of Jacobean time as to whether women could wear men's clothes or not. Cross-dressing was deeply condemned in conduct books such as Juan Luis Vives's *Instruction of a Christen Woman* (first published in 1523 and translated in English in 1529):

> [...] a woman shall use no mens raiment, els lette her thinke she hath the mans stomack, but take heed to the words of our Lord, saying: A woman shall not put on mans apparrell: for so to doe is abhominable afore God. But I trust no woman will doe it, except shee bee past both honestie and shame.[43]

25 Despite its popularity on stage, cross-dressing was objectionable and part of the charges held against Mary Frith during her trial.[44] In spite of these prescriptions, early XVIIth-century England witnessed a fad for women to wear masculine clothes. John Chamberlain (1553-1628), a Londoner and letter writer of the early modern period, describes this fashion in one of his letters to his friend, Sir Dudley Carleton, living abroad:

> Yesterday the bishop of London called together all his clergy about this town, and told them he had express commandment from the King to will them to inveigh vehemently and bittely in their sermons against the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair

[42] Armel Dubois-Nayt, "Animalizing Women and Men in an Episode of the Querelle Des Femmes: John Lyly vs Jane Anger", *XVII-XVIII*, n°76, 2019, §1.

[43] Juan Luis Vives, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

[44] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

> cut short or shorn, and some of them stilettoes and poniards, and other such trinklets of like moments, adding withal that if pulpit admonitions will not reform them he would proceed by another course.[45]

26 King James I even took part in the debate and condemned women wearing male apparels.[46] We may only postulate that drama might have had an influence over this trend, displaying cross-dressed women**.** Yet, even if Moll embodies these debates on stage, it is less than certain she can be designated as a cross-dressing character in that her clothes reflect her identity instead of hiding it. It may thus be quite interesting to put the play in perspective with a pamphlet written anonymously in 1620, "Hic Mulier" ("This Woman"), in reaction to the cross-dressing fad. The title displays a voluntary grammar mistake, as a masculine deictic is associated with the word "woman", thereby inducing that the eponymous character has a transgressive gender identity. The subtitle of "Hic Mulier" is a quote from Virgil that reads "Non omnes possumus omnes", that is "we cannot be everybody". The pamphleteer rails against women daring to wear men's clothes and complains about the masculinity of women:

> For since the daies of *Adam* women were neuer so Masculine; Masculine in their genders and whole generations, from the Mother, to the yongest daughter; Masculine in Number, from one to multitudes; Masculine in Case, eyen from the head to the foot; Masculine in Moode, from bold speech, to impudent action; and Masculine in Tense: for (without redresse) they

[45] John Chamberlain, London, January 25, 1620, quoted in Panek, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 120.

> were, are, and will be still most Masculine, most mankinde, and most monstrous.[47]

27 The pamphleteer is one among many to blame women for being somewhat too masculine; however, his arguments present a difference with other pamphlets and sermons in that it presents cross-dressing as unnatural and yet specifies it means "going astray (with ill-fauoured affectation) both in attire, in speech, in manners, and (it is to bee feared) in the whole courses and stories of their actions."[48] Such a definition finds a late echo in Judith Butler's definition of gender performance:

> In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments generally constructed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.[49]

28 Interestingly enough, according to Randolph Trumbach, early modern science identified "'three biological sexes – man, woman, and hermaphrodite' – but only two genders, male and female."[50]

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[47] Anonymous, *Hic Mulier*, A3.

[48] *Ibid*., B.

[49] Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

[50] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, p. 12. See Randolph Trumbach, "London's Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture", in Julia Epstein & Kristina Staub (eds.), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, New York and London, Routledge, 1991, p. 113.

Such discrepancy may be explained through Ambroise Paré's description of hermaphrodites:

> Male and female hermaphrodites are those who have two sexes well formed, can use both of them for reproduction; and unto them, ancient and current laws have imposed and still impose to select which sex they want to use, with decency, and under penalty of death, only to use that they have selected for the inconveniences that may arise.[51]

29 However, never do we know more about Moll's intimacy. Even though her private parts are often mentioned and fantasized about, and even though Mary Frith herself offered to show her vulva to people doubting her being female,[52] fictional Moll remains modest. As Kelly J. Stage notices, although Moll's chamber is often mentioned, never is she represented in this space and never does another character come into her chamber,[53] showing that Moll's intimacy is less important than her representation and her gender performance. Hence the fact that Moll is referred to as hermaphrodite several times despite her saying that she is female. Moll therefore embodies reflections on gender and its performance

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[51] Ambroise Paré, *Les oeuvres de M. Ambroise Paré conseiller, et premier chirurgien du Roy. : Avec les figures & portraicts tant de l'anatomie que des instruments de chirurgie, & de plusieurs monstres. Le tout divisé en vingt six livres, comme il est contenu en la page suyvante*, BnF, Gallica, 1595, p. 811. "Hermafrodites masles et femelles, ce sont ceux qui ont les deux sexes bien formez, & s'en peuuent aider & seruir à la generation; & à ceux cy les lois anciennes & modernes ont fait, & font encore eslire duquel sexe ils veulent user, auec dessense, sur peine de perdre la vie, de ne se seruir que de celuy duquel ils auront fait election, pour les inconueniens qui en pourroient aduenir." My translation.

[52] "Mary Frith's Appearance at the Consistory Court January 27, 1612", in Jennifer Panek (ed.), *The Roaring Girl: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co, 2011, p. 147.

[53] Kelly J. Stage, *op. cit.*, p. 428.

relevant to both her time and ours. In Act II, scene 1, she fights a man who offended her in a tavern the night before. As he sees her doing so, Laxton exclaims: “Gallantly performed, i’faith, Moll, and manfully!” (II.1.248). “Manfully” here is an adverb, clearly presenting masculinity as an action rather than a state of being. Of course, gender performance had not been theorized and exposed at the time; yet, several texts shed light on similar reflections on the part of early modern writers. The publication of “Hic Mulier” was quickly followed by the publication of “Haec Vir” (“This Man”). Once again, a voluntary grammar mistake associates a feminine deictic with the word “Man”. Presented as a dialogue between a woman in man’s clothes and a man in a woman’s apparel, the pamphlet is a response criticizing “Hic Mulier” position on women. Here again, a distinction between nature and culture is underlined as the character of Hic Mulier says to Haec Vir:

> Next, you condemne me of *Vnnaturalnesse*, in forsaking my creation, and contemning custome. How doe I forsake my creation, that doe all the rights and offices due to my Creation? I was created free, born free, and liue free: what lets me then so to spinne out my time, that I may dye free?[54]

30 She then mentions customs gone by like those of the Ancient Romans or customs changing depending on countries. She exposes how the expressions and manifestations of mourning or greeting may change across time and space and defends that the expression of gender is part of a cultural practice as well, which means it is

[54] Anonymous, *Hæc-Vir: Or, the Womanish-Man: Being an Answere to a Late Booke Intituled Hic-Mulier. Exprest in a Briefe Dialogue Betweene Hæc-Vir the Womanish-Man, and Hic-Mulier the Man-Woman*, London, 1620, B2.

arbitrary and ever-changing instead of a fixed and natural datum[55], thus anticipating Judith Butler's observation:

> Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex.[56]

31 Moll therefore appears as the dramatic embodiment of such debates and reflections of the time.

32 Being a dramatic character enables Moll to present gender as a prop allowing her to play numerous roles on stage. She often dresses up and prompts other characters to do so. In Act II, scene 2, Sebastian and she clearly put up a play to fool Sir Alexander. Yet, while using gender as an accessory to be worn and seen on the surface of the body, she does not deny its interior dimension and its links with identity as in Act IV, scene 1, when she dresses up as a musician and says:

> He that can take me for a male musician,
> I cannot choose but make him my instrument
> And play upon him (IV.1.222-224).

33 Furthermore, she most often defines what she is not, here a male musician, but she never specifies who she is, remaining an enigma for most of the audience and for the other characters. However, such propensity to put on a costume and play a role may be a feminine trait that Moll displays. She often claims to be a single girl;

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[55] *Idem*.

[56] Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

numerous single women in early modern England dressed up depending on what they needed in order to avoid the restrictions imposed on them by their sex and marital status.[57] Moll's fluidity and capacity for change may rather once again make her the epitome of a certain kind of women rather than questioning masculinity and femininity, all the more as Moll and her real-life counterpart always claim to be women. Yet, they widen the definition of femininity, by not getting married without being prostitutes, by adopting postures, clothes and accessories that were restrictively masculine. Knowing the importance of drama in terms of cultural representations, Moll offers a different model than what Adrienne Eastwood calls "the shrew or whore at one extreme, the devout, obedient virgin on the other."[58]

34 Yet, such assumption does not seem entirely satisfactory. All the more so as, contrary to Shakespeare's characters like Viola or Portia, Moll does not adopt a more conventional position or identity by the end of the play. She reiterates her will not to get married and she even announces the appearance of her real-life counterpart:

> The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence,
> Shall on this stage give larger recompense;
> Which mirth that you may share in, herself does woo you,
> And craves this sign: your hands to beckon her to you
> (ep. 35-38).

35 Mary Frith did indeed appear on the Fortune stage after a representation of *The Roaring Girl*. This was later held as a charge against her. She offered to expose her genitalia in order to prove

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[57] Adrienne L. Eastwood, "Controversy and the Single Woman in *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Roaring Girl*", *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol. 58, n°2, 2004, p. 11.

[58] *Ibid*., p. 10.

her being female which complicates again the representation of Moll Cutpurse, both real and fictional. For Susan E. Krantz, fictional Moll has power to threaten patriarchal culture but abides by conventions, while Mary Frith contradicts such position by disrupting social values:

> 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 behaviour.[59]

36 However, we may underline that instead of a transition from fictional disruptive behaviour to a heteronormative and cisnormative reality, the play rather offers a more complex return to reality that invites spectators to reflection. According to Jane Baston, the end of the play finally rehabilitates Moll because she wears a feminine wedding dress in Act V, scene 1. I offer disagreement; this is rather a moment in the play when Moll's clothes actually are carnivalesque. She puts on the dress to have Sir Alexander believe that she actually married his son Sebastian while the latter actually is marrying Mary. She uses feminine clothes the way Shakespearean heroines use masculine clothes, that is, to fool other characters, to entertain the audience and to hide her identity rather than to express it. It soon becomes clear that she is not a bride, she is to be compared with Mary who then appears on stage, except Moll does not have a husband, as if she was parodying the traditional wedding that close plays. Furthermore, her identity knows no drastic change or evolution in the course of the play, as

[59] Susan E. Krantz, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Susan Krantz underlines: "Further, the hero Moll undergoes no dramatic change in the play; like Prospero, she choreographs rather than participates in the action."[60] In that, she is not carnivalesque because there is no restoration of an order after her performance, but rather new questions and potentially new visions. She does not embody an upside-down world or theatrical performance, but rather reconciles what first appeared as contradictory identities, making them her own.

Conclusion

37 To conclude, if both characters and critics have difficulty to define Moll, it might be because she is not meant to be defined at all. Instead of presenting gender identity as a fixed essence attributed at birth, she rather explores it as the site for creativity, self-expression, calling to mind several lofty figures like Plato's androgynous, Ovid's Hermphroditus or Elizabeth I while being a very relatable and accessible character, a well-known figure for Londoners and yet an enigma for them all. Moll appears as a queer character on stage, defying gender conventions, norms, and hierarchy, questioning links between clothes, speech, acts and gender. Although she plays with gender as a performance rather than an essence, she is not a post-*Gender Trouble* heroine. Judith Butler's book may be a useful lens to look at her character, but one must not forget that she is a character drawn from a real-life person born in early modern England in a time when gender, though explored through drama, was still conceived as a binary notion. The omnipresence of the number two in *The Roaring Girl* attests a difficulty to go beyond a dual vision of gender. Therefore, her

[60] *Ibid*., p. 8.

character remains “a self-fashioned sexual enigma”[61] which both stimulates reflections in a positive and light atmosphere and contradicts non-fictional literature of the time and of ours presenting the absence of dichotomy in gender as threatening and alarming.[62]

[61] *Idem.*

[62] I wish to thank Elise Angioi and Sophie Chiari for their feedback and valuable advice.

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