

2020

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Recommended Citation

Choate, Victoria. "Queering the Roaring Girl: Gender Ideals and Expectations of Moll." *Merge*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2020, pp. 17-24.

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Victoria Choate

Queering the Roaring Girl: Gender Ideals and Expectations of Moll

Although “queer” and seventeenth-century Jacobean theatre are not usually a combined terminology, *The Roaring Girl*, a Jacobean drama written by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, first published in 1611, lends itself to analysis of its queer components. Moll’s characterization in *The Roaring Girl* is a fascinating look at how seventeenth-century England and the theatre allowed for queerness to occupy the stage. Her interiority and understanding of self through cross-dressing, and bending the binary of gender, translates into a dialogue on gender’s complexities in Renaissance England. Moll should be understood as a character that defies binary systems of gender through dress, attitude, and actions, and exemplifies the space queerness occupied and the response it on the early modern stage.

The word ‘queer’ was first used in approximately 1513 by William Dunbar, Scottish poet, and was used in the contemporary definition of “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” (“Queer,” def. 1a). As a word, queer existed in the time of the Renaissance, but did not carry the same connotation it carries today; today queer regularly means the existence outside of codified systems, and specifically, the binary precedence of gender and sexuality. Although queer was not a word frequently used in the Renaissance, Moll is interpreted by modern critics to be a queer character. More specifically, Moll can be interpreted as a genderqueer character, genderqueer meaning “a person whose gender identity cannot be categorized as solely male or female” (“Genderqueer”). Moll exists outside of the gender binary system by crossdressing and presenting ambiguously in men’s fashion and rebukes traditional female societal roles, such as marriage. As such, Moll occupies a space of queerness outside of the male-female binary system, in the land of queerness.

Crossdressing was not unheard of prior to *The Roaring Girl* -- literature throughout time and history displays crossdressing, especially in the Greco-Roman period. But the Renaissance, seen as a period of expansion in the arts, philosophy, and literature, saw queer behavior. Many famous figures of the Renaissance were accused of homosexuality, and bisexuality was common (but not necessarily accepted). Crossdressing and cross-gender behavior was also reported and documented. A play like *The Roaring Girl* makes a point that crossdressing was known of and enough of a spectacle to be a plot theatrically. Interestingly, crossdressing in literature was predominantly female-to-male in nature and existed in other plays, including *La Monja Alfezez*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Journal of a Voyage in Italy*, which has a lesbian marriage (Steiner 505). Male-to-female crossdressing was significantly less documented; female-to-male crossdressing was more popular to practice, for unknown reasons. Moll practices female-to-male crossdressing, like other plays listed.

Although Philip Stubbs' (1555-1610) work was published approximately thirty years before *The Roaring Girl*, his ideas are worth considering for Puritan ideas of cross-dressing and gender, especially because pamphlets were among the first printed materials and were vital for transmission of information and social commentary (Britannica, "Philip Stubbs," "Pamphlet"). Stubbs was a vigorous Puritan pamphleteer and propagandist during the Renaissance. His pamphlet, *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), his most popular work, consisted of an attack on English habits regarding dress, food, drink, games, and especially sex.

Anatomie of Abuses analyzes fashion and dress of the Renaissance regarding its sinful nature according to Puritan ideals, as Stubbs was a devout Puritan. He is critical of women overall, including usage of makeup and changing hair, noting

If curling, & laying out of their own

naturall heyre weare all (which is impious,
 and at no hand lawfull, notwithstanding, for
 it is the ensigne of Pride, and the stern of
 wantonnes to all that behould it) it were the
 lesse matter, but they are not simply contente
 with their owne haire,* but buy other heyre,
 dying it of what color they list themselues.

He ties back the sinful nature of modification of appearance to pride; women who modify their appearance are not only not lawful, but is sinful and “peruert the straight wayes of the Lord” (Stubbs). He uses words like “bewitched” in reference to women, highlighting the supernatural influence; it is the only answer for the absurdity of women (Stubbs). Stubbs’ notes “neither the Libertines, the Epicures nor yet the vile Atheists euer excéded this people in pride,” noting other groups who are typically associated with sin by Puritans (Stubbs). Stubbs’ position is against bodily modification to heighten femininity and speaks to a larger dialogue about how women should present their femininity.

Although he criticizes women for feminine qualities, including makeup, hair style and color, dresses, headwear, and jewelry, he is severely critical of women dressed in men’s clothing. His disgust in modification to fit molds of femininity is combatted later with his description against masculine femininity, specifically with women wearing men’s clothes --

. . . though this be a kinde
 of attire appropriate onely to man, yet they
 blush not to wear it, and if they could as wel
 chaunge their sex, & put on the kinde of man. . .

I think they would as verely become
 men indéed as now they degenerat from godly
 sober women, in wearing this wanton
 lewd kinde of attire.

Stubbs' recognition of cross-dressing in the text signals that cross-dressing was worrisome for general society as early as the publication of *Anatomie of Abuses* in 1583. He notes that women were not ashamed to be cross-dressed, and even touches on sex-change -- women would be comfortable, and desired, to not only act as man, but to embody man. Stubbs also makes note of Deuteronomy 22:5 in this section, citing it as support that cross-dressing is a sin. Deuteronomy 22:5 states "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto the man... for all that do so, are abomination unto the Lord thy God" (1599 Geneva Bible). Stubbs does not believe these cross-dressing women "may not improperly be called Hermaphroditi, that is, Monsters of bothe kindes, half women, half men" (Stubbs). Although cross-dressers were not seen as both sexes, these women are occupying male gender expectations with clothing, although it is seen as "stinking before the face of God, offensiue to mā, but also painteth out to the whole world, the venereous inclination of their corrupt con|uersation."

Anatomie of Abuses is an excellent primary source for understanding how critical Renaissance society was toward femininity, incorporating cross-dressing women. Stubbs, as a Puritan, was highly judgmental overall of women, for either their overt femininity or masculinity, but does provide insight that cross-dressing women were a phenomenon as early as 1583 when this text was written, and in the Puritan and larger Christian context, were understood as a disgrace to society and God.

Hic Mulier and *Haec-Vir*, both published in 1620, are additional pamphlets released that highlight female cross-dressing. *Hic Mulier* was published anonymously and was an attack on female cross-dressing, denouncing the women. It is worth noting the name of the pamphlet is a combination of the Latin male personal pronoun with the noun for woman (Norton Anthology of English Literature). *Haec-Vir* acts as the response to *Hic Mulier*, also anonymously published. The name combines the Latin female personal pronoun with the noun for man. The existence of both of these texts indicate that into the 1620s after *The Roaring Girl* was published that crossdressing was a hot topic for discourse and showed early feminism in the Renaissance.

It is important to note that cross-dressing was a threat to Renaissance society because clothing was highly gendered. Although the Renaissance was a marked time of changes and supposed enlightenment and rebirth, gender roles were held onto and looked to for stability in gender roles and norms. Appearance, especially clothing, marked whether or not you were a man or woman. Breaking apart this binary system of interpretation of gender threatened the very social fabric that regulated gender expectations -- for women to begin dressing as men could only lead to women taking up the sword and running into battle. This fear of genders acting outside of the social bounds created in the binary led to texts like *Anatomie of Abuses*, *Hic Mulier*, and *Haec-Vir* out of fear of change.

According to Patrick Cheney in "Moll Cutpurse as Hermaphrodite in Dekker & Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*," Moll is of "hermaphroditic nature" which "explains her dual personality... her benign manner is traditionally a feminine trait... and her irascible manner is traditionally a masculine trait" (121). Cheney's argument is continuing the binary -- Moll exists as made up of two distinct halves and represents "a moderator-reuniter and an inciter-exposer... both the land and the sea, a subject and an object of desire" (121). His argument fails to break

apart the binary system in which Moll is contained; this article, published in 1983, enforces gender dynamics in *The Roaring Girl* to a continuing binary system outside of which Moll needs to be evaluated. The nature of the article, focusing on hermaphrodites, limits its reach in an evaluation that cites Plato and other classic figures as an explanation of Moll's character. This argument is dated and lacks an effective argument in gender studies. Instead, Cheney relies on continuous binary references for explanation of Moll's cross-dressing and gender, creating an ineffectual argument. Just as Stubbs noted, cross-dressers, including Moll, should not be evaluated as hermaphrodites.

Critics have moved away from terms including "transvestite" or "hermaphrodite" as queer theory has developed; it has become obvious that these terms are dated and no longer properly identify gender identities. In favor of contemporary labels, what previously was recognized as a transvestite or hermaphrodite have moved into labels of "genderqueer" and "transgender" (Kemp 121). Moll is not a hermaphrodite, even in the Medieval understanding; Moll is never noted to have both male and female sex organs, which is the definition of hermaphrodite since 1398, into the Renaissance and later ("Hermaphrodite," 1a). Therefore, modern labels of hermaphrodite cannot be assigned; Moll's character is not defined as such by any definition, early modern or modern.

Although it is impossible to determine and assign identities to fictionalized characters, and especially historical figures such as Mary Firth upon which Moll was based, "hermaphrodite" should not be the assigned terminology. Genderqueer is the fitting label, emerging from queer theory, for how one interprets Moll in the text; she defies both categories of male and female identities and cannot be contained by one gender identity. It is worth noting when characters reference Moll, they do use female pronouns; she is discussed by other

characters as “the maddest fantastical’st girl” and “mistress” multiple times by Trapdoor (2.1.213, 2.1.355). The other characters understand that Moll is a feminine figure, addressing her as a girl and using she/her/hers pronouns in reference to Moll, and even Moll refers to herself as a “gentlewoman” (2.1.376). Other characters see Moll as female enough to be considered a girl and mistress, and Moll shows an understanding of herself as a woman; she thus occupies a feminine space, and yet is not strictly feminine.

Moll’s crossdressing is the indicative plot point that visually signifies Moll’s queerness to the audience and readers. When Moll enters scenes, the clothing she is adorning is noted in stage directions. They include “Enter Moll like a man” and “Enter Moll in a frieze Jerkin and a black safeguard,” a jerkin being a “man’s close-fitting jacket” and a safeguard being “an outer skirt or petticoat worn by women” (3.1.36, 2.1.181, “Jerkin,” “Safeguard”). This latter entrance is Moll’s first introduction to the stage, and she is wearing both a masculine jacket and a feminine skirt. This costuming exemplifies that Moll is not strictly masculine nor feminine and exists outside of the binary system of gender expression; rather, Moll exists in between within the undefined, gray definitions and understandings of gender. Moll cannot and should not be categorized into gendered understandings as a hermaphrodite or male or female; rather, Moll is ambiguous and queer.

Act II, Scene II is an exploration of Moll’s breeches -- while Tailor asserts “I forgot to take measure on you for your new breeches,” Alexander comments “if the wife go in breches, the man must wear long coats like a fool” (2.2.78-79, 81-82). Breeches are classified as male clothing and Alexander rebukes the masculinity a woman possesses when she wears breeches, making both man and woman a fool. This scene is a pivotal plot point for examination of reactions toward crossdressing -- Alexander’s reaction is symbolic of society’s understanding of

female-to-male crossdressing. Moll, adorning pants, breaks apart the understood gender dynamic that enforces femininity through clothing, and by wearing breeches, she subverts both standards of femininity and masculinity. To defy the physicality of femininity is also to defy marriage standards, as noted by the comment of wife and man.

In conversation between Moll and Trapdoor, he requests her services as a prostitute and makes reference of “the love I bear to your heroic spirit and masculine womanhood” (2.1.363-4). Trapdoor makes an astounding statement that appears paradoxical—womanhood is marked by a blossoming femininity, and to intrude on that womanhood with masculinity is to defy the very nature of womanhood. Yet, Trapdoor recognizes Moll’s womanhood, her feminine essence, is masculine as well, breaking apart the binary understanding of feminine versus masculine. This is an exemplary example of Moll’s queerness; other characters not only recognize her femininity, but how masculinity is intertwined within it.

Moll traverses traditional gender roles not only in the way she is presented physically with crossdressing, but also in her general attitude and actions within society. Moll reports to Sebastian, during his pandering attempt at a marriage request,

. . . I have no humor to marry, I love
to lie a’ both sides a’ th’ bed myself; and again a’ th’ other side,
a wife you know ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too
headstrong to obey . . . (2.2.38-41)

Moll recognizes although she has sexual appeal and operates as a feminine sexual figure, she does not feel femininely fit to operate in the traditional role of wife in marriage. Moll’s crossdressing is not the only factor in which Moll exists queerly; rather, Moll blends lines of femininity and masculinity and defies gender stereotypes for either defined gender. Moll

occupies both sides of the metaphorical marriage bed and lacks obedience that wives are expected to have to their husbands, but she also does not see herself as overtly masculine and occupying the place of the husband. She exists outside of gender binarism of man vs. woman, husband vs. wife, and understands herself to be both parties of a marriage agreement.

Moll's character in *The Roaring Girl* is a complex examination of Renaissance subversion of gender. Although Moll cannot be understood as a hermaphrodite as some scholars would interpret, an examination of character demonstrates queer qualities within Moll. She defies gender expectations in clothing standards and presents outside of both masculine and feminine, subverting the traditional standards of gender expression and acknowledgement through clothing. Her subversion is deeper than the surface level -- Moll understands herself to be a blending of masculine and feminine energy, which is also noted by other characters, especially within the institution of marriage. Overall, Moll's character delves into the early modern mechanisms of breaking apart gender dynamics and boundaries to create a character outside of the binary, defying societal standards of gender.

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