Negotiation of Femininity in *The Roaring Girl*—Moll’s Cross-dressing, Mobility, and Marriage Choice

Yang YANG
Fudan University

The Roaring Girl is a Jacobean comedy co-written by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker. In this play, they capitalized on the cultural tensions concerning cross-dressing, especially woman in man’s clothing; their use of Moll Cutpurse in a prominent role encourages the audience and readers to question the patriarchal ideals of femininity. The characterization of Moll is unique, because it breaks the stereotypical images of female characters in Renaissance drama. Moll is neither a quiet maid nor a scolding shrew, nor a wanton whore. Instead, she is assertive, sympathetic, and independent. Such a fresh image is of great importance in the social construction of femininity. This essay analyzes the uniqueness of Moll from three aspects: her cross-dressing, her mobility, and her attitude towards marriage. It argues that this play participates in the negotiation of femininity through questioning the patriarchal ideals of women expressed in a number of conduct books and tracts.

The patriarchal ideals are a kind of social and cultural construction which prescribes that good women should be “chaste, silent and obedient”. Although these ideals had an impact on contemporary men and women through the dispersion of religious, legal, and popular discourses, they were occasionally challenged by ideas that questioned such a prescription. Along with the ideals of femininity, misogyny
circulated in various discourses. The medical discourse emphasized women's inferiority to men; the religious discourse propagated the husbands' authority over wives; the legal discourse deprived women of their civil rights and property rights; and the popular discourse depicted many negative stereotypes for women. In *The Roaring Girl*, such misogyny can be detected; what's more important, Moll's words and actions give an incisive counter-attack to the brazen misogyny.

Cross-dressing was regarded as a transgression of social decorum and a challenge to man's right. No doubt, the woman who don male attire was labeled as an eccentric, even an immoral woman. Social opinion has a strong impact on people's behaviors. As pointed out by Jean Howard, "Given Biblical prohibitions against the practice [crossing-dressing] and their frequent repetition from the pulpit and in the prescriptive literature of the period, one would guess that the number of people who dared walk the streets of London in the clothes of the other sex was limited." (1988: 418) Nonetheless, there were some women dressed in such a way. The historical figure Mary Frith was one of the most famous among them.

*The Roaring Girl*, published in 1611, is a drama performed at the height of a gender controversy about Mary Frith. As a transvestite, she occasionally found herself in trouble with the law. This was evidenced by court records. On 27 January 1612, she was brought before the Consistory Court of London where she "voluntarily confessed that she had long frequented all or most of the disorderly and licentious places in this city, as namely she hath usually in the habit of a man resorted to alehouses, taverns, tobacco shops, and also to the playhouses [...] at the Fortune, in man's apparel, and in her boots and with a sword by her side" (qtd. Panek, ed. 147).

Frith donned male apparel and frequented places that were out of bounds to most women. For women in early modern England, many moral and conduct books have suggested that women's activities be confined within the household. A good wife is one who can fulfill her domestic duties. In *A Godly Form of Household Government*, Robert Cleaver advised the wives to "keep herself at home for the good government of her family, and not to stay abroad without just cause" (qtd. Davis 195). In many Renaissance plays, the female characters, especially the wives, were usually confined in the household, such as Shakespeare's Desdemona in *Othello*, Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Thomas Heywood's Anne Frankford in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, to name just a few. However, almost all the female characters have some freedom of mobility in *The Roaring Girl*. Mary Fitzallard could seek her lover
Sebastian in disguise; the merchants’ wives can sell commodities in the shops; Moll goes through London with great freedom. Dressed as a woman she enters the merchants’ shops; dressed as a man she fights with Laxton; and at the end of the play she moves easily among the rogues of the London underworld. Moll’s mobility is a prominent feature of this “man-woman”. It serves as an emblem of her independence and autonomy, as well as an indication of her “transgression”. In short, not immured with a domestic role within the house, she retains her freedom to move about.

In The Roaring Girl[2], Moll goes to a sempster’s shop to buy “a good shag ruff” (2.1.208). Her appearance arouses the gallants’ excitement. Goshawk describes her: “‘Tis the maddest, fantastical’st girl! I never knew so much flesh and so much nimbleness put together.” (2.1.192–93) Laxton responds with a similar erotic implication: “She slips from one company to another like a fat eel between a Dutchman’s fingers.” (2.1.194–95) Both “nimbleness” and “like a fat eel” indicate that Moll is a mobile figure who can enjoy her freedom of passing from one place to another. This kind of mobility subverts the ideals of docile and submissive femininity imposed on women by male-dominated society. Moll’s mobility enables her to contact with people from various walks of life, from the gentry to the middling sort and the low-life rogues. In contact with them, Moll, endowed with spirit and bravery, insists on her honesty and critiques the injustice towards women. She is a unique, morally superior character. As mentioned in the prologue: “None of these roaring girls is ours; she [Moll] flies/With wings more lofty” (Prologue 25–26). Moll serves as a spokesperson for women’s rights and acts as an embodiment of female independence.

However, Moll is initially treated as the “Other”. Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought” (16). In the play, Moll is condemned by Sir Alexander Wengrave for her cross-dressing and unconfined mobility. He calls her “a scurvy woman”, “a varlet”, and “a naughty pack”. (1.2.126–139) All these terms express his bitterness and repulsion to Moll. In his eyes, Moll’s deviancy in dress and behavior is something threatening and abnormal, against social norms. Therefore, she falls into the category of the “Other”, who is attacked by misogyny and prejudice. Sir Alexander believes that Moll’s cross-dressing is a sign of her ambiguous nature: “‘Tis woman more than man, / Man more than woman, [...] The sun gives her two shadows to one shape.” (1.2.131–33) He depreciates her as “[a] creature [...] nature has brought forth/ To mock the
sex of woman” (1. 2. 128 – 29), a wench “strays so from her kind, / Nature repents she made her” (1. 2. 214 – 15). It was believed that cross-dressing disrupts the distinctions that distinguish women from men. In the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, some tracts gave diatribes against cross-dressing. Philip Stubbes’ *The Anatomy of Abuses* critiques cross-dressed women in a dialogue between Philoponus and Spudeus:

PHILOPONUS: The women also there have doublets and jerkins, as men have here, buttoned up to the breast, [...] And although this be a kind of attire proper only to man, yet they blush not to wear it: and if they could well change their sex, and put on the kind of man, as they can wear apparel assigned only to man, I think they would as verily become men indeed, as now they degenerate from godly sober women in wearing this wanton lewd kind of attire, proper only to man. It is written in the 22 of Deuteronomy, that what man so ever wearth woman’s apparel is accursed, and what woman wearth man’s apparel is accursed also. Now whether they be within the compass of that curse, let they themselves judge. Our apparel was given as a sign distinctive, to discern betwixt sex and sex, and therefore one to wear the apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the verity of his own kind. Wherefore these women may not improperly be called Hermaphroditii, that is monsters of both kinds, half women, half men. Who if they were natural women, and honest matrons, would blush to go in such wanton and lewd attire, that is incident only to men.

SPUDEUS: I never read nor heard of any people, except drunken with Circe’s cups, or poisoned with the exorcism of Medea, that famous and renowned sorceress, that ever would wear such kind of attire, as is not only stinking before the face of God, and offensive to man, but also such as painteth out to the whole world the dissoluteness of their corrupt conversation. [3]

Both Circe and Medea are mythological figures in the Greek mythology, who are sorceresses possessing magical power. What’s more, they are condemned as threatening and destructive. According to the fictional character Spudeus, women wearing man’s attire must have been enchanted by Circe and Medea’s witchcraft. Those women are not only blasphemous to God, but also offensive to men. Therefore, cross-dressing is criticized as transgression of divine law and social custom.

Sir Alexander compares Moll as “a mermaid/ Has tolled my son to shipwrecks” (1. 2. 215 – 16). Like Desdemona’s father Brabantio, he also doubts whether his son was bewitched by some magic. He tries his best to persuade his son from
marrying Moll (Pretending to marry Moll is a strategy of Sebastian to deceive his father), imploring him: “Who has bewitched thee, son? What devil or drug / Hath wrought upon the weakness of thy blood / And betrayed all her hopes to ruinous folly? / Oh, wake from drowsy and enchanted shame, / Wherein thy soul sits with golden dream, / Flattered and poisoned!” (2. 2. 122–27)

Here Moll is demonized as a witch who allures men to destruction. Furthermore, she is scandalized as a whore. It is well-known that both whore and witch are negative stereotypes in misogynistic discourses. “Whore” is a derogatory term for a loose and wanton woman. Moll has autonomy to move in London and contact with people from different walks of life. Such kind of freedom were considered immodest and disruptive. According to the prescriptive literature, a good woman should stay at home to gain and keep a good reputation. Edmund Tilney wrote in The Flower of Friendship: “The chiefest way for a woman to preserve and mainaine this good fame, is to be resident in hir owne house.” (136) He continues, “To be briefe, not onely in chastity of bodie, but in honestie of behaviour, and talke, doth the womans honour, and good name consist, and is also mainteyned.” (137) From Tilney's standard, Moll is far from being a woman with a good reputation. In the play, both her cross-dressing and her mobility lead to scandal against her.

“But she is loose in nothing but in mirth.” (2. 2. 181) This is Sebastian’s comment on Moll. Indeed, Moll is depicted as an honest woman. She justifies her merry words and behaviors by saying: “Had Mirth no kindred in the world but Lust?” (3. 1. 105) Although she smokes tobacco, goes to tavern, watches play in the theater, fights against the lewd gallant with a sword, plays a viol in an erotic way, and tells bawdy jokes, she is bodily and morally chaste. She claims: “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 / As long as I have time in’t.” (3. 1. 136–39) On the one hand, Moll critiques the depravity of women who are willing to be seduced. “I am of that certain belief there are more queans in this town of their own making than of any man’s provoking, Where lies the slackness then? Many a poor soul would down, and there’s nobody will push’em.” (2. 1. 305–309) On the other hand, she makes a vehement denunciation of men’s wanton seduction of women and the unfair economic and social conditions. Laxton and Goshawk are such lewd and cowardly seducers. Laxton seduces Mrs. Gallipot to gain money, while Goshawk intends to cheat Mrs. Openwork into a love affair. At last, both of them suffer humiliation as a result of their lewdness and weakness. As mentioned by the two
matrons, these “whisking gallants” are mere “shallow things”, and “idle simple things” (4. 2. 46 – 49). Laxton fantasizes about having sex with Moll. In his opinion, Moll is a wench who “has the spirit of four great parishes, and a voice that will drown all the city!” (2. 1. 176 – 77) He eroticises Moll’s sexuality: “Such a Moll were a marrowbone before an Italian; he would cry ‘bona-roba’ till his ribs were nothing but bone.” (2. 1. 181 – 83) As a lewd and shallow misogynist, he believes money can buy her; “Where the walls are flesh and blood, I’ll ever pierce through with a golden auger.” (2. 1. 184 – 85) What surprises him is Moll’s denunciation of and fight against him in their so-called “assignation”. As mentioned by Jonathan Dollimore, Moll’s thrashing of Laxton is “partly in revenge for his untypical masculine blend of misogyny and promiscuity” (261). What’s more, in her condemnation, “Moll also offers the truly exceptional view of prostitution as a sexual exploitation rooted in economic exploitation and patriarchal power” (Dollimore 260).

At first, Moll severely censures men’s promiscuity and misogyny:

Thou’rt one of those
That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore.
If she but cast a liberal eye upon thee,
Turn back her head, she’s thine; or, amongst company,
By chance drink first to thee, then she’s quite gone,
There’s no means to help her; nay, for a need,
Wilt unto thy credulous fellow lechers
That thou’rt more in favor with a lady
At first sight than her monkey all her lifetime.
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. 72 – 84)

Moll criticizes the men who allow their fancy to run wild. Their wantonness and misogynistic view towards women make them believe “each woman thy fond flexible whore”. Thus, women’s “good thoughts” are paid back with slander of “whoredom”. Laxton’s attitude and behavior towards women is not untypical of many gallants depicted in the Renaissance drama. Another well-known example is Falstaff of Shakespeare’s The Merry Wives of Windsor. As a declining Knight, Falstaff seduces
Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Page for money. When he sends his servants to give love letters to the two matrons respectively, he indulges in fantasy: "I spy entertainment in her; she discourses, she carves, she gives the leer of invitation. I can construe the action of her familiar style, and the hardest voice of her behaviour—to be Englished rightly—is: 'I am Sir John Falstaff's'.” (1. 3. 41 - 45) His servant Pistol gives a witty and satirical reply: "He hath studied her well, and translated her will—out of honesty into English." (1. 3. 46 - 47) Furthermore, Falstaff is narcissistic enough to imagine that Mrs. Page shows favor to him: "who even now gave me good eyes too, examined my parts with most judicious oeillades. Sometimes the beam of her view gilded my foot, sometimes my portly belly [...] O, she did so course o'er my exteriors, with such greedy intention, that appetite of her eye did seem to scorch me up like a burning glass.” (1. 3. 56 - 64) Indeed, neither Mrs. Ford nor Mrs. Page behave frivolously in the face of the lusty knight. As a punishment of his wantonness and fantasy, Falstaff is revenged till “the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease” (2. 1. 59 - 60). Now, let’s come back to Moll’s denunciation of Laxton again. After condemning his promiscuity, she continues to critique the social conditions that force some poor women to prostitute themselves:

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;
Those are the lecher's food, his prey, he watches
For quarreling wedlocks and poor shifting sisters,
'Tis the best fish he takes: but why, good fisherman,
Am I thought meat for you, that never yet
Had angling rod cast towards me? (3. 1. 92 - 103)

While being indignant of the social degradation, she expresses great sympathy to the unfortunate women.

To some extent, Moll acts as a social reformer, who pursues justice with no turning back. This can be illustrated from her fight against Laxton for his wantonness and misogyny, her help to Sebastian and Mary for their honest and loyal love, as well
as her protection of the gentlemen from being blackmailed by the rogues. Moll's honesty and uprightness are conspicuous. Her good qualities enable her to defeat the misogynistic prejudice, and empower her from men's sexual exploitation. In some sense, Moll's cross-dressing and mobility strengthen her power to fight against prejudice and injustice.

Besides her cross-dressing and mobility, another uniqueness concerning Moll is her attitude towards marriage. In Renaissance England, marriage is an institution of great importance, which helps to maintain family and social stability. Women were usually distinguished by their marital status. That is, maid, wife, and widow. After the Reformation, the status of marriage had been exalted over celibacy, and holy matrimony was advocated. Even though in real life not all the women achieved the marital state, marriage was still seen as an ideal state for men and women alike. This may be reflected by dramatic works. In many Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies, Shakespeare's romantic comedies in particular, marriage serves as the happy ending for plays. Quite a few heroines effort to pursue love and marriage, such as Shakespeare's Portia, Viola, Rosalind, Miranda, Maria, etc. The Roaring Girl also ends with a wedding between Sebastian and Mary Fitzallard. Their wedding ceremony symbolizes a reconciliation between the old and young generation, as well as a social acceptance of Moll. Nonetheless, Moll displays a unique attitude towards marriage. Although she engineers in helping Sebastian and Mary to fulfill their love in marriage, she herself is longing for a single and free life. When Sebastian pretends to woo Moll, she gives a definite refusal:

I have no humor to marry, I love to lie o'both sides o'both bed myself, and again o'both other side; a wife you know ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll ne'er go about it. [...] I have the head now of myself, and I am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i'th'place. (2. 2. 37–45, italicized for emphasis)

In the above excerpt, "I" is used seven times while "myself" is employed twice. The two words indicate Moll's assertiveness and autonomy. As an embodiment of female independence, she is quite clear of what kind of life she desires. The reasons for her denial of marriage can be analyzed as follows: Firstly, as a single woman, she can do whatever she likes without interruption and regulation from the husband. This can be illustrated both by her freedom to lie on either side of the bed and by her
freedom to move about. Secondly, she is too independent and assertive to obey the husband. "I fear me I am too headstrong to obey" is a direct critique of wife's subjection to her husband. Thirdly, she possesses the intelligence and ability to support herself without depending on others. It is an affirmation of self-independence, as well as a negation of the dualism that propagating male superiority and female inferiority. Her satirical commentary on marriage—"marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i'th'place"—severely attacks the hierarchical relationship within marriage. The word "head" not only refers to woman's maidenhead, but also suggests her autonomy; "a worse i'th'place" means the husband's authority within the household.

Husbands' authority was strengthened in England by both Protestantism and humanist thoughts before and after the Reformation. Despite their elevation of the status of marriage, husband's authority and wife's submission were emphasized and advocated by homilies and tracts. For example, a potent voice in _The Flower of Friendship_ claims that; "For indeede both divine, and humaine lawes, in our religion giveth the man absolute authoritie, over the woman in all places." (Tilney 134) Robert Cleaver's _A Godly Form of Household Government_ writes: "The wife, her duty is in all reverence and humility to submit and subject herself to her husband in all such duties as properly belong to marriage [ ... ] to obey his commandments in all things which he may command by the authority of a husband." (Davis 195) In _Of Domestical Duties_, William Gouge compares the household with the state, and the husband with the king. He wrote: "he [ the husband] is the highest in the family, and has authority over all, and the charge of all is committed to his charge; he is as king in his own home." (qtd. Outhwaite 63) Along with Leaver's _A Godly Form of Household Government_, and _Of Domestical Duties_ by William Gouge, William Whately's _A Bride-Bush_ is the most famous of the seventeenth-century conduct books. Like the other two manuals, it reveals a particularly strict view of the importance of patriarchal power in the running of family. Whately prescribes:

Whosoever, therefore, doth desire or purpose to be a good wife or to live comfortably, let her set down this conclusion within her soul: Mine husband is my superior, my better. He hath authority and rule over me. Nature hath given it him, having framed our body to tenderness, men's more to hardness. God hath given it him, saying to our first mother Eve, "Thy desire shall he subject to your husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3. 16). His will I see to he made by God the tie and tether not of mine actions alone, but of my desires and wishes also. I will not
strive against God and nature. Though my sin have made my place tedious, yet I will
sure confess and hold the truth; mine husband is my superior, my better. (Davis
258)

All these tracts display the patriarchal nature of the household. That is, wives must
be obedient and submissive to their husbands. Moll opposes marriage because it
means loss of control and freedom for women. Therefore, Moll's voice criticizes the
injustice and inequality of marital relationship. Moll denies marriage because she is
not satisfied with the unequal relationship between husband and wife.

Marriage was regarded as the only legitimate way to release one's sexual desire.
Fornication and adultery were vehemently condemned as illicit sexual activities.
Being a chaste woman, Moll refuses to have sex with the gallants. "Yet Moll never
denies her sexuality." (Howard, 1992: 142) In the play, she is a woman full of
vigor and vitality. She has her own way to achieve her erotic desire. Jean Howard
argues that Moll's playing with the viol is an indication of her autoeroticism (1992:
142-43). Through playing this musical instrument, Moll falls into a dream-like
state. In this way, she finds an outlet to release her desire, both physically and
emotionally. One more thing should be noted; marriage does not necessarily ensure
the satisfaction of sexual desire. For example, Mrs. Gallipot scolds her husband as
"cookish" "apron husband" who doesn't know "how to handle a woman in her kind"
(3. 2. 26-33). She complains to her husband that "[y]our love is all words;
give me deeds" (3. 2. 24). These words are full of sexual innuendo, from which
we know Mrs. Gallipot's marital life is not satisfactory in terms of sex. In some
sense, this is an indirect attack on marriage. To sum up, Moll's choice of not
marrying provides an alternative to the traditional heterosexual marriage. Although it
is not suitable for everyone, it is an acceptable lifestyle for someone.

Moll's uniqueness makes her different from most female characters in the English
Renaissance drama. This fresh image might stimulate the audience and readers to re-
evaluate the ideals of femininity. Her cross-dressing transgresses social norm yet does
no harm to others; her mobility enables her to gain more insights into society; her
attitudes towards marriage provides an alternative for the women who aspires
independence and self-achievement. All these challenge and even subvert the ideals
of femininity prescribed by numerous conduct books and tracts. Meanwhile, Moll
gives a vigorous counter-attack against the misogynistic views. Along with Moll, some
conspicuous female characters appeared on the stage. Perhaps this is no coincidence.
Moll in *The Roaring Girl* (1611) is a woman who has “no humor to marry”; Maria in *The Woman’s Prize* (1611) is a newly-wedded bride who manages to “have my own will” within marriage; and the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613–1614) is a young widow who is eager to remarry in spite of her brothers’ strong opposition. All the three plays negotiate the question of women in contemporary England. Despite the situations faced by the three female characters are quite different, they all represent something fresh and original. They all possess the ability of powerful and eloquent speech; and then make use of their vision and action to complement their verbal power. Antonio’s praise of *The Duchess of Malfi* can be applied to all the three female characters: “She stains the time past, lights the time to come.”

**Notes:**

[1] For the idea of social construction of gender and sexual politics, see Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*; Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, esp. pp. 23–58.

[2] All citations from the play are taken from *The Roaring Girl*. A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Jennifer Panek. New York and London; W. W. Norton and Company, 2011.

[3] The excerpt is quoted from *The Roaring Girl*. A Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Jennifer Panek. New York and London; W. W. Norton and Company, 2011, pp. 118–19. *The Anatomy of Abuses, STC 23379* is accessible through Early English Books Online. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized by the Norton edition.

[4] Quotations of this play are from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series, ed. Giorgio Melchiori. Surrey: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 2000, p. 148.

[5] Edmund Tilney’s *The Flower of Friendship* (*STC 24076. 3*) is accessible through Early English Books Online.

[6] Robert Leaver’s *A Godly Form of Household Government* (*STC 5383*), William Gouge’s *Of Domestical Duties* (*STC 12119*), and William Whately’s *A Bride-Bush* (*STC 25297*) are accessible through Early English Books Online.

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Yang Yang, Ph. D. candidate in English Literature at School of Foreign Languages, Fudan University, and lecturer at School of Foreign Languages, Henan Polytechnic University. Her research interest is English Renaissance drama.