

Female Crossdressing:

Unhistorical Queerness within *The Roaring Girl*

Ozge Canbul

1. Introduction and Background

The gender-biased heteronormative social anxiety within the Renaissance culture requires an *other*, a queer other, to fully legitimize women's hierarchal structure and subordination. The external misrepresentation and crossdressing of the character Moll Cutpurse, featured within Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's play *The Roaring Girl*, engages with this anxiety.

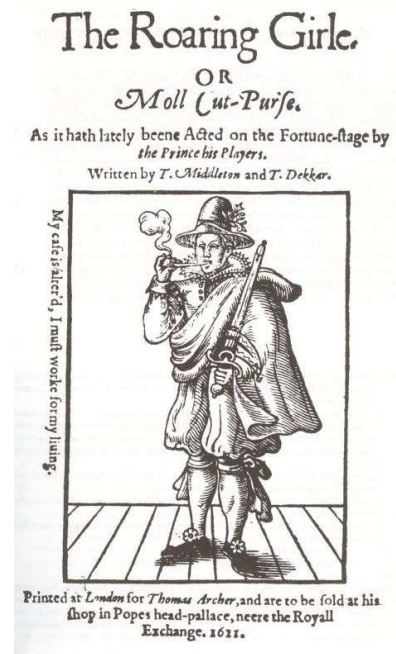
The ambiguities and queer implications surrounding her sexuality and gender-bias-resistant identity call for an anachronistic queer reading. Thus, the term *lipstick lesbian* will be applied in a slightly *altered* fashion befitting Moll herself, and it will function as a bridge between historical and unhistorical approaches. Although the term acquired different connotations over the years, *lipstick lesbian*, which dates back to the early 1980s, refers to a homosexual female who retains gender-biased feminine appearances.¹ It is similar to the archetype *femme lesbian* on the spectrum of self-presentation since they both support a normative feminine appearance, even though the lipstick lesbian may use her feminine apparel to conceal her sexual identity under certain circumstances. Moll's lipstick lesbian status is amplified because of multi-layer discrepancies between internal and external self; thus, both the term and her queer self throughout the play becomes inverted.

2. Analysis

The queerness provided by Moll's presence and actions operates as a mirror for the dynamics of gender struggle between the normative and unconventional female characters. As the play progresses, Moll's queer identity and her acts of crossdressing and masculine display evolve from being cases of misrepresentation and misidentification into apparatuses which she utilizes to gain her own foothold within the gender-biased social dynamics. The epigraph from the title page of *The Roaring Girl's* original, 1611 edition features a depiction of Moll Cutpurse in men's clothing and smoking a pipe alongside the following phrase: "My case is alter'd, I must worke for my living" (Dekker and Middleton 1). It is quite intriguing that such a line adorns the title page as it has no exact corresponding line within the play. Whether it was the result of an authorial agency or publisher's choice, adopting this line and the depiction as the frontispiece of the play create a build-up for the upcoming oddness or *queerness* and sets up the stage for the questioning of typical aspects of a comedy with a promise of heteronormative reproductive future at the end.

3. Conclusion

Queerness within the play operates on various interchangeable layers and leads the way to her acceptance, as long as she accepts her role as the queer female who is not part of the predetermined heteronormative gender-biased social categories. Her queerness is amplified because of multi-layer discrepancies between internal and external self; thus, both the term and her queer self throughout the play becomes inverted. The resolution only comes when Moll is fully integrated both internally and externally into the society, as an honest woman in both male and female clothing. In the end, what is left for Moll and possibly for all the queers is to adopt, adapt, and utilize the queer identity and push through the restrictions caused by the heteronormativity and find a place of belonging and acceptance.



¹ Other meanings including, but no limited to, "conventionally attractive and sexually insatiable women who desire one another but only insofar as their desire is a performance for male onlookers or a precursor to sex with men" - Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, Volume 1. (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 492.

Bibliography

- Bly, Mary. *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Butler, Judith. "Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Policies." *AIBR, Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2009, pp. 321e–36e. EBSCO, doi:10.11156/aibr.040305.
- Dekker, Thomas, and Thomas Middleton. *The Roaring Girl*. Edited by Elizabeth Cook, New Mermaids, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997.
- DiGangi, Mario. *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
- Forman, Valerie. "Marked Angels: Counterfeits, Commodities, and The Roaring Girl." *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 4-Part2, 2001, pp. 1531–60. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/1262161.
- Menon, Madhavi. "Love's Labour's Lost: The L Words." *Shakespeareer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by Madhavi Menon, Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 187–94.
- O'Brien, Jodi. *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*. 1st ed., vol. 1, SAGE Publications, 2009.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. Duke University Press, 1993.