

A New Role for Women in *The Roaring Girl*

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In Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, Moll is used to represent the equalization of genders. Her clothing and (nonliteral) genitalia are split between a man and woman. Inside Moll's body, men and woman are equalized. This new equilibrium between genders is rejected by the older generation yet accepted by the younger. Sebastian and Mary are amongst the younger generation who accept Moll's new ideals of equality. Sir Alexander and Mistress Openwork are of the older generation and look upon Moll with disgust and reject the ideals of gender equality. Though Moll's physical form is described as unnatural and undesirable, her character has the purest morals. Moll's split body is used to outline a new social code for both men and women that demands high morality and respect.

Moll is presented as a blend of male and female both internally and externally. Secondary characters in the play question her gender. For example, Mistress Gallipot relays that “some will not stick to say she's a man, and some/both man and woman” (III. 189-90). This statement implies that Moll is figuratively hermaphroditic in that she contains both male and female genitalia. Though Moll is female, her metaphorically spliced genitals imply that her gender is hard to determine. Similarly, Sir Alexander expresses that Moll “Tis woman more than man,/Man more than woman, and (which to none can hap)/The sun gives her two shadows to one shape;” (II. 130-33). Within her body Moll is split, as revealed by her shadows, between a man and a woman. Sir Alexander explains that Moll's inner self encompasses both man and woman equally, her body does not favor of one gender over the other. Moll's undefined gender acts as an equalizer of men and women, men are no longer above women in status. They are found, by means of Moll, within the same shell. Moll's body also contains a figurative set of both gender's sexual organs. Her hermaphroditic state is unnatural and Sir Alexander reveals his distaste for her by labeling her a fiend due to her split genitals; he does not want his son to “marry a monster/with two trinkets” (IV. 71-2). Like Sir Alexander, many of the characters in the play

find the mixing and equalization of male and female within Moll grotesque. Within her body is a new idea that men are equal to women. This new structure of equality receives reactions of distaste from the citizens in the play.

Moll is used as a figure of equality of the sexes and this new social idea frightens many of the citizens. She is “a creature/So strange in quality, a whole city takes/Note of her name and person” (II. 96-7). The concepts of male and female equality that her body presents is a new idea in society. The citizens have never seen a creature like her. Some characters see Moll's hybrid form as a crime against nature. Sir Alexander expresses that Moll “strays so far from her kind,/Nature repents she made her” (II. 213-15). Moll is a deviation from her naturally born state, she was originally a female yet crosses over to the male gender as well. Externally, Moll's male qualities are represented by the clothing she wears. She is dressed in a “frieze jerkin and a black safeguard” (III. 243) which is a mix of both male and female clothing. Even nature herself regrets creating something as wretched as the gender split Moll, a figure of female and male equality. One might think that if Moll were a crime against nature that she herself might engage in unlawful or immoral acts. However, the play does not portray Moll as a despicable thief or whore. Instead, her moral values are presented as strong and virtuous, she is able to remain pure within a society “where vice does so excel” (II. 63). If she has strayed so far from her kind, then the moral values of those who are purely feminine or masculine are unsuitable and deplorable. Moll is able to transcend the corrupted social standards of both male and females, making her hybrid form the ideal model for any citizen.

Moll is rejected by the elderly and purely masculine or feminine characters. Many of the knights and shop keepers express distaste for her transgender form. Sir Alexander thinks of her as “a naughty pack” (II. 137) and Mistress Openwork refuses to sell Moll anything in her shop. Not surprisingly, it is those who are either masculine or feminine and morally tainted who reject Moll. As an elderly and masculine character, Sir Alexander is presented as morally flawed. He is greedy and

gaudy, he flaunts his furniture in front company to prove the vastness of his wealth (II. 46). Also, Sebastian's request to wed Mary is declined because Sir Alexander deems her dowry too small, when in reality it is quite large. Sir Alexander's morals are impure, he is too concerned with wealth and his image. Mistress Openwork is, like Sir Alexander, morally flawed. Laxton described how Mistress Openwork "loves darkness well! She puts out a/candle with the best tricks of any drugster's wife" (III. 116-17). Laxton compares her to a low-life's wife because she attempts to have an affair with him. The completion of this act will violate the sanctity of her marriage but rather than attempt to remain pure she even pays Laxton "for want of opportunity thou know'st" (III. 76), this opportunity being sexual intercourse with him. Both Sir Alexander and Mistress Openwork are morally corrupt and they are the ones who reject Moll's form of equality and pure morality the most. Both these characters can be viewed as traditional and outdated because they are from a older generation and "set their dial by a rusty clock" (IV. 100). The church, which is also traditional, rejects Moll's hybridism as well:

"No priest will marry her ... for a woman,

Whiles that shape's on, and it was never known,

Two men were married and conjoined in one,

Your son hath made some shift to love another" (III. 106-9).

Tradition institutions will not deal with Moll's intermingled form. Her shape, which depicts equality, as never been witnessed before. The traditional are there by intimidated by her form and misunderstand it. Her exterior does not represent a single gender, it is an equal mix of both genders. Therefore, though the church views her body as masculine, a union between her and another man would not be the union of a man and a man, but instead a union of equals. Moll's body seeks to convey the melding of man and woman into one equal relationship. In marriage, her status should not be lower but brought up to match that of her partner and then conjoined in one. The son, Sebastian, has embraced this equalizing of status

and this appalls those who are elderly and traditional. Though Moll's hybrid form is rejected by the older and more traditional generation, her ideals of equality are appealing to and is accepted by the younger generation.

Sir Alexander says that Moll is “a mermaid/[That has] tolled my son to shipwreck” (II, 213-15, 238). Moll is compared to a vile temptress. Sir Alexander fears that Moll's equalization of male and female might appear appealing to some citizens, tempting them to change their ways. This concerns many of the characters and in defense they label her as a monstrous figure. Despite their efforts, Moll's portrayal of equality does not go unnoticed by the younger generation. Mary Fitzallard is dressed like a page, a young boy, and during this time she shares an intimate moment with her lover, Sebastian. Mary and Sebastian kiss and during this moment they are both male in appearance. Moll comments on the union of equals, she feels that it is strange to see “one man to kiss another” (VIII. 46). Sebastian accepts Mary in this new form, expressing that “a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet” (VIII. 48). Sebastian expresses that Mary's lips are just as sweet when her form, and thereby her status, is equal to his. He is not repelled by this new hybrid woman. Like Moll, Mary has taken on a male appearance yet remains female thereby equalizing herself with males. It was Moll's tailor which created Mary's male outfit, molding her into a second image of male and female equalization. Sebastian knows that the older generation does wax at the concept of a union of equals, but the younger generation accepts this new form of gender equilibrium. Sebastian says that “every kiss [Mary gives him] now/In this strange form, is worth a pair of two” (VII. 56-7).

The opposing ideas found between the young and the old are represent by a disagreement between Sir Alexander and Sebastian. Sebastian expresses the views of the younger generation and Sir Alexander reinforces the ideals of the old. Both contenders step forward and Sebastian begins by stating that he loves Moll and that his father's ideals are outdated. Moll's hybrid form, which serves to equalize male and female is, though accepted by Sebastian, rejected by the aged knight. Sir Alexander

is furious to find his son conforming to the ideals which Moll represents. He states in rage that he has not “brought up/[his] son to marry a Dutch slop, and a French doublet, a codpiece/daughter” (IV. 85-7). Sir Alexander resorts to insulting Moll's form, comparing it with other negative citizens, in order to present it as unappealing to Sebastian. This reflects Sir Alexander's concern for appearances, he hopes that, like himself, Sebastian will not want to be seen with someone fitting a vile description. Despite his efforts, Sebastian is not swayed, he informs his father that even though “her apparel somewhat shames her birth,... she is loose in nothing but in mirth” (V. 172-3). Though Moll is not as exuberant as other woman, she is not lacking in correct, pure morals. Since he is not concerned with external appearance, Sebastian uses Moll's strong morality to justify her hermaphroditic state. However, Sir Alexander does not change his opinion on the matter, he reiterates his concerns about the family's image to attempt to persuade his son once more. Sir Alexander says that there are “more whores of [Moll's] name, then of any ten other” (IV. 146) hoping to make Sebastian realize that Moll is a name which is almost predestined to be morally impure. But Sebastian defends her again, he rebuts: “What's that to her? Let those blush for themselves/Can any guilt in others condemn her?” (IV. 149-50). Sebastian is not corrupted by the same moral flaws as his father. The family morals are more important than the family's image and since the Moll which he defends is not a whore he can not see the logic behind Sir Alexander's argument. Their verbal battle continues in a similar fashion of argument and rebuttal until Sir Alexander leaves. The disagreement between the younger generation and older is at a stalemate.

Just as tradition rejects Moll, she renounces the traditional. A wife is expected to take a submissive role within the confines of marriage but Moll rejects this submissive state. She wants equality in a marriage and does not agree with a male headed household. Moll's transgender form once again demands equality:

“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 me I am too headstrong to obey,
 therefore I'll ne'er go about it ... I have the head now of myself, and am
 man enough for a woman: marriage is but a chopping and changing,
 where a maiden loses one head" (III, 34-42, 250).

Moll does not wish to be obedient. She challenges the social conventions of a submissive wife by claiming this tranquilized state is undesirable to women who seek equality. The leveling of man and woman presents itself as sides of a bed. Moll wishes to be on both sides, implying that she wants to be equal with her partner. Like her equal embodiment of masculine and feminine, Moll seeks to equalize a husband and wife in their marital bed. Unwilling to be submissive, Moll claims to be too "headstrong" to obey the command of a male. She has strength enough on her own and is both man enough for herself and for another woman. This union of either man and woman or woman and woman suggests a union of equal status despite gender. Whether a man weds a woman or a man, their statuses within their relationship should remain the same, equal to that of their partner. Moll seems to suggest that were she to marry a man or a woman, her role would remain the same. Moll does not want marriage to be an exchange of one thing for another, her independence for submission. The union of man and woman should, instead, be one which equalizes status and dominance.

Moll's encounter with Laxton reveals her superior morals. While Mistress Openwork participates in the stereotype, Moll disagrees with the common belief that most women are whores and can be easily bought. When Laxton first meets Moll he assumes that she is morally "loose" and wishes to engage in sexual activity with her (III. 255-56). Laxton speaks of women as easily persuaded into whoring and that "money is that aquafortis that eats into many a maidenhead" (III. 176-77). Though secretly despising him, Moll agrees to meet with Laxton in order to correct his misconceptions

regarding her morality. When Laxton and Moll meet, Moll begins an onslaught on Laxton's incorrect perceptions. Their fight is physical and moral, Moll while fighting him physically with a sword is also fighting his impure morality. She scolds him for he “thinks each woman [his] fond flexible whore/If she but cast a liberal eye upon [him]” (V. 68-9). As a male, Laxton gives little respect to women, he thinks of them as whores if they care to kindly look his way. To Moll, Laxton's morals symbolize the morals of all men:

“In thee I defy all men, their worst hates

And their best flatteries, all their golden witch crafts,

With which they entangle the poor spirits of fools:

Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives” (V, 87-90, 257).

Moll believes it is a misconception that women are easily susceptible to becoming whores, it is partially men who have facilitated the problem by preying on women in weak states. Men's compliments and insults appeal to fragile women. It is men's false flatteries and hateful words that seduce feeble women into whoring. Moll defeats this stereotype when she defeats Laxton, bringing him into submission (V. 117). Moll relays that she who “is wit and spirit/May scorn to live beholding to her body for meat,/Or for apparel like your common dame” (V. 128-30). It is weak, immoral women such as Mistress Openwork who result to whoring, not women such as Moll who call for pure morals and equality amongst the genders.

Moll also asks for reform in the treatment of women in her society. Addressing both male and female responsibilities, Moll outlines the conditions under which she will marry. Marriage, in her opinion, should only be participated in when women are treated equally and men are not deceitful. Moll proclaims she will only wed when:

“Gallants void from sergeants' fear,

Honesty and truth unslandered,

Woman manned but never pandered,

Cheats booted but not coached,

Vessels older ere they're broached:

If my mind be then not varied,

Next day following, I'll be married" (XI. 119-27)

These new ideals call for higher respect of women. Women should never be exploited or thought of in the context of poor taste. Moll wishes that cheats are punished and gallants become honest. These are Moll's standards, the purity of her morals are able to sway Sir Alexander and he reevaluates his initial judgment of her. He expresses that he will never again prejudge any person base on popular social conventions (XI. 251). Sir Alexander is able to realize the faults of his generation and fix his misconceptions. Moll is able to persuade the new generation and convince some of the old that her morality is the purest and greatest.

Moll in *The Roaring Girl* portrays a body which encompasses men and women equally. Her external and internal mesh seek to equalize men and women. Moll is a symbol for gender equality and correct morals. Though she is rejected by the traditional, the younger generation more openly embrace her virtues. Sebastian and Mary are willing to behave as equals in their relationship, displaying this by kissing while Mary appears equal in status to Sebastian. They are part of a younger generation which except Moll's hybridism. The pureness of Moll's morals is even enough to sway a member of the older generation over to her side. Sir Alexander, though at first opposing Moll's gender equilibrium, alters his initial judgment due to the purity of her morals and he comes to agree with and accept Moll. *The Roaring Girl* is a play which outlines a new role for women, one that demands respect and high

morality. Women and men should look to *The Roaring Girl* for correct, pure morals and for a guide to equalize their statuses within their relationship.

Works Cited

Cordner, Michael. *The Roaring Girl and Other City Comedies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 227-309.