

Deconstructing Patriarchies:

A Womanist Reading of Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*

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Abstract

Based on womanist approaches, this paper examines Moll Cutpurse's life, with the aim of highlighting that Moll Cutpurse performs the transiting character from patriarchal subjection to women's emancipation. The exploration of *The Roaring Girl* written in 1607 by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker allows affirming that Moll Cutpurse deconstructs the male-built systems in Early Modern England. From stereotyped girl to emancipated character, Moll is portrayed as a character that embodies women's aspiration to deconstruct patriarchal orders of English society.

Key words: Deconstruction, emancipation, masculinity, patriarchy, womanism

Résumé

Basé sur des approches womanistes, cet article examine la vie de Moll Cutpurse, dans le but de montrer que Moll Cutpurse incarne le personnage transitant de la sujétion patriarcale à l'émancipation des femmes. L'exploration de *The Roaring Girl* écrite en 1607 par Thomas Middleton et Thomas Dekker permet d'affirmer que Moll Cutpurse déconstruit les systèmes patriarcaux de l'Angleterre moderne. De fille stéréotypée à personnage émancipé, Moll est dépeinte comme un personnage qui incarne l'aspiration des femmes à déconstruire les ordres patriarcaux de la société anglaise.

Mots-clés: Déconstruction, émancipation, masculinité, patriarcat, womanisme

Introduction

Women are submitted to the system of male domination. They are marginalised and placed under men so as to serve the interests of the men in British society. In the traditional sphere dominated by men, the British society is framed in a male-built system. In reaction to such phallic systems, Mary Frith, the female character in Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*¹ questions and deconstructs this old value system that governs women.

The Roaring Girl is a play written in 1607 by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker and published in 1611. The play performed at the Fortune Theatre by Prince Henry's Men is a fictionalised dramatisation of the life of Mary Frith, known as Moll Cutpurse or the Roaring Girl. The term "roaring girl" is adapted from the slang term "roaring boy", which is applied to a young man who carouses publicly, brawls, and commits petty crimes. Moll Cutpurse is portrayed as Woman-Man. Moll Cutpurse is a woman that refuses to belong to the class of women and struggles to access the class of men.

By patriarchy one needs to take into account traditional male-built systems. Deconstruction refers to Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's female character's philosophy of breaking the male-built systems. Womanism is the theoretical framework of this article. The female character, in Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, acts as womanist to deconstruct the male-built systems. It deconstructs the order on which the world has been founded ever since.

In a critical analysis of the novel, some analysts set *The Roaring Girl* in the context of matrimony. Such an opinion is held by Stephen Orgel (2005) who argues that the historical Mary Frith as Middleton and Dekker present her in *The Roaring Girl* is about matrimony, both as the object of wooing and as the enabling figure for other marriages. For Jane Baston (1997), Moll is fitting into the traditional requirements of marriage rather than seeking to change them. In her essay, Jo E. Miller (1990) claims that one of the most troubling things about this play is that Moll does not, at first glance, seem overtly to reject her society's vision of marriage as a male dominated hierarchy, but rather opts out of it only for herself. For Miller, rather than being a transgressive figure, Moll is used as an instrument to reaffirm precisely those values that she appears to refuse.

¹ From this page on, *The Roaring Girl* will stand for (TRG) and further references to this novel will appear in the body of the work followed by the page number of the quotation.

As far as the present work is concerned, it demonstrates that Moll Cutpurse performs the transiting character from patriarchal subjection to women's emancipation. Thus, what are the womanist strategies used by Moll Cutpurse to deconstruct the male-built systems in Early Modern England? Specifically, how does she shape gender relations? In which ways does Moll perform women emancipation? The work is organised in three points. The first point entitled "Stereotyping Moll Cutpurse through Her Clothing" throws light on the ways people perceive Moll Cutpurse in the traditional patriarchal system. The second point is entitled "Moll Cutpurse's Rejection of Woman Stereotyping." It is concerned with Moll's struggle to free herself or escape from patriarchal domination and connotation. The third point entitled "Masculinity and Anti-Patriarchy in *The Roaring Girl*" throws light on the lifestyle adopted by Moll Cutpurse to contradict gender superiorities.

1. Stereotyping Moll Cutpurse Through Her Clothing

Stereotyping refers to a standardised mental picture that is held in common by men that represents women as home objects or beings that are submitted to men's desire and relegated to the second place in society. The objectification of women not only reflects the existing gender hierarchy in which the subordinate group is at the dominant group's service but also reinforces it by promoting the subjugation of women and derogation of their value. In most human societies, women are characterised by a particular way of clothing. Contextually, Moll is degraded because of her way of clothing and pictured as a rebel, a person who violate behavioral standard.

1.1. Moll Cutpurse as a Rebellious Character

In the play, Alexander grumbles to his friends: "my son to marry a thief, that impudent girl...whom the world sticks their worst eyes upon! Which all the country fix their eyes upon as her thy folly dotes on." Act 1 (TRG, 11) In fact, Moll is all like a boy who behaves exactly as a delinquent boy. She transgresses gender norms of the British society. But, Moll's behaviour has significance. Moll uses her masculine agency to teach the men of London a lesson. Her choice to smoke, fight, and reject laws leads to more freedom and personal agency. Moll's cross dressing challenged gender norms of the period. When women wear masculine outfits for reasons beyond necessity, argues Jane Baston (1997: 321), "they become dangerous figures, standing breech in the streets as a walking challenge to the social expectations of female containment."

In the same logic, Marion Wynne-Davies (2009: 23) asserts that “Mary Frith through her dress, habits, and lascivious speech challenged moral codes.” In fact, *The Roaring Girl* focuses on Moll’s behaviour and her cross-dressing. While it is not unheard of for women to dress as men, this is not a common behaviour, and early modern society typically reserves such cross-dressing only for occasions when women need to don men’s garb to do particular assigned tasks.

Society certainly recognises that it is unusual and abnormal that Moll dresses and behaves like a man. Moll’s outfits are a source of discomfort and misjudgment from others. Scholars who argue that Moll is transgressive see Moll’s clothing as destabilising to gendered social contracts. The men in the play react to Moll’s gender identity with a mixture of awe and derision. But, Moll uses her impudent behaviour to protect herself from harsher criticism and create a new image of herself.

1.2. Polemic about Moll’s Clothing

Moll creates a polemic with her cross-dressing code. Moll is wearing male clothing and sometimes even using bladed weapons. Earlier, Mary Beth Rose (1984: 387-388) illustrates:

Like Moll, who insists on being recognised as a man-woman, heroines like Rosalind and Viola seek to conceal their identities and to protect themselves by masquerading as men...the heroine gladly sheds her disguise with its accompanying freedoms at the end of the play, in order to accept the customary social role of wife, thereby allowing the play’s androgynous vision to remain spiritual and symbolic without awakening the audience’s dissatisfaction or desire for social change.

One can see the destabilisation of gendered norms as the representation of women liberation from patriarchal connotation. Moll’s behaviour can be seen as a tension between the normative social expectations of the period and a social reality that is variegated and complex.

In *The Roaring Girl*, resistance is complexly staged as Moll performs many identities and genders. Susan E. Krantz (1995: 8), for instance, asserts that Moll exhibits at least three different sexual identities and that she “is sometimes female...Sometimes she is identified as monster since she performs male and female into her own being” Moll’s identity is plural. Moll’s masculine and feminine genders exist simultaneously and that her androgenous makes her shifting identity possible.

2. Moll Cutpurse's Rejection of Women Stereotyping

Through the play of Decker and Middleton, they represent Moll as a character who challenges patriarchal representation of women. Moll, through the stage, adopts attitudes that set her in rejection of women stereotyping. She decides not to marry and goes father as to claim her chastity and her ability to fight men so as to resist to patriarchy. Moll's resistance to patriarchy consists in portraying herself as a man with full competences and aptitudes. She refuses to marry and defy men publicly in real fight in arenas.

2.1. Chastity as Way of Refusing Men's Domination

According to Merriam Webster, chastity "is the abstention from all sexual intercourse." For a woman to have sex with a man is considered by some womanists as a form of male domination. According to Diane Richardson (1993: 74), for "many radical feminists, sexuality is at the heart of male domination; it is seen as the primary means by which men dominate women." The fact that Moll refuses to have sex with a male character, is for her, a means to refuse to be dominated by a man.

Indeed, in several places throughout the play, Moll does appear to be rejecting the roles of women in conjugal life. She also tries to depreciate these roles. An example of such an attitude can be found in her conversation with Sebastian, where she claims:

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...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, and has a worse i' th' place. Act 2 (TRG, 23)

Sebastian begs Moll to marry him. She refuses this marriage. Moll is consistent in her approach to marriage. She wants her freedom. Moll is not intimidated by the judgment of society about women who are not married. Such a statement is in discordance with the patriarchal notion of marriage. For Moll, on the one hand, marriage should not be compulsory for a woman. On the other hand, having sex is to be men's object and be always under men dominance. This means that women become subjects of men that have sex with them. Moll sees marriage as a straitjacket for herself, she refuses to promote it. Within the play, Moll is thus, set into direct opposition to the already established marriage systems. Lloyd Edward Kermode (1997: 441) voices this line of thinking by explaining that "what Moll supports and begins to erect is the order that contemporary society fails to be."

Moll is opposed to marriage because it contradicts woman's freedom. Moll considers herself as equal in power to men. To illustrate this point, Moll can affirm:

But howe'er
Thou and that baser world censure my life...
I scorn to prostitute myself to a man,
I that can prostitute a man to me. Act 3, scene 1 (TRG, 29)

In fact, Moll sees getting married or giving herself to a man as a way of prostituting her body. Getting married is like a form of desacralisation of her body and her ideals. Moll sees marriage or sexual intercourse as a weakness of the woman's mind. And this weakness of the mind places the woman in an inferior position like a prostitute. Moll thinks she is capable of doing all these things but her decision to break the barriers of patriarchy dominates her senses. Thus, she voluntarily deprives herself of all these pleasures that could place her in a disadvantaged and inferior position. Moll recognises that her masculine dress might be associated with socially unacceptable behaviours. But, she insists in keeping her way of dressing and her chastity.

2.2. Fighting Men for Resisting to Traditional Patriarchy

To show her strength and readiness to resist to men and prove that she can be as powerful as a man, Moll used to confront and defy men publicly in a fighting ring. The coming quote can be illustrative: "If I could meet my enemies one by one thus, I might make pretty shift with 'em in time, and make 'em know..." Act 3 (TRG, 29) Moll expects women to fight against men and prioritise equal strength and role instead of secluding women into domestic role. Although the fact that people think that women with swords are deviating from their established place, Moll does not consider this sexist conception. Instead, she shows that women are able stand as men and against men.

The ultimate expression of Moll's control over her own sexual agency happens shortly after her encounter with the gallant bearing a long rapier. Throughout the play, Moll shows her capacity to deal with men by engaging into a fight against Laxton. She wins the fight against Laxton in the ring. Moll deals with Laxton mercilessly. Moll's behaviour is similar to a merciful action of a self-controlled man. "I scorn to strike thee basely" Act 3 (TRG, 29), she intones. By winning against Laxton, Moll shows her capacity to physically overpower men.

While the craven Laxton appeals to Moll's preferred gender identity when she spares him, "spoke like a noble girl, i'faith!" Act 3 (TRG, 29) his subsequent aside reveals his shame

at having lost the fight to a woman: “Heart, I think I fight with a familiar or the ghost of a fencer.” Act 3 (TRG, 29) Laxton is utterly incapable of admitting to himself that a woman has bested him. He falls into flights of fancy, imagining that she must be a witch, if not possessed. Laxton cannot define Moll in the same terms that she uses to define herself. As a result, he re-categorises her in a way that lessens his own disgrace.

Moll’s sword and her way of clothing are used as a protection or a masculine shell which covers her femininity. Moll protects herself and her own sexual orientation. Her chastity shows that she wants to defend herself:

What durst move you, sir,
To think me whorish? A name which I’d tear out
From the High German’s throat if it lay ledger there.
To dispatch privy slanders against me! Act 2 (TRG, 21)

Moll sees in her victory an opportunity to correct Laxton and show him that he must be respectful. That is a lesson for Laxton and the other Londoners. This show of strength reveals that women can be equal to men. In some cases, women can even overpass men in terms of strength. By objectifying Laxton, Moll lays claim to her own agency, using a performance of masculinity for her own ends. Throughout the play, Moll repeatedly refers to herself as female only to immediately mention her own masculinity.

3. Masculinity and Anti-Patriarchy in *The Roaring Girl*

Throughout the play, Moll exerts agency over the other men of London by forcing them to face their own shortcomings, and her own dual gender enables Moll to position herself as a teacher. Moll transgresses the patriarchal norms. She creates a kind of condition that shows that she is embedded in anti-patriarchal spirit. The play is itself a place full of anti-patriarchal conversations and strategies well structured into its stages.

3.1. Roaring Girl Performing a Roaring Boy: Masculinity

Moll used to perform male behaviour. “Some will not stick to say she’s a man and some both man and woman.” Act 1 (TRG, 18) Moll Cutpurse can affirm: “I have the head now of myself and am man enough for a woman.” Act 2 (TRG, 23) Moll’s gender exists in different states simultaneously. Moll’s gender, at various points, is both a man and a woman. Moll possesses particular secret knowledge that positions her as a disruptive agent aware of both male and female subjectivity. She becomes an attractive and disruptive figure because she is able to understand both sides of an unstable gender binary.

Most of Moll's behaviour in *The Roaring Girl* asserts a kind of sexual agency that the men try to subvert, and her swordsmanship allows her to protect herself. One can see that Moll employs "clothing, canting, and fencing" Act 1 (TRG, 2-3) to assert a kind of agency over the ingress and egress of a porous female body. Like a man, or as she puts it, "as a musician" Act 4 (TRG, 47), Moll uses her viol skills to make money, and even invites the men to challenge her. She affirms "I hang up my viol by me, and I care not" Act 4 (TRG, 45) about whatever could happen. Even Alexander comes to realise Moll's position, as evinced by his promise to pay her back for the trouble he caused her. As Moll asserts, she is simultaneously a woman and "as good a man" as Moll enters "in the room as a man" Act 3 (TRG, 27) as many of the male characters in the play.

Lloyde Edward Kermode (2009: 7) explains that "self-identity is determined by its reaction to the other, and specifically on its difference to the other." Rather than letting the men of London define her, Moll forces them to cope with a reaction to the other that can be interpreted as the quintessential factor in manufacturing the self. The way Moll portrays two gender identities provokes discomfort to many of her detractors throughout the play. In fact, this dual gender serves not only to protect her, but it is used also to teach Londoners that she deserves the right to speak and act for herself.

The important difference between what Moll Cutpurse does as a roaring girl and the behaviour of the roaring boys of the period is that Moll aggressively defends her own agency. For those deemed boys, roaring could signify they are uncontrolled young men. But Moll disrupts this association by employing roaring as a way to gain control not only over herself, but also, over those who might override her agency. Moll's roaring becomes a kind of hyper-control that shelters her feminine willpower from outside interference while recoding her body as an unassailable, masculine entity.

3.2. *The Roaring Girl* as Anti-Patriarchal Play

The Roaring Girl stages the deconstruction of the patriarchal order settled by men in the Early England society. According to Barbora Šedivá (2019: 1-2):

The Roaring Girl contributes to the discussion concerning gender in several different ways. Dealing with the position of women in English society, the play has been argued to both reaffirm and transgress established social norms. Moll Cutpurse, the play's protagonist, is based on a real historical person, Mary Frith, an eccentric figure of a disreputable character...the protagonist's preference for male attire has been perceived as the main source of the play's transgressive character, the representation of conjugal life provides an essential comment on gender roles, which contributes to the overall message

of the play...In her steady refusal to marry, Moll is expressing the need for independence but also, and most importantly, her resistance to the corrupted values associated with marital life in the society around her... we might not only learn about the role of women in the early modern period, but also trace the development of this role until the present day, and in this way to learn about ourselves.

The scenes show Moll defending her own sexual agency through violence very early in the play. When Moll spies “a fellow with a long rapier by his side,” Act 2 (TRG, 18), she publicly beards him: “you remember, slave, how you abused me t’other...night in a tavern” Act 2 (TRG, 19), she exclaims, “you have tricks to...save your oaths, reservations have you, and I have...reserved somewhat for you.” Act 2 (TRG, 19) Moll, by approaching the man, shows that she is capable of taking all comers, even when they have the mechanical advantage. In so doing, she denies the mechanical advantage of the long rapier just as she denies the notion that biological sex serves as a marker of power.

Another character in the play is worth to point as a figure that represents a very symbol of anti-patriarchy. The “merchant’s wife” Act 1 (TRG, 14) thus becomes a potential threat to patriarchy precisely for her ability to move in the economic sphere and to be even more successful than her husband. The fact that the wife can operate to some extent independently of her husband’s income creates tension in the married couple. This tension is further enhanced by the sexual implications of the woman’s exposure to the public gaze.

In fact, public visibility and sexuality in the marketplace go hand in hand with the economic status this setting offers. Just as the wife becomes economically independent from her husband, her erotic desire starts to develop on parallel lines. For a self-sufficient woman, marriage, as represented in the merchant subplot of *The Roaring Girl*, becomes highly frustrating and as a result she starts to search for other sources of fulfilment. Female economic independence is thus perceived as troublesome. The scenes of the marketplace are economic metaphors used to express the social relations related to marriage.

In *The Roaring Girl*, Moll exerts the same kind of sexual agency as a young, aristocratic male. She is so successfully that her presence emasculates the men around her by comparison. Moll is considered as a particular character able to challenge the patriarchal social orders established by men. The play itself presents stages that show to the audience that it is evident to reconsider gender position within societies.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on gender roles in *The Roaring Girl*. Moll exposes throughout the play the ideals and acts that challenge male-built systems. Moll's male attire upholds her masculinity. She is chaste and not interested in pursuing any relationships with men. Her male attitude creates an identity of emancipated character regarding women having a male behaviour and not submitted to male domination. Moll Cutpurse plays the role of an androgenous character. She is the character that struggle to settle a new point of view on woman in Early English. She tries to free women from patriarchal subjection. Moll embodies women's aspiration to deconstruct the patriarchal orders in the English society.

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