

“The Fashion of Playmaking”: The Worn World of *The Roaring Girl* by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker

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The Roaring Girl.
OR
Moll Cut-Purse.

As it hath lately beene Acted on the Fortune-stage by
the Prince his Players.

Written by *T. Middleton* and *T. Dekkar.*



Printed at *London* for *Thomas Archer*, and are to be sold at his
shop in *Popes head-pallace*, neere the *Royall*.
Exchange. 1611.

Fig. 1. Frontispiece for the published edition of *The Roaring Girl*, printed in 1611. Consistent with the play's descriptions of her apparel, Moll Cutpurse's ensemble includes a costly tall beaver hat with feather, starched (or wired) collar with lace trim, doublet, "Dutch slops" (a type of breeches), and a cloak. She smokes a pipe (primarily a masculine pursuit) and carries a rapier—a gentleman's sword (illustration courtesy Huntington Library).

Introduction

When they collaborated on writing *The Roaring Girl* for Prince Henry's Men at London's Fortune Theatre in 1611, Thomas Middleton and fellow playwright and pamphleteer Thomas Dekker were undoubtedly aware of the "crowd trouble" that so often accompanied productions at public theaters. With an admission price as low as a mere penny to stand in front of the stage, as many as 3,000 playgoers—courtiers, merchants and tradesmen and their wives, apprentices, prostitutes, and pickpockets—would have been packed into the open air amphitheater (Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage* 34). Middleton and Dekker¹ appealed to this diverse audience by placing Mary Frith (known in the play, as she was on the street, as Moll Cutpurse)²—a real-life cross-dressing woman living in the Fortune's immediate vicinity—at the center of the play. Frith was a well-known and colorful local figure and probably a Fortune Theatre regular (Gurr 276). As the first woman to set foot on an English stage, Frith even performed a post-performance jig—a lewd song and dance. Women would not be permitted onstage again for another fifty years. The playwrights undoubtedly made a calculated decision in using a flesh-and-blood female as their inspiration, yet it was more than a shrewd publicity stunt. Like her larger-than-life counterpart Mary Frith, Moll Cutpurse takes center stage and uses clothing as a vehicle of self-transformation. In pushing aside the fragile boundaries of gender and class, *The Roaring Girl's* heroine embodies a shocking possibility: individuals

could extricate themselves from socially constructed norms and fashion their own singular identities.

Before discussing *The Roaring Girl* and its heroine, let us briefly establish the social context of the play. London life as depicted by Middleton and Dekker in *The Roaring Girl* was, in the words of the contemporary philosopher Thomas Hobbes, “nasty, brutish, and short.” The Jacobean phrase “roaring boys” described young upper class men with money and leisure time to roam the streets, frequent brothels and taverns, and start duels. At the other end of the social scale, cutpurses—common slang for pickpockets—worked in crowded gathering places such as theaters. Despite the class differences and hardships of urban life, however, Londoners shared a common obsession: clothes. Approximately one-third of London's workforce—male and female—was employed in textile work in some way (Bucholz and Ward 67). From lowly street dealers in second-hand clothes to wealthy drapers and mercers to entrepreneurial merchants sending ships around the globe to trade English wool for foreign fabrics and dyes, fabric and its byproduct—fashion—were the engine that transformed London into an *emporium mundi*. Londoners viewed clothing as vehicles for self-presentation, appareling themselves in pieces—often magpie style—to achieve singular effects and individual styles.

Moll Cutpurse stands at the center of two circulating plots in which her clothing allows her to cross boundaries of gender and class. In the central

narrative, Sebastian's acquisitive, social climbing father will not permit him to wed Mary Fitzallard because he feels her dowry is inadequate. Sebastian announces that he plans to marry Moll Cutpurse, the roaring girl, instead, believing that such an unsuitable choice for daughter-in-law will motivate his father to approve the woman of his real choice, Mary. A secondary plot involves four foolish and penniless gallants who attempt to line their pockets by ingratiating themselves with the wives of wealthy merchants. Moll's costume changes demonstrate her ever-shifting self-presentation. She initially appears in a sexually hybrid costume--with male jackets and women's skirts. Later, she hires a tailor to create a man's ensemble for her consisting of a "great Dutch slop" [a baggy trouser] and a doublet (considered to be a masculine jacket). Unlike the other female characters, Moll moves freely about the streets, shopping, chatting, and challenging men to duels with swords--and beating them. Because she is a Roaring Girl who duels with gentlemen above her rank, she transgresses lines of gender and class. Order is restored in the play's final scene. The merchants' wives return to their husbands, Sebastian's father approves of the marriage, and the gallants move on to other conquests. Moll appears on this occasion in wholly feminine dress. The variations in her costumes show how she dresses according to specific situations.

Moll Cutpurse and her real-life counterpart Mary Frith can teach us about how clothing reflected the attitudes and public discourse in the early seventeenth century. In their studies of Mary Frith's career trajectory, Gustav

Ungerer and Natasha Korda describe Mary Frith's first appearance in London records as a not-very-successful pickpocket operating in the area around the theater. Over time, she self-consciously re-invented herself as a street performer. She wore men's clothes—but unlike the characters in Shakespeare's plays—she was not in disguise. Like the Roaring Girl, she challenged gallants to sword duels. At least one historian has speculated that her associates would work the crowd picking pockets while she engaged her opponent. She also performed bawdy songs with a lute—on the street as a busker or sometimes in taverns or tobacco shops (both male preserves). Some feminist historians and critics have depicted Mary Frith as a transvestite. A less glamorous but probably more realistic appraisal is that Frith was simply a self-promoter, making a self-conscious effort to establish a street identity that would allow her to move freely through city in ways that a woman in a skirt could not. It is significant that the frontispiece of the play states, "I must work for my living," an obvious indication that Mary Frith was unwilling to depend on others. Mary Frith was in fact a shrewd entrepreneur, because later in her life she became a licensed broker in used goods, an unusual status for a female at that time. She used her position between the criminal world of her earlier life and the world of aspiring gallants and theatrical entrepreneurs in search of fashionable used clothing. She therefore able to improve her status through multiple re-inventions and changes of clothes, but once she had achieved a measure of respectability, she returned to conventional female apparel.



Fig. 2. Peter Saltonstall, 1610. Unknown artist. Saltonstall's contemplative gaze is typical of the self-conscious melancholy seen in fashionable male portraits of the period. Saltonstall's apparel is sumptuous, belying his informal demeanor. Note the elaborate collar and sleeves of fine fabric with lace and the heavy needlework and embroidery on the doublet. The robe has velvet edging with gold and black trim. His hair is longer and swept back in a casually elegant style, and he sports a voguish gold earring. A cat peers over his shoulder (Beck 35)



Fig. 3. Full-length portrait of Queen Anne of Denmark, consort of King James I, dated 1617. The artist is Paul van Somer. She wears a doublet-style hunting ensemble. Note the beaver hat with red plumes and the rather male gaze under the brim. Oatlands Palace is in the background. King James was a strong opponent of masculinized dress for women, adding to the irony of the queen's apparel (Vincent 175).

Mary Frith's street act as a female in pants also tells us much about one of the most widely discussed social topics of the day--men whose fashion obsession was viewed as unmasculine and women wearing masculinized apparel. Both issues are bound up in the plot of the *Roaring Girl*.

Edward Saltonstall appears in Fig. 2 in the self-consciously melancholy pose of a young courtier; Queen Anne is shown in Fig. 3, presumably dressed for the hunt. What do these portraits reveal about the blurring of gender lines occurring in fashions and habits of the time? Anti-theatrical pamphlets and sermons of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century are full of hand-wringing and shrill admonitions about men taking an unseemly interest in fashion. The gallants in *The Roaring Girl* fit this description. Similarly, women in masculinized apparel—wearing doublets or jerkins and broad hats with feathers, or sporting stiletto daggers—were scolded for their fashion choices. Even King James--ironically, given that his wife is portrayed here—entered into this public fray, admonishing his ministers to, in the words of contemporary observer John Chamberlain, “inveigh against the insolency of our women and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn, and some of them stilettos or poniards [small knives].” Because she also wore breeches and a rapier, Mary Frith took masculine apparel to the extreme, but she was not alone in making these sartorial choices.

Pamphleteers and sermons also targeted young men who overspent on clothing and “flaunted” or “jetted” in sumptuous apparel in public spaces, as the gallants do in *The Roaring Girl*. The concern focused particularly on young men who were dressing above their established social position. In his review of sumptuary legislation for the *English Historical Review* in July 1915, Wilfred Hooper discusses the regulations that outlined what people wore according to station. Everything from color to type of fabric to degree of ornamentation was determined by the status of the wearer. Statutes even prohibited working class people from wearing certain colors, like purple, or types of fabric, like imported cloth. Under these laws, without a title or wealth, people’s fashion choices were limited. However, Hooper points out that although attitudes about the connection between clothing and status persisted well into the seventeenth century, sumptuary legislation ended early in King James’s reign. Early modern men and women saw themselves as knitted into a hierarchy with roles that had been ordained by God. Clothing made this hierarchy visible; to defy one’s assigned role was to deceive and to commit the multiple sins of pride, envy, and greed (443-449).

The livelihood of actors, of course, required them to defy their pre-ordained roles more than any other segment of the population. Imagine a production of *The Roaring Girl* in 1611: the actors were all male. The actor who played the part of Moll Cutpurse would be a man dressed as a woman who dressed as a man. The actor playing the part of Mary Fitzallard would be a man

dressed as a woman who later disguises herself as a boy. More importantly, actors were considered to be masterless men, a lower status for whom sumptuous apparel was off-limits. Any actor playing a high status role—in the case of the *Roaring Girl*, this would be the parts of the gallants, the merchants and their wives, Sebastian and his father—was by definition counterfeiting, pretending to be someone better than he really was—or even worse, a different gender. One of the most common justifications for the Puritans' closing of the theaters in 1642 revolved around issues of apparel: men dressed as women, men wore clothing above their station, and men were engaged in counterfeiting and duplicity.

What we see in Mary Frith and Moll Cutpurse are the beginnings of new notions of individuality, selfhood, and personal agency. Clothing also served as a sort of metaphor for how men and women navigated an increasingly complicated commercial world. As Sir Francis Bacon wrote in 1605, "Behavior seemeth to me as a garment of the mind and to have the conditions of a garment..." Social historian Keith Thomas explains that men and women were beginning to fashion themselves for a role that they had chosen, not one that was chosen for them. He comments, "the prevailing literary topos was of life as a stage on which everyone played a part, self-consciously fashioning themselves to fit the role they had chosen." Thomas also points to "widespread evidence of active agency, mobility, self-help, and independence of spirit" (40). Individuals saw clothing, a central component of an ever-expanding consumer market, as

a means of freeing themselves from the old order. The character of Moll Cutpurse and the real-life Mary Frith demonstrated this new individuality and self-sufficiency. After eighty more years of civil war, plague, fire, and religious turbulence, John Locke would write of the self as “that conscious thinking thing.” Dekker’s and Middleton’s depiction of Moll Cutpurse, however, anticipates Locke’s thoughts about the space between outward appearance and inner thought.

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¹ Determining which portion of the play was composed by which writer is beyond the scope of this paper. A simplified summary follows: Playwrights of the period frequently collaborated on plays. Middleton and Dekker worked with other writers on many occasions and had written two other earlier works together. In the introduction to the Revels edition of *The Roaring Girl*, Paul Mulholland speculates that the writers revised one another's work on the play, which resulted in an unusually seamless composition. Mulholland and others agree that Moll Cutpurse was the most fully realized of any character created by either writer, and that her larger-than-life presence is the greatest achievement of the collaboration (8-12).

² For purposes of clarity, I refer to Moll Cutpurse in discussing the character in the play but refer to Mary Frith when discussing the historical figure.