Hic Mulier: The Female Transvestite in Early Modern England

R. VALERIE LUCAS

"Long Meg of Westminster," "Frederick of Jennen," "Mary Frith the Roaring Girl" – the woman in male attire is a recurrent figure in the popular culture and literature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Why did this period produce so many texts which focussed upon the female transvestite? What social significance does female transvestism hold in a patriarchal culture?

In popular festivals, transvestism and the reversal of sex-roles functioned as a kind of licensed misrule, and as such was deemed unthreatening to patriarchal order because it remained safely contained within the realm of the 'festive.' In early Christian legends as well as English Renaissance poetry, drama, and pamphlet literature, writers attempt to overcome the threat which the unruly female poses to men: here, the female transvestite uses her unorthodox position to defend women's chastity, promote traditional marriage, and thus furthers the reinforcement of patriarchy.

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They were real enough, these strange usurpers of masculine attire, "masculine-féminines" who took to the streets in the rituals of sex-role reversal during carnival and other forms of licensed misrule in Early Modern Europe. Most of the transvestite rites, such as the Abbeys of Misrule in France and Northern Italy, the French Fête des Fous, and St. Stephen's Day celebrations as well as the English traditions of the Boy Bishop, Bessy, and Maid Marian involved men impersonating lascivious, unruly, or grotesque females.1 However, there is an example of female transvestism in the disguised bride ritual, a pre-nuptial rite of passage in Wales:

On the night previous to the wedding, a few of the bridegroom's friends proceed to the bride's house to see if she is safe, when her friends conceal her for a time, either by dressing her in man's apparel, or by putting her in some obscure place: but, after some pretended difficulty, she is at length discovered, when they sit down, and, after spending the evening merrily, depart home.2
In such rituals, transvestism functions as part of a fertility rite, but in other rituals in carnival and related to the Saturnalia transvestism allowed both sexes to transgress socio-sexual norms.

Mumming, was common during the Christmas season in England, where men dressed as women and women dressed as men went from house to house, making merry in their disguises. The carnival festivities of Spain and Germany, although not always transvestite, afforded an even greater degree of role-reversal: during this period women were allowed to dominate and bully their husbands. On February 5, the Feast of Santa Agueda (Saint Agatha) in Spain, women gave the orders and men obeyed. At carnival time in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Nuremberg men were relegated to the house and domestic chores while their wives amused themselves.

Such role-reversals, outside of periods of festive misrule, were not tolerated: for sixteenth- and seventeenth-England husband-beating was a matter of some concern (figure 1). A satirical broadside, “Fill Gut and Pinch Belly” (1620) attests to its frequency. It shows a scrawny beast making the most of the sole good woman it has managed to catch, while its more fortunate counterpart:

Now full bellyed Fill gut, so Fat heere in show
Feeds on our good Men, as Women well know,
Who flocke in great numbers, all weary of lives
Here thus to be eaten, and rid from their Wives.

The rest of the broadside shows scenes of husbands beaten and ill-used by their wives. At least three husbandbeaters figure in contemporary court records and ballads. In 1624, Dorothy Turner was ordered to appear at the next session of the Peace for Middlesex, to answer “for cruelly beating and abusinge her husband Anthony Turner.” Two of the husband-murderers commemorated in ballads, take similar measures. “The unnatural wife” (1628) offers Alice Davies as a cautionary example of a wicked woman who comes to a bad end, while Martin Parker’s “A warning for wiuws” (1629) berates Katherine Francis, who lived with her husband Robert “at household iarres” before mortally wounding him with a pair of scissors. Like Alice Davies, Katherine Francis was condemned for petit treason and burned to death at Clerkenwell Green.

Among the female transvestites mentioned in the sessions and ecclesiastical court records, ungovernability is also a common charge. In 1578, a Stondon woman, Susan Bastwick, while in service with her father, “about Allhollantide (All Saints) last in a merriment came on horseback in a cloak disguised and demanded of him if he had any good ale.” The judge ordered her to ask her father’s forgiveness. A woman servant in Littlebury (1585) “did wear man’s apparel disorderly in her master’s house.” When
FIGURE 1: Husband-beating.
Jacob Cornwall of Terling’s wife was accused of unchastity with one Thomas Burles in 1592, part of the evidence against her was that she “useth to wear young men’s garters and said she would do so until they came for them.” Hunt’s wife, according to the Great Chesterford churchwardens (1585), was not content with such halfmeasures: she “contrary to God’s law, did put on man’s apparel and went forth from one house to another so ungodly and shamefully, with other naughtiness of words.” While these isolated examples cannot verify the existence of the disruptive female subculture attested to by polemicists, the woman transvestite and husband-beater violated the socio-sexual hierarchy by introducing into daily life the female unruliness and pugnacity allowed only at carnival and other occasions of licensed misrule, and herein lies the reason for the interest and anxiety which they elicited from male writers.

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From the 1570s through the 1620s, not only polemicists, but also preachers and satirists viewed the transvestite female with concern, contempt, and horrified fascination. Castigating them as monsters, hermaphrodites, and amazons, their detractors condemned female transvestism as a transgression against the God-given natural order, associated it with sexual immorality, and claimed that, by wearing the clothes of another sex, women wanted to transform themselves into men.

They justified such objections by citing God’s prohibition of transvestism in Deuteronomy:

> The woman shall not weare that which pertaineth vnto a man, neither shall a man put on a womans garment: for all that doe so, are abomination vnto the Lord thy God.

John Calvin’s 1566 sermon on this text, for example, argues that God intended men and women to wear clothes which denote their sex: “Againe, when women go appareled like men of war, . . . it is against kinde, and we ought to abhor it . . .” The pamphleteer Philip Stubbes, in his *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583) takes a similar line:

> It is writte in the 22. of Deuteronomie, that what man so euer weareth womans apparel is accursed, and what woman weareth mans apparel is accursed also. . . . Our Apparel was giuen vs as a signe distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therfore one to weare the Apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his own kinde.

Stubbes, Arthur Golding (who was Calvin’s translator), and Richard Brathwait were Puritans who objected to the phenomenon not only on grounds of scriptural authority, but also because it transgressed the ideals
of female chastity, silence, and obedience set forth in Puritan domestic ideology. Far from conforming to those ideals, the female transvestite was visible, vocal, and disruptive. Preacher John Williams, in his A Sermon of Apparel (1619) described the audacious women who attended church in masculine attire:

What flesh and blood hath his thoughts so staunch, but must be distracted in his Church-deuotions, at the prodigious apparition of our women? ... For a woman therefore to come vnto a Church ... halfe male, and halfe female ... lifting vp towards his throne two plaister'd eies and a polled head ... In Sattin (I warrant you) in stead of sackcloath ... standing most manly vpon her points, by wagging a Feather to defie the World, and carrying a dagger, ... to enter Gods house, as if it were a Play-house ... what devotion in the world but must start aside?

Joan Towler seems to have been such a woman. Although her offending garb remains a mystery, in 1596 this Essex woman “came into our church in manes apparell upon the Sabaoth daie in the servyce time” and was brought before the ecclesiastical court.

Since such unusual attire contravened the Pauline dictate that woman’s dress reflect her subordinate status the polemicists saw it as both immodest and a sign of licentiousness. In his Description of England (1577/87), William Harrison laments that the doublet, once worn by “light house-wives only is now become the habit for chaste and sober matrons” and that it “is now come to pass that women are become men; and the men transformed into monsters.”

William Parkes, writing in 1612, also associates transvestism with unchastity:

... how are our women (as it were) transformed into men, by degenerating from their sex, and from the vertue, modesty, and ciuility thereof, by their mannish complements, and ruffianly attires: And how are our men (as it were) transformed into women, by their lascivious, effeminate, and wanton imitations, none being content with their owne estates and conditions.

Hic Mulier (1620) contrasts proper women’s dress with the lewd attire of the female transvestite:

... you have taken the monstrousnesse of your deformitie in apparel, exchanging the modest attire of the comely Hood, Cawle, Coyfe, handsome Dresse or Kerchiefe, to the cloudy Ruffianly broad-brim’d Hat, and wanton Feather, the modest vpper parts of a concealing straight gowne, to the loose, lasciuious open embracement of a French dublet, being all vnbutton’d to entyce, all of one shape to hide deformitie, and extreme short [?] wasted to give a most easie way to euery luxurious action: the glory of a faire large hayre, to the shame of most ruffianly short lockes; the side,
thicke-gather'd, and close guarding Sauegards, to the short, weake, thinne, loose, and euery hand-entertaining short basses; for Needles, Swords; for Prayerbookes, bawdy Ligs; for modest gestures, gyant-like behauiers, and for womens modestie, all Mimicke and apish inciuilite...24

Perhaps taking their cue from the polemicists, playwrights made transvestism one of the tricks of the whore. In Thomas Dekker's The Honest Whore, Part I. (1604), Bellafront dresses as a page. The prostitutes in Thomas Middleton's Your Five Gallants (1602-08) deck themselves out as shield-boys. John Marston's "Satyre II" (1598) describes a disguised whore amongst gallants:

Tis loose legg'd Lais, that same common Drab,  
For whom good Tubrio tooke the mortall stab.  
Ha ha, Nay then I'le never raile at those  
That weare a codpis, thereby to disclose  
What sexe they are, since strumpets breeches vse.25

John Reynolds' sensationalistic Gods Revenge Against the Abominable Sin of Adultery (1679) links transvestism to adultery: the unfaithful Helda dresses as a man to run off with her lover, and "forgets the modesty and pudicity that belongs to her Sex, she is without shame or blushing, and as if she had chang'd her nature with her cloathes she seems bold and impudent."26

For some polemicists, transvestism signified more than loss of womanly modesty. They maintained that the female transvestite wished to transform herself into a man and to tyrannise men. This inversion recalls the role-reversals of the carnival, but here provokes alarm rather than laughter. One of the earliest texts, George Gascoigne's The Steele Glas (1576), depicts them as "monsters" with "helish harts" and "deceitful thoughts:"

What be they? women? masking in mens weedes?  
With dutchkin dublets, and with Jerkins iaggde?  
With Spanish spangs, and ruffs set out of France,  
With high copt hattes, and fethers flaunt a flaunt?  
They be so sure euin Wo to Men in dede.27

Philip Stubbes describes the "dublets and Jerkins" worn by female transvestites and contends that:

if they could as wel chaunge their sex, & put on the kinde of man, as they can weare apparel assigned onely to man, I think they would as verely become men indeed as now they degenerat[e] from godly sober women, in wearing this wanton lewd kinde of attire, proper onely to man (sig. liv).

And finally, commenting on the private theatre at Blackfriars in 1617, Henry Fitzgeffrey presents the female transvestite as a potential man-batterer:
Monstrous: A Woman of the masculine Gender.

Looke! thou mayst well descry her by her groath,
Out, point not man! Least we be beaten both.28

The uproar about female transvestites peaked in 1620 when, according to Hic Mulier, hordes of “Masculine-Feminines” plagued the country:

For since the daies of Adam women were neuer so Masculine; Masculine in their genders and whole generations, from the Mother, to the yongest daughter, Masculine in Number, from one to multitudes; Masculine in Case, even from the head to the foot; Masculine in Moode, from bold speech, to impudent action; and Masculine in Tense: for (without redress) they were, are, and will be still most Masculine, most mankinde, and most monstrous (sig. A3).

While Hic Mulier recapitulates previous objections and dwells upon the aggressiveness of the transvestite woman, Haec Vir, the first of its two companion pieces,29 censures men for their effeminate dress and behaviour. Most significantly, it counters the objections raised in previous polemics with a unique defence of female transvestism on grounds of personal liberty. Since these texts have already been discussed in detail by others,30 this essay shall only briefly consider their contributions to the debate.

Entered in the Stationer’s Company Registers on 9 February 1620, Hic Mulier; or, The Man-Woman: Being a Medecine to cure the Coltish Diseases of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our Times, shows, on its title page, two of the offending females, one in a man’s broad-brimmed, feathered hat and the other seated in a barber’s chair, waiting to have her locks shorn off by an attendant barber (figure 2). Like many of its predecessors, Hic Mulier bases its charge of ‘unnaturalness’ upon scriptural authority: it locates the first sumptuary law in the Garden of Eden, where God’s decree stipulates not social rank, but proper gender roles.31 Man’s clothing designates his role as worker and provider, whereas woman’s denotes her as the chaste possession of one man:

Remember how your Maker made for our first Parents coates, not one coat, but a coat for the man, and a coat for the woman; coates of seuerall fashions, seuerall forms, and for seuerall vses: the mans coat fit for his labour, the womans fit for her modestie (sig. B3).

The women who reject God’s order degenerate into licentious, ungovernable gadabouts:

But when they thrust vertue out of doores, and give a shamelesse libertie to every loose passion that either their weake thoughts ingenders, or the discourse of wicked tongues can charm into their yeelding bosomes (much too apt to bee opened with any pick-locke of flattering and deceit-full insinuation) then they turne Maskers, Mummers, nay Monsters in
FIGURE 2: Hic Mulier: the Masculine-Feminine.

HIC MULIER: OR,
The Man-Woman:
Being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminine of our Times.
Express in a briefe Declamation.
Non omnes postumus omnes.
Misrsis, will you be trim'd or truss'd?

London printed for J. T. and are to be sold at Elizon Chantry late, 1640.
its disguises, and so they may catch the bridle in their teeth, and runne away with their Rulers, they care not into what dangers they plunge either their Fortunes or Reputations, the disgrace of the whole Sexe, or the blot and obloquy of their priuate families. . . (sig. C2\textsuperscript{1}).\textsuperscript{32}

Its most virulent objection is that such women adopt only the worst male characteristics. Its indictment of the "great ones" (presumably aristocratic masculine-feminines of independent means) who

\ldots will be man-like not onely from the head to the waste, but to the very foot, \& in evry condition: man in body by attyre, man in behauiour by rude complement, man in nature by aptnessse to anger, man in action by pursuing reuenge, man in wearing weapons, man in vsing weapons: And in briefe, so much man in all things, that they are neither men, nor women, but iust good for nothing (sig. B2\textsuperscript{1}).

inadvertently dams men as belligerent bullies, but, more important, it betrays how men fashion the female transvestite as a mirror image of masculine violence.

These accusations of baseness, unnaturalness and shamefulness are refuted in Haec \textit{Vir: or the Womanish-Man: Being an Answer to a late Booke intituled Hic Mulier}. When the sword-wielding Hic Mulier encounters the effeminate Haec Vir, they mistake each other for, respectively, a man and a woman. This gender muddle leads to a debate on whose aberration is worse. Speaking in her defence, Hic Mulier cites another natural law, mutability, which sanctions continual change in the shape of all things, and argues that male attyre is utilitarian, not immodest: "what we weare is warme, thrifty and wholesome, then no excessse and so no indiscretion. . . ."\textsuperscript{33} She claims that traditions of attyre are established by custom, not reason, and shows how social customs differ from place to place, suggesting that gender roles are also a product of culture rather than nature. She eloquently argues for her right to follow "those pleasures which are most suitable to mine affections" (sig. A3\textsuperscript{4}-B\textsuperscript{1}), for "we are as free-borne as Men, haue as free election, and as free spirits, we are compounded of like parts, and may with like liberty make benefit of our Creations. . . ." (sig. B3\textsuperscript{1}). There is, moreover, another compelling reason for female transvestism: men have taken to cosmetics and have robbed women of"our Ruffes, of our Earerings, Carikanets, and Mamillions, of our Fannes and Feathers, our Busks and French bodies, nay, of our Maskes, Hoodes . . ." (sig. C\textsuperscript{1}). She deplores men's loss of martial strength and degeneration into foppish gallants (sig. C2\textsuperscript{4}), but promises that when men once more become "men in shape, men in shew, men in words, men in actions, men in counsell, men in example: then will we loue and serue you; then will we heare and obey you . . ." (sig. C2\textsuperscript{4}).

The monarch himself took up the challenge, but concentrated more on
reforming women than transforming men. In mid-January 1620, James I enlisted the aid of the bishop of London who
called together all his clergy about this town, and told them he had express commandment from the King to will them to inveigh vehemently and bitterly in their sermons 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 poignards and such other trinkets of like moment; adding withal that if the pulpit admonitions will not reform them he wold preceed by another course; the truth is the world is very much out of order, but whether this will mend it God knows.\textsuperscript{34}

After three weeks, John Chamberlain could report some progress:

Our pulpits ring continually of the insolence and impudence of women; and to help the matter forward, the players have likewise taken them to task, and so do the ballads and ballad singers, so that they can come nowhere but their ears tingle. And if all this will not serve, the King threatens to fall upon their husbands, parents or friends that have or should have power over them and make them pay for it.\textsuperscript{35}

Perhaps Chamberlain was overly optimistic. Thomas Walkington’s sermon \textit{Rabboni, or Mary Magdalen’s Tears} furnished but a timid rebuke: “Are not the days farre worse, then those that were in Isay the Prophets town? … Are not the sexes altered? Contrary to that in Deut. 22.5.”\textsuperscript{36}

And an undated ballad gives some indication of women’s irreverent response to Walkington and his brethren:

\begin{quote}
Nor do they care what a wise man saith,
Or preachers in their defame,
But jeer, and hold him an ass; but i’faith
They’d blush if they had any shame:
For city and countrey both deride ’em,
And our king, God blesse him, cannot abide ’em.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Even a decade later, the female transvestite continues to plague Richard Brathwait: his \textit{The English Gentlewoman} (1631) upbraids his female readers for wearing doublets: “That distinction which decency found out for habits virile and feminine, what commixture hath it found in latter times? What near resemblance and relation hath womans to mans: suting their light feminine skirts with manlike doublets?”\textsuperscript{38} Hic Mulier’s vow to Haec Vir - ”Comeliness shall be our study: feare our Armour, and modestie our practice” (sig. C2) - was not, it seems, kept, and the preachers’ and pamphleteers’ dream of subduing the female transvestite remained unrealized. Yet the literature of their contemporaries offered, in its treatment of this aberrant female, the consolations of wish-fulfillment.

While polemicists denounced the female transvestite as a monstrous,
aggressive affront to a divinely-sanctioned natural order, her fictional counterpart is treated with more leniency: for in early Christian legends as well as English Renaissance prose, verse, and drama, the female transvestite's subversive potential is defused, for the most part, by fantasy resolutions in which she takes on male attire to defend her chastity, or where her exploits assist men and often end in capitulation to patriarchal authority. Transvestism practiced by female saints was not regarded as immoral or scandalous by the Church Fathers or their medieval followers. Following Philo of Alexandria, the early Church Fathers represented the male as the more rational, and therefore superior, element of the soul, the female as the less rational and therefore inferior. Wearing men's clothes thus signified an attempt to become more rational and nearer to Christian perfection by imitating the superior sex. In an age which held celibacy to be the highest Christian virtue, female transvestism symbolised not only the rejection of one's own sex, but also the renunciation of the world in order to better serve God. These reasons are reflected in the vitae of transvestite female saints. Pelagia, a beautiful dancing girl and prostitute in Antioch, after her conversion to Christianity, dressed as a man, adopted the name Pelagius, and took refuge on Mount Olivet, where she was admired for her holiness and asceticism. Her true sex was not revealed until after her death. Saint Margarita-Pelagia despised marriage so much that, following her betrothal, she fled the nuptial chamber in men's dress, cut her hair, and entered a monastery under the name Pelagius.

Transvestism undertaken to defend chastity also figures in the 1560 tale of Frederyke of Jennen. When the merchant Ambrose of Jennen boasts of his wife's fidelity, Johan of Florence makes a bet that he can seduce her. Secreting himself in a chest conveyed into her room, he creeps out at night, steals three jewels, and takes note of a mole growing on her left arm. With this information, he convinces Ambrose of his wife's adultery. Ambrose orders her slain, but a compassionate servant allows her to escape. She dresses as a man, and taking the name of Frederyke, travels to Secant, where she wins the King's admiration, becomes one of his officers, and vanquishes his enemies. When Johan comes to Alkare, he inadvertently reveals his duplicity to Frederyke, who has her husband summoned to the court. Without disclosing the reasons for her inquiry, she asks Ambrose to identify the jewels and questions the king on the punishment which a thief and traducer of women's honour deserves. Stripped of her male attire and naked except for a silk loincloth, Frederyke then appears before the court and denounces Johan's treachery, for which he is sentenced to death. With her honour restored, she is reunited with Ambrose and rewarded by the King, who reluctantly allows one of his best statesmen to return to Jennen.

While Frederyke becomes a transvestite from exigency and relinquishes
her masculine apparel when she can safely return to her husband, Long Meg of Westminster is a warrior woman who exults in her male attire and attacks cheating, thieving, or braggart males. A folk heroine, she fascinated the popular imagination during the English Renaissance: the Lord Admiral’s Men presented *Long Meg of Westminster, Part I* in the season beginning June 1594. She is associated with the rituals of carnival in Gabriel Harvey’s “Pierce’s Supererogation” (1600), which calls her a “lustie bousing rampe somewhat like Galemella or maide Marian,” while a history of a brothel, *Hollands Leaguer* (1632) describes her less flatteringly as “that famous Amazon, Longa Margarita, who had there for many yeeres kept an infamous house of open Hospitality.” She is alluded to in Nathan Field’s *Amends for Ladies* (1611) and appears as a defender of women in John Taylor’s *The womens sharpe revenge* (1640). Most important, between 1582 and 1690, four accounts of her life were published.

In the lives of Long Meg, the threatening aggressiveness of the female transvestite is undercut by making her a force for public justice, pranks, and patriotism. Arriving in London from her native Lancashire, she becomes a serving maid in the Eagle tavern, where she aids needy soldiers, staves off the bailiff who arrives to arrest her customers, and saves her friends from robbers. Disguised as a man, she duels with and defeats the braggart Sir James of Castile. As punishment, he must “wait on my trencher at supper and confesse me to be thy better in any ground in England” (*Life and Pranks*, (1582), sig. A4). That evening, guests commiserate with Sir James on his defeat by the English gentleman, but Meg “pulling off her hat, her hair falling about her eares,” reveals her identity, to the amusement of all the company (*Life and Pranks*, (1582), sig. A4). Serving in the wars at Boulogne as a laundress, Meg defeats a Frenchman who has challenged the English:

... after a long and desperate combate Meg overthrew him and pulling out her Scymeter cut off his head, then taking of her Burganet, her hair did fall about her ears, whereby the Frenchmen perceived that she was a Woman, and the English giving a great shout, Meg by a Drum sent to the Dolphin his Souldiers head, and said, an English woman sent it (*Life and Pranks*, (1582), sig. B2).

On her return to England, Meg becomes proprietor of an Islington tavern. After Huffing Dick attacks one of her maids, she beats him with a staff and subjects him to a degrading ritual of sex-role reversal: “Thou shalt put on my Maides Petticotes on, and follow me to day to dinner with a Sword and a Buckler; and I will be drest in mans apparell... [She] carried him home with her, and drest him full womanlike...” (*Life and Pranks*, (1635), p. 26). She dresses herself in male attire and parades him through the streets until they arrive at an inn where she “shewed Sir James Withrington what a proper
Page shee had got. Hee and the rest of the guests laught heartily at the matter; and full mannerly did he waite upon her trencher all dinner time. . . .” (Life and Pranks, (1635), pp. 26-27).

Although her acts serve the cause of justice, the intensity of violence, particularly in the last episode, exposes male fear of the aggressive female and the humiliation she inflicts upon men: because of her, they are mock-ed by their fellows, forced to perform servile tasks, and suffer dishonour or even death at the hands of a woman. However, the text allays these anxieties by Long Meg’s marriage to a soldier. Long Meg becomes an obedient wife who, rather than battle her husband, subjects herself to a beating:

... he sought to pick a quarrell and fall out with her, and calling her aside vnto a backe chamber, stript her into her petticoate, and there delivered her one staffe, and tooke himselfe another, and told her, that for that hee had heard shee was so mankind as to beat all shee met withall, he would try her manhood, ... She replied nothing, but held downe her head. And with that hee layd her on three or foure blowes. And shee in all submission fell downe vpon her knees, desiring him to hold his hands and to pardon her. Why, quoth he, why take you not the sticke and strike? Husband, quoth she, whatsoever I haue done to others, it behooueth me to bee obedient towards you; and neuer shall it be said, though I can swindge a Knaue that wrongs me, that Long Meg shall be her Husbands master: and therefore vse me as you please (Life and Pranks, (1635), p. 22).49

Like Long Meg, Clara, the heroine of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s Love’s Cure, or, The Martial Maid (1606-13)50 is also a woman warrior. The play considers the nature versus culture debate in Haec Vir, through the treatment of its two protagonists, Clara (who has been raised as a boy by her soldier-father, Alvarez) and Lucio (whom his mother, for fear of reprisals from her husband’s enemies, has reared as a girl). When Alvarez is reprieved, husband and wife are reunited and exchange the transvestite siblings in order to educate them in their proper sex-roles. Alvarez assumes that gender is socially-constructed rather than biologically-determined and therefore believes his children’s behaviour may be changed through judicious re-training:

Now our mutuell care must be
Impoy’d to help wrong’d nature, to recover
Her right in either of them, lost by custome:
To you I give my Clara, and receive
My Lucio to my charge: and we’ll contend
With loving industry, who soonest can
Turne this man woman, or this woman man.51

However, the action of the play argues against his contention. Instead, the reformation of Clara and Lucio, who bear an uncanny resemblance to Hic
Mulier and Haec Vir, demonstrates how Anatomy is indeed Destiny: "just as one can’t change one’s genitals, so one can’t change the ‘real’ way one is meant to behave."

But Lucio and Clara’s subsequent adventures do more than illustrate biological determinism. They reveal how ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are defined according to a phallocentric standard created by men and serving their interests. *Love’s Cure* presents a warrior’s culture which equates skill in swordsmanship with sexual prowess, which measures merit by one’s skill in boozing, wenching, and warmongering. It is, as well, a culture which is deeply antagonistic towards women: ‘femininity’ is defined as lack of masculine virtues. This is clearly shown through Lucio, whose behaviour offers a male-defined view of women as frivolous, prissy, and weak: he fusses over pet birds and clothes, is scandalised by smutty jokes, runs away from fights, and refuses to master a sword.

Although Lucio is a priggish coward, the warrior males have their own defects. Ironically, the person who most conforms to the pattern for ideal manhood is Clara, the female transvestite. Her function in the play is to point out men’s deviations from their own chivalric code of combat and to provide an heroic example for men to emulate. Clara joins forces with Vitelli, her father’s enemy, because he has been unfairly set upon by several opponents in Alvarez’s house where “the lawes/Of hospitable duty should protect him” (I.iii.130-31). She rescues Vitelli for a second time when his whore, Malroda, plots with her lover to have him killed, admonishing him to

Show your old valour, and learn from a woman,
One Eagle has a world of odds against
A flight of Dawes, as these are (IV.ii.146-48).

However, Clara’s martial strength is inappropriate for her new role as “true woman.” Alvarez tells her that she no longer needs to use a sword, for “Thy beauty . . . /Shall be a stronger guard” (I.iii.31-32), but Bobadilla offers a more cynical view of woman’s place as an object for men’s sexual gratification:

... what have you to
doe with Armors, and Pistols, and Javelins, and swords, and such tooles?
remember Mistresse: nature hath given you a sheath onely, to signifie
women are to put up mens weapons, not to draw them ... (II.ii.86-89).

Clara herself realises the disadvantages of being female: while she acknowledges her duty to her father will mean giving up her male attire, she “could wish/I were what I appeare” (I.iii.37-38), and when Lucio jibes at her for sparring with him: “When wil you be a woman?” (II.ii.138), Clara
replies, “Would I were none./But natures privy Seale assures me one” (II.ii.138-39).

It is, nonetheless, nature and not ‘custom’ which prevails in reforming both Lucio and Clara, who repudiate their unseemly ways when they fall in love with members of the opposite sex. The disgruntled Alvarez gives his son a final chance to prove his manhood by striking the first man they meet and “if we chance to light upon a woman,/Take her away, and use her like a man” (IV.iii.39-40). As he kisses Genevora, Lucio finds his “womanish soul, which hitherto hath govern'd/This coward flesh, I feele departing from me” (IV.iv.54-55). Clara, infatuated with Vitelli, realises “I am a woman, and must learn to fight/A softer sweeter battaile then with Swords” (II.ii.251-52).

Still, it is Clara’s martial skill which first endears Vitelli to “The fairest Souldier, I ere saw” (II.ii.176). In Vitelli’s attraction to Clara, the text very nearly implies something even more distressing than the contention that the female transvestite wishes to be a man: it suggests that the warrior male is not interested in women, but in other men. However, the text evades this latter issue to dwell upon the former. When Vitelli voices his fear of petticoat rule, viewing the inversion of gender roles as loss of masculinity:

You are of so great spirit, that I must learn
To weare your petticoat, for you wil have
My breeches from me (IV.ii.182-82).

Clara reassures him that she will now behave as women should: her ambition now is to serve, to obey and, disturbingly, to suffer at the hands of her man:

Rather from this houre
I here abjure all actions of a man,
An wil esteem it happinesse from you
To suffer like a woman: love, true love
Hath made a search within me, and expel’d
All but my naturall softnesse, and made perfect
That which my parents care could not begin.
I wil show strength in nothing, but my duty,
And glad desire to please you, and in that
Grow every day more able (IV.ii.182-93).

*Love’s Cure* seems fundamentally a conservative text. Clara’s capitulation to Vitelli recalls Long Meg’s submission to her soldier husband, and like Long Meg’s, it allays the anxieties about the bellicose female transvestite who attacks men. Yet, in a more telling way, its subtext alludes to women’s power over men. By threatening to commit suicide when the fighting commences, Genevora, Eugenia, and Clara end the vendetta
between their families. Genevora emphatically tells Lucio that his valour derives from his relationship with her: "Thy valour's not thy owne, I gave it thee,/These eyes begot it, this tongue bred it up" (V.iii.117-18). However, the text never develops this implication that men need women to validate their own sense of masculinity. Rather, Vitelli smugly hammers home the moral that nature, through love, has triumphed over custom by converting the transvestite female warrior into a proper woman:

Behold the power of love: lo, nature lost
By custome irrecoverably, past the hope
Of friends restoring, love hath here retriv'd
To her own habit, made her blush to see
Her so long monstrous metamorphoses.
May strange affaires never worse successe (V.iii.257-62).

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For Early Modern England, the significance of female transvestism lies in its challenge to the existing socio-sexual hierarchy. During carnival and other festivals of licensed misrule, men and women exchanged gender roles and sometimes apparel. The women were allowed to bully men and once-a-year husbands were subjected to the inequities of a domestic order which they had created. While such role-reversal was sanctioned within these festivals, at other times of the year, female aggressiveness and transvestism were viewed with disapproval. Contemporary documents suggest that a subculture of female transvestites existed in London and its environs. Not only preachers and polemists, but James I himself argued that the transvestite female undermined a God-given natural order and threatened male authority. Although James I's campaign to control them was only partially successful, the literary versions of the transvestite female offered the consolations of a fantasy resolution to the problem. In the Long Meg of Westminster series and Love's Cure, the female transvestite ceases to use her formidable power against men when she voluntarily renounces her masculine attire and submits to her husband's authority. In this way, the texts assuage male anxiety about the pugnacious and ungovernable females who existed in the world beyond the stage in Early Modern England.

University College, Cardiff

Notes

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1 See Natalie Davis, "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society, ed. Barbara


4. Mumming was prohibited in the time of Henry VIII and persons disguising themselves in such apparel were ordered arrested as vagabonds and committed to gaol for three months. C. J. S. Thompson, *Mysteries of Sex: Women Who Posed as Men and Men Who Posed as Women* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1938), pp. 15–16.

5. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), p. 194. Burke speculates that it "is as if St. Agatha's torturers, by cutting off her breasts, had turned her into an Amazon" (p. 194).


8. This broadside, whose verses are attributed by Pollard and Redgrave's *Short Title Catalogue* to John Taylor, is held at the Society of Antiquaries, London. Robert Lemon, *Catalogue of a Collection of Printed Broadsides* ... (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1866), pp. 52–53.


15. Deuteronomy 22:5 in the King James version of the Bible.


17. Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London: Richard Jones, 1583), sig. F2iv. Subsequent citations are from this edition with references given parenthetically within the text.


21 The “Homily of the State of Matrimony,” *Certain Sermons appointed by the Queens Majestie... 1582* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1850), p. 507 gives the following rationale:

> that apparel is of nature so appointed, to declare her subjection; so biddeth St. Paul, that all other of her ramant should express both shamedacedness and sobriety but to bear thereon the sign of her power, wheresoever she goeth; more is it required that she declare the thing is meant thereby.


24 *Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman: Being a Medecine to cure the Coltishe Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Femines of our Times* (London: [G. Purslowe] f.J. T[rundle], 1620), sig. A3*-A3*4. All citations are from this edition with subsequent references given parenthetically within the text.


29 *Hic Mulier and Hace Vir* are reprinted in abridged form in Henderson and McManus, *Half Humankind*, pp. 264-89. Muld Sacke: Or, *The Apologie of Hic Mulier* (London: Richard Meighen, 1620) was the third response, and extends the definition of a masculine-feminine to include all unruly women. Unlike the previous frontispieces, which show the female transvestite in a skirt and doublet, Muld Sacke wears trousers, has a moustache and appears more manish than the females on the title-pages of *Hic Mulier* and *Hace Vir*.


32 The text echoes the metaphor of horse-breaking used in Puritan preaching to describe the submission of a wife to her husband’s authority. See William Whatley, *A Bride Bush* (London:

33 Haec-Vir; or The Womanish-Man, Being an Answere to a late Book intituled Hic Mulier (London: J. Trundle, 1620), sig. B3. All subsequent citations are from this edition and are given parenthetically within the text. Haec-Vir was entered in the Stationers’ Company Registers on 16 February 1620, 5 days after Hic Mulier.


36 Thomas Walkington, Rabboni, or Mary Magdalens Tears, p. 158, quoted in Linda T. Fitz, “What Says the Married Woman?”, Marriage Theory and Feminism in the English Renaissance,” Mosaic, 13:2 (1980), 22. Fitz notes that Rabboni was entered in the Stationers’ Company Registers on 25 January 1620, the day after James I’s proclamation to the clergy. The sermon, however, is not entirely about transvestism and the reference may have been a last-minute addition.

37 “Will Bagnall’s Ballet,” Satirical Songs and Poems on Costume, ed. Frederick J. Fairholt (London: For the Percy Society by Richards, 1849), p. 148. If it is, as Fairholt suggests, a Caroline text, it is evidence that the transvestite trend lasted well into the 1630s. However, from the description of the women’s costume, and references to the King and preachers, I believe it more likely to be Jacobean.

38 Richard Brathwait, The English Gentlewoman (London: B. Alsop and T. Fawcet for Michaell Sparke, 1631), p. 10. William Prynne, writing in the 1630s, decries the garb of “our Englishe gentlewomen, as yf they all intended to turne men outright, and weare the breeches, or to be Popish nunnnes, are nowe growne soe farre past shame, past modesty, grace, and nature, as to clipp their hayre like men . . .” Samuel R. Gardiner, Documents Relating to the Proceedings Against William Prynne in 1634 and 1637 (London: Camden Society Publications, n.s., no. viii), p. 4 in Baldwin, Sumptuary Regulations, p. 257.


41 See Delcourt, Hermaphrodite, p. 85 and Bullough, Sexual Variance, pp. 366.

42 Delcourt, Hermaphrodite, p. 92; Bullough, Sexual Variance, pp. 367-68.

43 Here begynneth a proper tratysye of a maarchantes wyfe, that afterwarde went lyke a man . . . (London: Abraham Vele, 1560[?]).


48 These were The life of long Meg of Westminster . . . (London: E. All-de f. E. White, 1620); The life of long Meg of Westminster . . . (London: J. Beale) f. R. Bird, 1635); The life and pranks of Long Meg of Westminster (n.p.: n.p., c.1680 according to Wing STC); The life of long Meg of Westminster
London: J. M. for G. Conyers, [1690?]). Citations from the different versions give the title, year of publication and page or signature, with all references given parenthetically. The text of the 1635 edition is take from the 1816 reprint in Miscellanea Antiqua Anglicana . . . vol. I (London: Robert Tripphook, 1816).


50 The probable date of composition is pre-1613, when Beaumont retired. Cyril Hoy identifies it as one of the earlier collaborations, ante-dating The Woman-Hater, written in the first half of 1606. Information is from George Walton Williams' edition of Love's Cure (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 5.

51 Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Love's Cure, ed. George Walton Williams, vol. 3 of The Dramatic Works of the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), I.iii.175-82. All subsequent quotations are from this edition with references given parenthetically within the text. Other plays also feature female transvestites: Bess Bridges in Heywood's The Fair Maid of the West (1604), the second Luce in Heywood's The Wise Woman of Hogsdon (c.1604), Susan and Nan in Sharpham's The Faire (1608), Aspasia in Beaumont and Fletcher's The Maid's Tragedy (c.1610), Kate in Middleton's No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's (c.1613), Alathe in Fletcher's The Nightwalker (c. 1611), Aurelia in Middleton's More Dissemblers Besides Women (1615), and Martia in The Widow (c. 1616). Field's Amends for Ladies (c. 1611) concerns the intrigues of four transvestites, two men and two women, with a guest appearance from The Roaring Girl's Moll Cutpurse. These plays are briefly discussed in Woodbridge, Women and the English Renaissance, pp. 156-58.