Moll Cutpurse as Hermaphrodite in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*

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In his 1927 essay on Middleton, T.S. Eliot praised *The Roaring Girl* as Middleton's "best" comedy. What Eliot valued was the Roaring Girl herself, Moll Cutpurse, whom he finds

always real. She may rant, she may behave preposterously, but she remains a type of the sort of woman who has renounced all happiness for herself and who lives only for a principle. ... Middleton's comedy deserves to be remembered chiefly by its real – perpetually real – and human figure of Moll. ... [*The Roaring Girl* is the] one comedy which more than any Elizabethan comedy realizes a free and noble womanhood.¹

Eliot is thus able to forgive the play's weaknesses for its powerful portrayal of a central figure who is, paradoxically, both "perpetually real" and the embodiment of an ideal (a "type of ... free and noble womanhood").

Despite Eliot's enthusiasm for *The Roaring Girl*, subsequent criticism has not been so forgiving; it certainly has not been so enthusiastic. Between 1927 and 1970, the criticism confined itself largely to very limited or technical problems, such as the relationship between Moll and the historical Mary Frith, the manuscript of the quarto edition, or the "double" names of two of the characters, Moll and Mary Fitzallard. In the 1970's, however, Middleton (and Dekker) scholarship flourished, resulting in several book-length studies. At one extreme is Anthony Covatta, who mentions merely in passing that *The Roaring Girl* is "much overrated" and that it is "sentimental and topical." At the other extreme is David M. Holmes, who devotes a chapter to the play, focusing on identifying Middleton's contribution and on a plot summary. In between are critics like Norman Brittin, who offers a brief commentary: the play is "largely a vindication of Moll" (who, as the historical Mary Frith, needed a good deal of vindication), and its patterns are "mainly romantic and satirical," the romantic parts being written by Dekker and the satirical by Middleton. Perhaps, however, the most significant work done during the decade is the 1976 New Mermaids edition of the play, edited by Andor

Gomme, who in an introduction focuses on Moll as the unifying moral force in the play.²

Aside from Eliot's enthusiasm, missing in recent criticism is a detailed analysis of Moll Cutpurse, the figure Eliot claimed was a "finer woman" than any we find in Webster, Marlowe, Tourneur, Shirley, Fletcher, or even Shakespeare,³ in the play Eliot claimed was the "best" of Middleton's comedies. I should presently like to build on Eliot's implied remark that Moll's power as a character depends on her being, paradoxically, both realistic and idealistic. She is realistic in that she is endowed with a complex personality, both benign and irascible. She is idealistic (in the sense of being romantic and mythical) in that she is endowed with a hermaphroditic nature, both male and female. I shall argue that Moll's hermaphroditic nature helps explain her dual personality, for her benign manner is traditionally a feminine trait (as in the goddess of beauty, Venus), and her irascible manner is traditionally a masculine trait (as in the god of war, Mars). Moreover, the two sides of Moll's nature and her personality help explain her role in the plot: she is both a moderator-reuniter and an inciter-exposer. Moll's hermaphroditism also helps explain much of the imagery in the play, for in it she is a creature of both the land and the sea, a subject and an object of desire.

Moll's hermaphroditism, I shall also suggest, derives from a Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, popularized by Spenser, in which the hermaphrodite is a figure of love representing the union of contraries, or the pagan mystery of *concordia discors*. Moll is most akin to that hermaphroditic figure of love, Venus, particularly in the form of *Venus armata* (Venus wearing the armor of Mars), who signifies the warfare of love. In her role as such an *eros* figure, Moll comes to represent, as the play's preface implies, the spirit of comedy — in particular, a new form of comedy then coming into vogue. Although *The Roaring Girl* is at times a very funny play, containing many lewd sexual innuendoes, it has a most serious central theme: love as the power that unites contraries.

The tradition of the hermaphrodite that *The Roaring Girl* is indebted to goes back to Plato. In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes tells his famous tale in which originally there were three kinds of human beings: man, woman, and the hermaphrodite. Mankind, however, grew corrupt through his pride, and Zeus grew angry, dividing each kind in two. As a result, those beings previously male now seek a male mate, while those previously female seek a female mate, and those previously hermaphrodites seek the half they are missing. Aristophanes concludes:

So you see, gentlemen, how far back we can trace our innate love for one another, and how this love is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, to make two into one, and to bridge the gulf between one human being and another.⁴

Importantly, the hermaphrodite represents the union of male and female, the union of contrary sexes.

In his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, Marsilio Ficino interprets the fable as an allegory of love:

Hence mutual love, the restorer of their original nature, is innate in all men, striving to make the two one again, and to heal the natures of men. ... This desire of restoring the whole – this force – has received the name of Love.⁵

For Ficino, as for Plato, man had an original identity that he lost and that he consequently attempts to regain through love.

According to Edgar Wind, an Orphic poet like Ficino

could not doubt that the monstrousness of Aristophanes' fable was a sign that it concealed a sacred mystery; and in that he followed, perhaps more than he knew, the distant precedent of Alexandrian Platonism. The biblical passage: "and he divided them in the midst" (Genesis xv, 10) had been cited by Philo as crucial evidence for ... the "Logos as cutter," who produces "creation by dichotomy" but is the "joiner of the universe" as well. In Aristophanes' fable the divided man longs to regain his original integrity; and ... that benefit is conferred on him by the power of Love. ... Instead of having to turn around to see the light ... the Aristophanic man can attend to the upper and lower worlds simultaneously. ... For Ficino the ridiculous monster ... concealed a promise of celestial bliss.⁶

Wind, noting that the hermaphrodite was treated both seriously and jocularly (p. 200), suggests that if the hermaphrodite resembled a monster of abnormal portents, "it was not because of a willful preference for the grotesque. The unusual subject demanded an unusual tone" (p. 204). In fact, he says, the Platonic hermaphrodite "became ... acceptable [as] an image for the universal man" (p. 213).

The figure of the hermaphrodite is widespread in Renaissance literature. Ben Jonson, for example, in *The New Inn* has Lord Beaufort refer directly to the Platonic myth (with perhaps the Christian overtones mentioned by Wind):

Then I haue read somewhere, that man and woman
Were, in the first creation, both one piece,
And being cleft asunder, euer since,
Loue was an appetite to be reioyn'd.

In the same play, love is defined as "a spirituall coupling of two soules."⁷ Although Jonson does not use the word "hermaphrodite" here, he does use the corresponding dramatic device, disguise, in which characters don the clothes of another – frequently, women donning men's clothes, and men donning women's clothes. The Host's "son" Frank, for example, is really his daughter

Laetitia. Everyone, in fact, is masking his identity, and, as is revealed by the play's central episode, the "court of love," this identity is largely sexual in nature. In the end, everyone reveals who he really is, and all the appropriate couples reunite.

Perhaps a more memorable example of the theme occurs in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (which Jonson evidently had in mind when he wrote *The New Inn*). Viola dons the disguise of a male page, and at the end, when her twin brother Sebastian appears, the Duke Orsino says, "One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons!"⁸ The soldier Antonio asks Sebastian, perhaps referring to the Platonic myth in its Christianized form,

How have you made division of yourself?
An apple cleft in two is not more twin
Than these two creatures. Which is Sebastian? (V.i. 214-16)

And finally, Sebastian himself tells Olivia, the lover of the "page" Viola, "You are betroth'd both to a maid and a man" (255). The comical confusion of sexual identity is resolved when Sebastian unites with Olivia, and Viola unites with the Duke. In Shakespeare, as in Jonson and other dramatists of the period, comedy is binary in form, beginning with a phase of confusion about sexual identity and ending with a recognition, in which separated lovers join to create a happy ending.

Underneath all the joking, of course, is a rather serious matter, as revealed, for example, in the more private love poetry of Donne. As many commentators have recognized, at the heart of Donne's love poetry is the idea of two souls becoming one, as such poems as "The Dissolution," "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," and "Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn" reveal. As Donne puts it in "The Ecstasy," "we two [are] one anothers best":

Our hands were firmly cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beames twisted, and did thread
Our eyes, upon one double string;

So to'entergraft our hands, as yet
was all our meanes to make us one.

In this "dialogue of one," Donne goes on to speak about love, which "these mixt soules doth mixe againe, / And makes both one, each this and that."⁹ Man's true identity consists of his physical and spiritual union with a beloved of the opposite sex.

Perhaps the most significant Renaissance representation of the hermaphrodite and the principle of "two into one" occurs in Donne's great predecessor in

love poetry, Edmund Spenser. In the original ending to Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, the heroine Amoret joins with the hero Scudamour in an embrace to form a “faire Hermaphrodite”:

Had ye them seene, ye would have surely thought,
That they had beene that faire Hermaphrodite,
Which that rich Romane of white marble wrought,
And in his costly Bath caused to bee site:
So seemd those two, as growne together quite.¹⁰

Amoret and Scudamour come together “like two senceles stocks in long embracement” (45), thus participating in love’s “sweet counteruayle” (47). Although Spenser reveals that his figure derives from the Ovidian myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, rather than Plato, he retains a symbolic meaning common to both myths during the period: the hermaphrodite is a supreme symbol of two souls becoming one – particularly, within the context of married love.

For Spenser, Amoret and Scudamour represent, in Edgar Wind’s terms, the “unfolding” of the great hermaphrodite, the goddess Venus. In Book IV, canto x of *The Faerie Queene*, Venus is portrayed as being both male and female:

The cause why she was couered with a vele,
Was hard to know, for that her Priests the same
From peoples knowledge labour’d to concele.
But sooth it was not sure for womanish shame,
Nor any blemish, which the worke mote blame;
But for, they say, she hath both kinds in one,
Both male and female, both vnder one name:
She syre and mother is her selfe alone,
Begets and eke conceiues, ne needeth other none. (IV.x. 41)

Covered in a veil, Venus is indeed a “pagan mystery,” a great goddess shrouding the principle of the union of contraries, *concordia discors*, both male and female, to become a powerful self-contained creative force in faeryland. Complete within herself, Venus takes as her task the joining of other couples in love, as she does with Amoret and Scudamour here in the Temple of Venus episode, so that they in turn can participate in the mystery of love’s creative union.

Traditionally, one of the forms of the hermaphroditic Venus is what Wind calls the *Venus armata*. This figure represents the union of contraries by combining the feminine trait of amiability and the masculine trait of fierceness. Although often the principle of *concordia discors* is represented in the union of Venus and Mars, Venus can represent the principle herself when “she adopts the martial weapons for her own” (Wind, p. 91). “Dressed in

armour, the ... *Venus armata* signifies the warfare of love: she is a compound of attraction and rejection, fostering her gracious aims by cruel methods" (p. 91). Comparing pictures of the martial Venus with the poetical self-portrait of the writer Navagero, Wind says:

the roles of Mars and Venus, which would normally be divided between man and woman, both recur within man and woman as such. The principle of the "whole in the part" entails this rather baffling conclusion: that Venus is not only joined to Mars, but that his nature is an essential part of her own, and vice versa. True fierceness is thus conceived as potentially amiable, and true amiability as potentially fierce. In the perfect lover they coincide because he – or she – is the perfect warrior. (p. 94)

Venus, in other words, dons armor primarily to overcome obstacles standing between her and her object of desire – a symbol of her power of love. But, as Wind is careful to note, "while appearing armed, Venus may give to the armour a peaceable motive" (p. 92). The *Venus armata*, in short, comes to symbolize love's power to unite contraries peacefully as a means of happiness.¹¹

In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Venus, though appearing as a hermaphrodite, does not actually appear in martial guise as *Venus armata*. In Book III, however, the heroine Britomart uses her powers to reunite Amoret and Scudamour (at least according to the original ending of Book III), thus serving as a forerunner to Venus and her similar reunion of the couple at the end of Book IV. Spenser portrays Britomart as a warrior maiden whose armor conceals her feminine beauty, often resulting in her being confused for one of her masculine counterparts. As the etymology of her name suggests ("Brito" = the female Britannia; "mart" = the male Mars), Britomart is a human (and British) form of the *Venus armata*:

For she was full of amiable grace,
And manly terrour mixed therewithall. (III.i. 46)

Although a heroine of chastity, Britomart is destined to use her armor to unite with her lover, Artegall, so that they can fulfill their destiny of creating a long line of British kings and queens. Britomart is not sexually self-complete, like the hermaphroditic Venus, but she becomes a popular portrayal of a heroine who dons masculine attire, combines in her person both feminine and masculine traits, and uses her remarkable powers to unite other couples in love.

A decade after Spenser published the second part of *The Faerie Queene*, Thomas Dekker adapted the great romantic epic for the Jacobean stage in his *Whore of Babylon*, which borrows freely both themes and figures from the national epic.¹² Shortly after, Dekker collaborated with Middleton in writing *The Roaring Girl*, which in some respects can be seen as an adaptation of

Spenser's great theme of the hermaphroditic nature of human love to Jacobean citizen comedy.¹³

In *The Roaring Girl*, Moll, though by sex a female, appears in other ways as a male. Without much doubt, she is physically the strongest character in the play (much as Britomart is in *The Faerie Queene*). From the outset, Moll is described as

a thing
One knowes not how to name, her birth began
Ere she was all made. Tis woman more than man,
Man more than woman, and (which to none can hap)
The sunne giues her two shadowes to one shape.¹⁴

One of the shopwives in the play, Mistress Gallipot, says of Moll, "Some will not sticke to say shees a man and some both man and woman" (II.i. 186-7), while in a more comic vein the bumbling henchman Trapdoor calls Moll "my braue Captaine male and female" (III.iii. 170) and "my ... Maister and Mistresse" (V.i. 57), and refers to her "masculine womanhood" (II.i. 320). Moll says to Alexander Wengrave of herself:

Me thinkes you should be proud of such a daughter,
As good a man, as your sonne. (V.ii. 153-4)

She becomes, to Alexander, to Trapdoor, to others, a "Monster" (I.ii. 138) which in its unnaturalness must be avoided like a plague. Yet it is such an image of the hermaphrodite that the play treats sympathetically; it is such a hermaphrodite that Eliot praised so highly as embodying personal nobility. Like the hermaphrodite in the Neoplatonic tradition, Moll inspires both laughter and awe, jocularity and seriousness.

Moll's hermaphroditic nature helps explain her paradoxical personality — the fact that she is both benign and irascible. In the dialogue that follows the famous canting scene and the exposure of the real "cutpurses," Lord Noland inquires into Moll's history, wondering how she has acquired her knowledge of the lower world of London and how she came to be called Moll Cutpurse. Revealing her benign nature, Moll tells him,

I must confesse,
In younger dayes, when I was apt to stray,
I haue sat amongst such adders; seene their stings,
As any here might, and in full play-houses
Watcht their quick-diuing hands, to bring to shame
Such rogues, and in that streame met an ill name. (V.i. 285-90)

She goes on to say that she is trying to bring with her to the higher world of society the knowledge of vice and folly which she has learned in the lower

world, so that she can save her friends from "quicke danger" (311). Like the Neoplatonic hermaphrodite in a cosmic context, Moll in a social context can attend to the upper and lower worlds simultaneously. She unwittingly dramatizes her own innocence and virtue when she fails to be tempted by the watch and jewels that Alexander has set for her to steal (IV.i.). And she puts her benign wisdom to work when she advises Sebastian about marriage: "neuer while you liue sir take a wife running, many haue run out at heeles that haue don't" (II.ii 54-6).

In contrast to this soft, benign part of her personality, Moll can also be irascible. When Mistress Openwork refuses Moll entrance to her shop, the Roaring Girl vents her fury by attacking the "fellow" who happens to be walking by at the time, and whom she accuses, probably with justice, of abusing her at a tavern the night before (II.i.). Her temper is quick, and she can take offense at a straw. In the scene in which Moll brings Mary Fitzallard (disguised as a page) to her lover Sebastian Wengrave, the following dialogue ensues:

Seb. I'le offer no worse play.

Moll. Nay and you should sir,
I should draw first and prooue the quicker man. (IV.i. 74-5)

In a successful attempt to appease her sudden "fury" (77), Sebastian offers Moll the viol, which, luckily for him, she plays contentedly.

At the heart of Moll's dual personality is her pride — a trait that can be expressed as being either benign or irascible. In the viol scene just referred to, Moll's pride becomes simultaneously both benign and irascible when she says to Sebastian,

well since you'l needes put vs [herself and the viol] together sir, I'le play my part
as well as I can: it shall nere be said I came into a Gentlemans chamber, and let his
instrument hang by the walls

....

for though the world iudge impudently of mee, I nere came into that chamber yet,
where I tooke downe the instrument my selfe. (IV.i. 81-91)

Aside from the comical sexual innuendoes here, Moll's language reveals both an inborn fierceness and a conscious attempt at amiability.

Moll's dual personality is reminiscent of Britomart's, and, more particularly, of the *Venus armata's*. In the preface to the printed edition of the play, Middleton perhaps hints that he is aware of this tradition (at the very least, as it appears in Spenser), when he says referring to Moll, "For Venus being a woman passes through the play in doublet and breeches." Like Venus in her "armed" form, Moll is a figure of both love and war, though, as we shall see, Moll shares the *Venus armata's* use of her "armour" for a "peaceable motive."

Moll in essence becomes a civic *Venus armata*, and London's correlate of faeryland's Britomart. In fact, Moll manifests the Neoplatonic principle of *concordia discors* in a remarkably clear way. Throughout the play, we see her wielding her sword – in her wounding of the gallant Laxton (III.i), in her beating of the fellow outside the shop, and in her chasing away of the cutpurses (V.i). The threat of her martial weapon, to be sure, is always imminent, as Sebastian learns easily enough. But as a kind of counterpoint to her sword, Moll also plays the viol; she is, we are told, an accomplished, self-taught musician (IV.i. 80–1), and she can sing as well. In the scene in which she brings the disguised Mary together with Sebastian, which begins with her threats to Sebastian and ends with her music-making, the authors may be using the two symbols, the sword and the viol, to illustrate the principle of *concordia discors*, love's power to triumph over adversity to attain a peaceable end.

Moll's hermaphroditic nature also manifests itself in the plot. For, like *Venus armata*, she is both an inciter and a moderator, an exposor of vice and a reuniter of virtue. Although the plot is plagued by clumsy machinery and a general sense of disunity, it does have more unity than we may at first think. In fact, it is precisely Moll's hermaphroditic nature and personality that give the play the unity it does have.

Essentially, the play has two plots: a main plot and a subplot. In the main plot, the young hero, Sebastian Wengrave, loves the young heroine, Mary Fitzallard; but Sebastian's father, Alexander, adamantly opposes a match he once approved: Mary's dowry is not rich enough. The primary aim of the main plot, then, is to reunite the two lovers, despite the father's attempt to separate them. The secondary aim is to expose the father's folly and to reconcile him with the lovers.

In the subplot, the three shopkeeper couples, the Gallipots, the Openworks, and the Tiltyards (though the Tiltyards receive almost no attention), are all experiencing marital difficulties.¹⁵ The gallants, Laxton, Goshawk, and Greenwit, try to seduce the three respective shopwives. But the gallants, especially the more developed Laxton and Goshawk, clearly have no genuine feeling for their mistresses. Hence, the primary aim of the subplot is to reunite the wives with their husbands; and the secondary aim is to expose the gallants for men of lust, and then to reincorporate them as friends to the married couples.

The primary and secondary aims of the subplot thus correspond to the primary and secondary aims of the main plot: reunion and exposure-reintegration. From this, we might expect that the figure generally recognized as unifying the play, Moll, would be the reuniter and the exposor-reintegrator in *both* the main and the subplot. The issue, however, is not so simple, and consequently the plot as a whole seems not only complex but also disunified. The first problem arises over the primary aim, reunion; for, though Moll is

directly responsible for the reunion of the young lovers in the main plot, she is not directly responsible for the reunion of the married couples in the subplot.

To add to this discrepancy between Moll's function within the two plots, there are two noteworthy episodes which seem to form plots of their own – but which, it can be argued, are really appendages to the main and subplot.¹⁶ In the first of these (III.iii) bearing on the main plot, Jack Dapper is, like the hero Sebastian, called a “prodigal” by his own father. Unlike Sebastian, however, young Dapper spends his time gambling and running with a “thousand” women (III.iii. 57), and is consequently plotted against by his father, who tries to have him arrested and sent to prison. At the time of the arrest, however, Moll happens to enter, sees the plot, and warns Dapper, allowing him to escape while she battles the furious officers Curtleax and Hanger. This episode bears on the main plot in two important ways. First, it makes clear that Jack Dapper is the play's real prodigal son, thus enabling us to see Sebastian's integrity as a hero and his father's folly as a blocking force.¹⁷ Second, the Dapper episode suggests that, though Moll in rescuing Dapper seems to be interrupting legal justice, she is really ensuring that Dapper avoid the fate of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* or Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* – expulsion from the comic society that she is helping to create.¹⁸

In the second of the appendage episodes (III.i) bearing on the subplot, the gallant Laxton, earlier the seducer of Mistress Gallipot, attempts to seduce Moll and offers to meet her in Gray's Inn Field, where they will take a coach to Brainford to lie together. Moll agrees to the meeting, but only to teach Laxton, with his “base thoughts” (III.i.68), a lesson: she chastises his lust, wounds him with her sword, and chases him away. Moll's exposure of Laxton, it can be argued, bears indirectly on the shopwives' eventual exposure of the gallants, hence on their reunion with their husbands. At first, for example, Moll's behavior parallels that of the other women, when she accepts Laxton's offer for a liaison: the wives, though with more serious intent, allow themselves to be courted by their respective gallants. Then Moll changes, exposing Laxton: and the shopwives appropriately reject and expose the gallants, deciding that their husbands are better men. The fact that Laxton is the victim in both cases seems significant. The authors may be suggesting that Moll's exposure of a gallant, which is associated through imagery with a shopwife's exposure of the same gallant, symbolizes the exposure of gallants in general.¹⁹ Moll tells Laxton:

In thee I defye all men, their worst hates,
And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts,
With which they intangle the poore spirits of fooles,
Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallne wiues. (III.i.88–91)

The idea occurs two other times (III.i. 111–12 and 131–4). This juxtaposition of plots to create unity is what David Holmes calls Middleton's “*montage*

technique."²⁰ It is in this regard that Moll's relation to the subplot becomes more coherent than we may have at first thought.

Moll, then, in her hermaphroditic role, can be seen to unify the plots. In the main plot, through her role as reuniter, she helps reunite Sebastian and Mary; she helps reunite Alexander with the couple, in a group that includes Mary's father, Guy Fitzallard; and she rescues Jack Dapper from the officers, thus ensuring that he remain part of the comic society. Also in the main plot, through her role as exposé, she helps expose Alexander for his folly; she exposes Trapdoor, Alexander's unheroic henchman, and his equally shabby compatriot, Tearcat, for the imposters and beggars that they are (V.i); and she exposes the cutpurses who come to rob her and her friends. In the subplot, through her role as reuniter, she indirectly helps reunite the shopwives with their husbands. And also in the subplot, through her role as exposé, she exposes Laxton for his lust and folly.

Moll's role in the plot, her dual personality, and her hermaphroditic nature all contribute to an understanding of what seems at first sight a real hodge-podge of imagery. In fact, much of this imagery becomes intelligible only in the light of Moll's hermaphroditism. She becomes, for example, an amphibian, like Jonson's Tom Otter in *Epicoene* ("a land and sea captain") – a creature of both the water and the land: a mermaid (I.ii. 215), a duck (III.iii. 4), and a swan (IV.i. 78). Appropriately, she is associated with water (perhaps in accord with her link with Venus, who is traditionally born from the sea): Moll becomes, for example, an eel (II.i. 185–6). But she is also associated with the land; she is, according to Alexander, the dangerous "rocke" in the sea on which Sebastian will inevitably wreck himself (I.i. 105–6). Near the end of the play, the motif of land and water comes together when a messenger arrives to tell Alexander that his son and Moll Cutpurse have eloped and are going out to sea; then Trapdoor appears and says that they are down at the Tower. Greenwit says: "One brings vs water-newes; then comes an other ... And he reports the Tower" (V.ii. 45–7). This kind of dramaturgy makes best sense if we see Moll being represented as a creature of two natures, an amphibian who is adaptable to both land and water, traditional symbols of reason and passion.²¹ Similarly, Moll becomes, at various times, both the subject and the object of desire: she is both the fisherman and the fish (III.i.92–4 and I.ii.219–20); the rider and the horse (II.i. 294–5 and II.i. 256–7); the trapper and the trapped (particularly her trapping of Trapdoor and her being trapped by him – I.ii. 218 and 234–5); the player and the instrument (Moll as viol player at II.i. 191, and V.i. 212–3); and the tailor and the one who is fitted (V.i. 99–101).

Because Moll is a figure embodying both subject and object, balancing reason and passion, she has no real sexual desires herself: she is *asexual*. This is revealed more directly by her rejection of both Laxton and Sebastian (though Sebastian is merely playing a part here); by the prologue's reassur-

ance that she is not the usual lusty roaring girl but rather one who "flies / With wings more lofty" (25–6); and by her remark to Sebastian that "I haue no humor to marry, I loue to lye aboth sides ath bed my selfe" (II.ii. 35–6).²² As such, she bears resemblance to an *eros* figure Northrop Frye speaks of in *A Natural Perspective*:

sexual identity is a more deep-seated theme in comedy than it looks. The center of the comic drive toward identity is an erotic drive, and the spirit of comedy is often represented by an Eros figure who brings about the comic conclusion but is in himself sexually self-contained, being in a sense both male and female, and needing no expression of love beyond himself.²³

Frye goes on to identify Shakespeare's Puck and Ariel as belonging to this class of figure. Moll's asexual nature and her reconciling function link her with the Eros figure as well; as Sebastian puts it:

Twixt louers hearts, shee's a fit instrument,
And has the art to help them to their owne,
By her aduise, for in that craft shee's wise,
My loue and I may meete. ... (II.ii. 191–4)

The paradox involved in Moll being both Venus and Eros is not so odd if we recall traditional portrayals of Venus *herself* as an *eros* figure, as in Virgil's *Aeneid* or Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

Strange as it may sound, Moll Cutpurse becomes a figure of love representing the complete human identity, the union of male and female, and the corresponding principle of *concordia discors*, insofar as a drama of this nature will allow her to do so. The other couples in the play – Sebastian and Mary, the Gallipots, the Openworks, and the Tiltyards – all represent combinations of male and female trying to attain the complete identity. Moll and her group of couples thus correspond to Spenser's Venus and her couple, Amoret and Scudamour. Moll is indeed the "spirit of comedy" – the spirit of love as the shaping force of comedy.²⁴

There remains a final consideration. When Dekker and Middleton wrote *The Roaring Girl*, the age was in rapid transition. Elizabeth had just died a few years before, and James had ascended the throne. Compounding this fracture in social and political order, the old cosmic order of geocentricity was being rendered inaccurate, and a new cosmic order of heliocentricity was being offered in its place, throwing into doubt man's role in the universe. Literary order was also being threatened, for the great Elizabethan poet, Spenser, had just died, and his great artistic energy was splintering off in two principal directions: the lyric poetry of Donne, which rejected Spenser's style and form yet accepted his romantic vision; and the drama of Jonson, which rejected Spenser completely (at least for the while). The age was perhaps less in transition than in crisis.

This crisis seems to have been felt most intensely in the area of Jacobean drama – in comedy as well as in tragedy. An author like Dekker, for example, found himself in an age of Jonsonian satire with a Spenserian vision of romantic love. An author like Middleton, who shared Jonson's satiric habit of mind, found himself collaborating with a romantic like Dekker. Their creations – the characters within the plays – find themselves exchanging sexual identities. Amidst the confusion is born a hybrid form of comedy mixing romantic and satirical elements, such as we find in Dekker and Middleton's other collaboration, *The Honest Whore*, Part I, and in numerous other plays of the period. Indeed, the hybrid form becomes something of a norm.²⁵

During this time, Dekker and Middleton combine their romantic and satirical sensibilities in *The Roaring Girl*. Yet what is innovative here is the authors' creation of a figure who combines them both. Moll Cutpurse becomes the true spirit of a new comedy, for in her hermaphroditism are contained, not merely her two natures (female and male), or her two personalities (benign and irascible), or even her two roles within the plot (moderator-reuniter and inciter-exposer), but also the two halves of her "creator's" mind. Moll thus can be seen as a symbol, not merely of a civic Venus, but of a new hermaphroditic form of comedy combining romance with satire, Dekker with Middleton, Spenser with Jonson. The hermaphrodite, conventionally a symbol of sexual identity, expands to become a symbol of artistic identity as well. Middleton himself may be suggesting a link between the hermaphroditic Moll and the hybrid form of play he and Dekker are writing when he says in the preface, "The fashion of play-making, I can properly compare to nothing, so naturally, as the alteration in apparell." "Our plaies follow the nicenes of our Garments," he adds: "mingled with diuerse colours, you shall finde this published Comedy." Like the play, Moll Cutpurse becomes "mingled with diuerse colours." Moll becomes a symbol of hope for a regaining of artistic, as well as personal and social, identity – as the artistic energies of the period slowly transformed from the age of Spenser into the age of Jonson, and the serious dramatists tried to figure out, not merely who they were and where the world was going, but also what form their art should take.

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Notes

- 1 *Elizabethan Dramatists* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 89–93. Eliot still considered the 1927 essay of value in 1963 when he included it in his edition of selected essays.
- 2 For notes and articles on the technical problems of the play, see M. Dowling, "A Note on Moll Cutpurse: *The Roaring Girl*," *RES*, 10 (January 1934), 67–71; James G. McManaway, "Fortune's Wheel," *TLS* (April 16, 1938), p. 264; George R. Price, "The Manuscript and Quarto of *The Roaring Girl*," *Library*, 11 (1956), 182–3; William Power, "Double, Double," *N&Q*, 6 (1959), 4–8; and two

- recent articles by P.A. Mulholland: "The Date of *The Roaring Girl*," *RES*, 28 (1977), 18–31 (which fixes the date at 1611, rather than the conventional 1605), and "Some Textual Notes on *The Roaring Girl*," *Library*, 32 (1977), 333–43. For comments in books, see Anthony Covatta, *Thomas Middleton's City Comedies* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 10 and 137; David M. Holmes, *The Art of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 100–110; Norman A. Brittin, *Thomas Middleton* (New York: Twayne, 1972), pp. 77–9; and George R. Price, *Thomas Dekker* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 142, who agrees with Brittin about the portions of the play written by each author. For the New Mermaids edition, see *The Roaring Girl*, ed. Andor Gomme (London: Ernest Benn, and New York: W.W. Norton, 1976); on Moll as "the moral force of the play," see p. xxxiv.
- 3 *Elizabethan Dramatists*, p. 89.
 - 4 *Symposium*, 191d, trans. Michael Joyce, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961).
 - 5 *Commentary on Plato's "Symposium"*, Speech 4, Chapter 1, trans. Sears R. Jayne (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1944), pp. 154–5.
 - 6 *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958; rev. and enl., New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), p. 202. Future citations will be included in the text.
 - 7 *The New Inn*, III.ii. 79–82 and 105, in *Ben Jonson*, eds. C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1938), VI. That Jonson is referring directly to the Platonic myth, one of the characters, Lovell, lets us know: "It is a fable of Plato's, in his Banquet, / And vutter'd there, by Aristophanes" (86–7). In *Epicoene*, Jonson's parody of the Elizabethan notion of hermaphroditism becomes the subject for an entire play. On Jonson's use of the Platonic myth of the hermaphrodite, see Patrick Cheney, "Jonson's *The New Inn* and Plato's Myth of the Hermaphrodite," forthcoming in *Renaissance Drama*, volume XIV.
 - 8 *Twelfth Night*, V.i. 208, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951). Future citations will be included in the text.
 - 9 *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Sir Herbert Grierson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933).
 - 10 *Faerie Queene*, III. xii. 46 (original ending), in *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, eds. Ernest de Sélincourt and J.C. Smith (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1909), I. Future citations will be included in the text. See Donald Cheney, "Spenser's Hermaphrodite and the 1590 *Faerie Queene*," *PMLA*, 87 (March 1972), 192–200.
 - 11 Wind says that the "idea of Venus as a Goddess of moderation may be mythologically odd," but, he argues, Pico calls her "the goddess of concord and harmony," following Plutarch. In fact, the "concept of a beneficent, peaceable, guarded Venus was one of the more refreshing paradoxes of Neoplatonism" (p. 119). This duality, he adds, is not confined to Venus alone: "All the particular gods, in the Orphic theology as outlined by Pico, seem animated by a law of self-contrariety, which is also a law of self-transcendence" (p. 196). After providing examples of how this principle functions for all the major gods and goddesses (Venus is the goddess of concord but she loves strife), Wind concludes, "all the gods, without exception, appear in Orphic theology as inciters and moderators, they are *dei ambigui*" (p. 196).
 - 12 See Price, *Thomas Dekker*, pp. 69–74.
 - 13 I follow the definition of "citizen comedy" given by Alexander Leggatt in *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 3: a comedy "set in a predominantly middle-class social milieu." Leggatt briefly but perceptively discusses *The Roaring Girl* as a citizen comedy treating the theme of "chaste maids and whores" (pp. 109–10), arguing that Moll is an embodiment of chastity. As such, Moll resembles Britomart, Spenser's heroine of chastity.
 - 14 *The Roaring Girl*, I.ii. 131–35. All quotations are from *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), III. Future citations will be included in the text.
 - 15 To simplify matters, I talk of the shopwives and their gallants as a single group. Holmes, in *The Art of Thomas Middleton*, pp. 104–5, points out that the authors may originally have intended to develop the relation between Greenwit and Mistress Tiltyard but then gave the idea up.
 - 16 Cf. Holmes, *The Art of Thomas Middleton*, pp. 102 ff.: "There is one structurally simple plot in *The Roaring Girl*, ... and a more complex plot, or nexus of plots with a common motif." The play's plot structure corresponds most closely to Richard Levin's "three-level hierarchy" plot in *The Multiple Plot*

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in *English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), which features a main plot, a subplot, and "a third set of characters, usually of the clownish sort, who may be loosely attached to one of these major actions" (p. 55).

- 17 For the suggestion that Sebastian and Jack Dapper are meant to be compared, see III. iii. 53–7.
- 18 Although Jack Dapper is not brought on stage at the very end, he does appear in V.i reunited with both Moll and his friends.
- 19 See II.i. 287 and IV.ii. 41, where the word "shallow" is attached to Laxton. Holmes, in *The Art of Thomas Middleton*, p. 108, makes this point also.
- 20 Holmes, *The Art of Thomas Middleton*, p. 109; see also p. 10.
- 21 The connection between water and passion requires little comment. The connection between land and reason ("continent" and "continence"), though perhaps less familiar, was still traditional. See Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, III.iv. 10 for the pun on "continent" and "continence," noticed by A.C. Hamilton in his edition of *The Faerie Queene* (New York and London: Longman's, 1977), p. 338. See also III.v. 25, where the severed head (reason) of the forester falls on the land, while his body (passion) falls in the water.
- 22 See IV.i. 123, where Moll sings a song about a dream she has had, in which she *does* become a lover; then she adds: "but being awake, I keepe my legges together."
- 23 *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1965), p. 82.
- 24 Throughout the play, the authors refer to Moll as a *spirit* or in some way connect her with the idea of *spirit*. Laxton, for example, calls Moll "the *spirit* of foure great parishes" (II.i. 167); Trapdoor refers to her "heroicke *spirit*" (II.i. 320); Sebastian says of her: "She has a bold *spirit* that mingles with mankind" (II.ii. 169); Laxton says again, referring to Moll: "Heart I thinke I fight with a familiar [*spirit*], or the *Ghost* of a fencer" (III.i. 125); and Moll says of herself:

If I could meete my enemies one by one thus,
I might make pretty shift with 'em in time,
And make 'em know, she has wit, and *spirit*
May scorne to live beholding to her body for meate. (III.i. 131–4)

And again: "Base is that Minde, that kneels vnto her body. ... My *spirit* shall be Mistresse of this house" (III.i. 137–9).

- 25 For this idea I am indebted to Price, *Thomas Dekker*, who is continually drawing attention to Dekker the romanticist and Middleton the satirist; and to Andor Gomme, in the New Mermaids edition of the play, who says, p. xxii: "Doubtless Dekker's influence is responsible for softening the characteristic acerbity of Middleton's satiric humour. The play seems deliberately to attempt a fusion of the two principal streams into which, as Miss Bradbrook points out, English comedy had divided in about 1600: 'On the one hand, the popular domestic themes handled in sanguine and traditional ways: on the other, themes equally traditional, but handled in ways which were melancholic and satiric.'"