HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	The Curious Case of a Cutpurse: Unhistorical Queerness through Female Crossdressing within The Roaring Girl
Author(s)	Canbul, Ozge
Citation	Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, 17, 23-29
Issue Date	2022-02
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/jfhhs.17.23
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/84386
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	05_Canbul.pdf

Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers : HUSCAP

Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, Hokkaido University
Vol. 17; pp. 23−29, February 2022

The Curious Case of a Cutpurse: Unhistorical Queerness through Female Crossdressing within *The Roaring Girl*

Ozge CANBUL

Abstract: The gender-biased heteronormative social anxiety within the Renaissance culture requires an *other*, a queer other. The external misrepresentation and crossdressing of the character Moll Cutpurse, who is featured within Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's play *The Roaring Girl*, engages with this anxiety.

The ambiguities and queer implications surrounding her sexuality and gender-bias-resistant identity call for an anachronistic queer reading. In order to bridge the gap between the historicist and unhistoricist approaches, it is ideal to borrow the term "lipstick lesbian," a homosexual female who is similar to the archetype *femme lesbian* since they both support a normative feminine appearance. However, lipstick lesbian may use her feminine apparel to conceal her sexual identity. Moll's lipstick lesbian status is amplified because of multi-layer discrepancies between internal and external self, thus both the term and her queer self throughout the play becomes inverted. As the play progresses, Moll's queer identity and her acts of crossdressing and masculine display evolve from being cases of misrepresentation and misidentification into apparatuses which she utilizes to gain her own foothold within the gender-biased social dynamics.

Queerness within the play operates on various interchangeable layers and leads the way to her acceptance, as long as she accepts her role as the queer female who is not part of the predetermined heteronormative gender-biased social categories. Her queerness is amplified because of multi-layer discrepancies between internal and external self; thus, both the term and her queer self throughout the play becomes inverted. The resolution only comes when Moll is fully integrated both internally and externally into the society, as an honest woman in both male and female clothing.

(Received on October 28, 2021)

1. Introduction and Background

Transgressing social boundaries was a severe offense in Renaissance England. The strict social structure was regulated by laws and supported by political and civil institutions, as well as everyday decorum. Apparel was a crucial part of daily etiquette: it served as a tool in recognizing people's social

©2022 by the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, Hokkaido University
Ozge CANBUL: ozgecanbul@elms.hokudai.ac.jp
10.14943/jfhhs.17.23

place and standing, as well as reinforcing class immobility. Conceivably, violations of this social conduct through external misrepresentation occasioned some of the most severe penalties among all the transgressions. Renaissance dramatic productions provide a fertile field to observe why such breaches of conduct incited great fear among various ranks of the public. Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's play *The Roaring Girl*, published in 1611, which features Moll Cutpurse, is one such example. It is based on the real-life story of Mary Firth, who was a notorious thief and a crossdresser, commonly referred to in the play as the roaring girl or Moll Cutpurse. In what follows, this paper is going to argue that Moll's act of external misrepresentation and crossdressing can be used to address the gender-biased heteronormative social anxiety within the Renaissance culture, which requires an *other*, a queer other, in order to fully legitimize the hierarchal structure and subordination of women. The following sections will focus on the queerness that Moll provides and the way her queerness operates as a mirror for the dynamics of gender struggle between the normative and unconventional female characters. As the play progresses, Moll's queer identity and her acts of crossdressing and masculine display evolve from being cases of misrepresentation and misidentification into apparatuses which she utilizes to gain her own foothold within the gender-biased social dynamics. Revitalizing the term lipstick lesbian as a starting point in understanding Moll's position within the play while utilizing the historical facts and particulars will provide an approach that bridges ahistorical methods and historicism.

2. Analysis

In order to establish a well-rounded analysis, it is necessary to start with the epigraph from the title page of *The Roaring Girl*'s original, 1611 edition featuring a depiction of Moll Cutpurse in men's clothing and smoking a pipe alongside the following phrase: "My case is alter'd, I must worke for my living" (Dekker and Middleton 1). It is quite intriguing that such a line adorns the title page as it has no exact corresponding line within the play. Whether it was the result of an authorial agency or publisher's choice, adopting this line and the depiction as the frontispiece of the play create a build-up for the upcoming oddness or *queerness* and sets up the stage for the questioning of typical aspects of a comedy with a promise of heteronormative reproductive future at the end. While the sentence as a whole provides multiple interpretations, it is useful to parse it, starting with the punning of the word "case." As Mary Bly argues in her book, gendering of the "case" as a sexual pun was commonly female-oriented, it usually referred to feminine parts, and it was uncommon for male nether regions to be the target of this pun within Renaissance dramas (66). However, it was not unprecedented; occasionally, puns similar to "case," which are mainly female-oriented, were appropriated for male characters. Moreover, due to the nature of Renaissance theatre and crossdressing boy actors, puns such as the "case" become slippery in relation to their reference to body regions. In that sense, altering of the "case" loses its clarity of changing from female to male counterparts or apparel; it could also imply a change in the opposite direction and back again. Thus, as Mario DiGangi observes, because of the

The Roaring Girle.
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. Dekker.
My case is alter'd, I must worke for my living.
Printed at London for Thomas Archer, and are to be sold at his shop in Popes head-pallace, neere the Royall Exchange. 1611.

double-edged pun on the word "case," "'alter'd case' aptly describes the blurring of gender and sexual boundaries produced by Moll's crossdressing and 'masculine' behavior" (139).

The first part of the sentence expresses Moll's circumstances within the play rather well because it announces, "my case is alter'd" which suggests an outside force. The fact that syntax is structured through first-person possessive and pronoun, "my" and "I," rather than her and she is significant. Since this sentence is placed before the introduction of the dramatis personae, one would expect it to be conveyed through an external narrative voice in the form of the third person. The construction of the sentence makes Moll's queer situation the focal point and raises the question of agency because of the implication of an external force. The continuous misidentification she experiences at the hands of male and female characters alike, where she is perceived as a loose woman, at times a "whore," is the most crucial example of her "case" being altered by others, without the double reference to both female and male genitalia: as even when she socially engages entirely in her feminine self, her "low countries," are misidentified (Dekker and Middleton 2.1.211). Thus, her "case" changes in the public eye by means of external influences of a gendered-biased value system, while both Moll and play itself maintain an adamant stance that she is chaste. The rest of the sentence also endorse such a reading due to the fact that Moll has to exert additional effort to correct the mislabel and slander she faces.

Albeit, that is only one of the possible readings of the second half, "I must worke for my living" (Dekker and Middleton 1). The more common reading would regard the fiscal disparities between Moll and the citizen wives who can achieve a certain level of economic independence from their husbands via utilizing their domestic talents, such as sewing, but are still tied to the household businesses. Since Moll's case or situation is different from those wives and she does not have a husband, the phrase can be taken at its face value that she has to work independently for her living. Furthermore, the historical link between Mary Firth and Moll also contributes to the material reading of the work Moll does for a living, opens the second part of the sentence up for possibilities, such as through her crossdressing and altered apparel Moll works as a cutpurse or deals with counterfeiting.[1] Notwithstanding, such materialist readings of the play tend to disregard the situational queerness experienced by Moll as a byproduct of the gender-biased society and the vagueness of identity she produces willingly. As DiGangi further comments, the phrase can be read as Moll voluntarily "altering" her "case" with her unorthodox choice of clothing and masculine attitude; consequently, unlike her fellow female characters, any income she procures is for herself and she is financially independent of any husband (139).

She deviates even further from the heteronormative social order by rebuffing Sebastian's courtship by implying, similar to her identity, the inner truth of her sexuality is ambiguous; "I love to lie o'both sides o'th'bed myself, and again o'th'other side … I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman" (Dekker and Middleton 2.2.36-37). Her declaration of dominance to such a degree over the sexualized sanctum sanctorum of matrimonial bed, which is considered an inherently heteronormative plane where women are subordinate, is Moll's ultimate queer transgressive moment of the play. The implications of playing both the passive and active roles within the sexual domain aside, it provides a justification for the change of external appearance while granting an anchor point to pin down her act of crossdressing. She infringes on the boundaries of the acceptable gender role for women, which expects

1 For more information on such material readings please refer to, Valerie Forman, "Marked Angels: Counterfeits, Commodities, and The Roaring Girl," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54,4 (2001): 1531-560.

submission and subordination, via creating an ambiguous inner truth about her sexuality and refusing to abide by the established perimeters of heteronormative gender roles. Thus, the play does not punish her for severing the ties between external form and internal truth, nor for utilizing her crossdressing for carving out a niche for herself as the necessary other. Ultimately, this discrepancy between image and words, reality and etiquette within the play's foundation is the manifestation of Moll's inherent queerness.

The ambiguities and queer implications surrounding her sexuality and gender-bias-resistant identity call for an anachronistic queer reading. Thus, the term *lipstick lesbian* will be applied in a slightly *altered* fashion befitting Moll herself. Although the term acquired different connotations over the years, *lipstick lesbian*, which dates back to the early 1980s, refers to a homosexual female who retains gender-biased feminine appearances.[2] It is similar to the archetype *femme lesbian* on the spectrum of self-presentation since they both support a normative feminine appearance, even though the lipstick lesbian may use her feminine apparel to conceal her sexual identity under certain circumstances. As Madhavi Menon suggests that,

Rather than being suggestive of her sexual identity, the lipstick lesbian's desire is understood to be the opposite of the straight femininity she performs. This understanding is based on two assumptions: one that identity should be transparent - you need to look like what you are; and two, that femininity in and of itself is putatively hetero - femme women are straight until proved otherwise. The lipstick lesbian does not coincide with herself, and the fear is that her appearance does not line up with her "reality" (188).

The discrepancy created via the contrast between external appearance and inner self resonates deeply within *The Roaring Girl*, and on so many layers. Moll's difference from the chaste citizen wives and suburban whores, and her social misidentification are amplified by the divergent choices she makes regarding both her demeanor and her apparel. Moll disproves the assumption that identity is transparent both by her impeccable drag, which fools characters and via her suggestive acts and comments, such as admitting that she likes to occupy both sides of the bed. While positioning herself against the dictations of gender roles, she is still adamant in her stance that she is chaste and she is a woman, even when she is "man enough for a woman" (Dekker and Middleton 2.2.43). Moll becomes an altered version of the lipstick lesbian, as she does not use femininity to cloak her sexual orientation or sexuality: yet, she utilizes the same principle of manipulating the surface in order to create opacity and vagueness for her inner truth and identity.

The lipstick lesbian term provides some relief and a radial point to one of the essential discussions regarding sexuality, gender, and queer theory: acts versus identity. A lipstick lesbian's identity is not transparent: her exterior appearance not only cloaks her inner truth but also disguises it and projects an opposite ideal instead. She achieves this misdirection by manipulating the surface through her acts. As such, she eludes the concept of a translucent identity and rejects the idea that acts are projections and reflections of the queer identity. Thus, the lipstick lesbian brings the acts and identity together in order to create a unique existence, an opaque gendered reality. It is neither merely an act nor solely an identity, but a combination of the two on equal terms. The lipstick lesbian's acts are not insidious reflections of her sexuality. Neither her sexuality nor inner truth, nor identity caters to a physiological status.

---

2 Other meanings including, but no limited to, "conventionally attractive and sexually insatiable women who desire one another but only insofar as their desire is a performance for male onlookers or a precursor to sex with men" - Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, Volume 1. (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 492.

Part of the heteronormative identity and gender role imposed on Moll within the play includes wearing proper women's clothing, but the other part is heavily contingent on her chastity and her actions. The discrepancy between the way she acts and her projected image creates an opaque screen for her identity. Moll strengthens the ambiguity through both her lines and actions, such as playing the viol in a suggestive manner or engaging in swordplay with Laxton, both of which happens while she is in full male drag. Moll, as the author of her acts, is not merely a *subject*. She deliberately proclaims her preference to sleep *on both sides of the bed*. She is aware of the implications of being unfit for the role of a chaste and compliant wife within the current social structure of the play, yet she chooses to perform outside the normative categorizations. Her performance has two layers: first, the implication of being both active and submissive sexually, and second, the act of conveying this information to one of the most heteronormative characters within the play. Through these prudent actions, she achieves a level of self-fulfilling prophecy, as the second half of her speech boasts how she has the faculties to think and execute decisions for herself because she is her own master and "man enough for a woman" (Dekker and Middleton 2.2.43).

In order to avoid confusion with the *hermaphrodite* strand of the recent criticism, her manliness, in this case, extends so far as a reasoning point for her act of crossdressing and part of her lipstick lesbianism which thrives on the discrepancy between visage and truth, surface and depth. The representations of Moll's lipstick lesbianism have been evoked on multiple occasions. Moll performs her role on the two extreme ends of the female imagery spectrum within the Renaissance culture. While crossdressing as a man, her gender performance is either hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine, which further complicates the discrepancies between the layers of perception and appearance. The scene where she plays the viol, which is considered "an unmannerly instrument for a woman," is one of the prime examples of her hyper-feminine sexuality combined with full masculine drag (Dekker and Middleton 4.1.95-98). The punning of the "instrument" is hard to miss as she plays the viol by gripping it between her thighs (Dekker and Middleton 4.1.96). It is possible to argue at this point that the act of crossdressing, which caused Moll to be misidentified as a wanton woman earlier, protects her maidenhood honor. The only difference between respectable women and Moll, who is openly playing an instrument between her legs, is the fact that Moll performs this act while wearing breeches. Moreover, this scene is crucial to the gender struggle dynamics and queerness, for the reason that according to the Epilogue, "The Roaring Girl herself," the real-life Mary Firth may also visit and come upon the stage (Dekker and Middleton 137). As Elizabeth Cook notes in the introduction of the play, there is a record of Firth's performance at the Fortune, where she "sat there upon the stage in the public view of all the people there present in mans apparel and played upon her lute and sang a song" (Dekker and Middleton xviii). Various social implications can be derived, regarding the Renaissance heteronormative gender dynamics, from having Moll's lute performance on the stage, in full view, in a masculine drag complete with "her boots" and "a sword," while the boy-actor who is in a feminine drag, crosses the gender dress code once more and replicates her performance with a viol: one of those implications would be the acceptance of queerness, both from the audience and Moll herself, due to the fact that she was not seen as out of place or norm at that moment, even if she was judged and brought to penitentiary later on.

There are two major concerns regarding the application of gender within social norms: the performative aspect of gender and the precarity which surrounds it. According to Judith Butler,

> To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the "appearance" of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted

> by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; and finally, there is no gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines (i).

Moll's refusal to portray the *inherent* qualities of her gender produces conflict within her immediate social interactions. Changing her appearance is her way of reproducing a more suitable gendered reality for herself. However, showing agency in such a manner not only produces conflict but also comes with consequences.

The second part of the gender conundrum is the precarity, which "seems to focus on conditions that threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one's control" (Butler i). Butler argues that precarity singularize a politically induced condition, in which social and political institutions take measures to make sure base needs for existence are available to people; however, it also characterizes the vulnerability and exposure to social persecution against which the same institutions do not provide adequate protection (ii). As a result of its communal nature, precarity is essentially connected to gender and its social norms and implications. Since the performative aspect reshapes the gendered reality in accordance with the gender role's enactment, behaving appropriately to, or in Moll's case outside of, gender norms affect how one is perceived in the social sphere; in turn, it makes them either more or less susceptible to precarity. The degrees of precarity Moll experiences consist of slander, misidentification, and harassment, as a result of her rendition of the gendered reality. From the very beginning of the play, before even the audience or reader meets Moll, she is labeled in various ways, "There's a wench called Moll, mad Moll, or merry Moll, a creature so strange in quality, a whole city takes note of her name and person" (Dekker and Middleton 1. 2.97-100). As Moll's reputation travels through the city, it also becomes warped, and as it becomes more and more distorted, it changes from supplementary adjectives, such mad and merry, into, "Some will not stick to say she's a man and some both man and woman" (Dekker and Middleton 2.1.194-195). Upon facing this situational queerness and weaponizing the reputation she already possesses throughout the city, Moll chooses to utilize her crossdressing and acknowledge her stance of the queer other through her gendered reality as a reactionary move.

3. Conclusion

Considering the profound and complex social implications of crossdressing in the Renaissance era, it is hard to draw all-encompassing conclusions based on *The Roaring Girl* alone. However, this play provides solid insights as it is based on the real-life Mary Firth, and there are records of her "case" in a public court. Moreover, *The Roaring Girl* is uniquely suitable for the unhistoricist approach while still being connected to history. Moll's lipstick lesbianism and queerness strengthen the anachronistic reading of her behavior and transgression across the gendered dress code. Moll's lipstick lesbian status in itself deviates from both timelines: the play's historical period and the term's period. Her queerness is amplified because of multi-layer discrepancies between internal and external self; thus, both the term and her queer self throughout the play becomes inverted. Withal, I will borrow Eve Sedgwick's famous quote regarding queerness as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8). It is not unsettling, then; Moll's queerness

operates on various interchangeable layers and leads the way to her acceptance, as long as she accepts her role as the queer female who is not part of the predetermined heteronormative gender-biased social categories. The resolution only comes when Moll is fully integrated both internally and externally into the society, as an honest woman in both male and female clothing. In the end, what's left for Moll and possibly for all the queers is to adopt, adapt, and utilize the queer identity and push through the restrictions caused by the heteronormativity and find a place of belonging and acceptance.

Bibliography

Bly, Mary. *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Butler, Judith. "Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Policies." *AIBR, Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2009, pp. 321e-36e. *EBSCO*, doi:10.11156/aibr.040305.

Dekker, Thomas, and Thomas Middleton. *The Roaring Girl*. Edited by Elizabeth Cook, New Mermaids, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997.

DiGangi, Mario. *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Forman, Valerie. "Marked Angels: Counterfeits, Commodities, and The Roaring Girl." *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 4-Part2, 2001, pp. 1531-60. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/1262161.

Menon, Madhavi. "Love's Labour's Lost: The L Words." *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by Madhavi Menon, Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 187-94.

O'Brien, Jodi. *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*. 1st ed., vol. 1, SAGE Publications, 2009.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. Duke University Press, 1993.