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Cut Purses and Poisoned Paintings: Resisting Gender Objectification

by

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Abstract

The early modern English stage often portrays gender as polarized, creating an unwelcoming atmosphere toward characters who act exhibit characteristics from both male and female genders. Moll Cutpurse from Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* and Alice of *Arden of Faversham* resist early modern gender boundaries, conflating masculine and feminine attributes as they use objects to navigate their respective social spaces. Critics often describe Moll as a transvestite due to her fashion choice to wear a codpiece, along with her exaggerated, boisterous masculine behavior; however, she consistently defends her biological sex, implicating herself within her arguments concerning female chastity. As she duels with a sword for the honor of women, Moll inhabits a masculine persona. Alice, on the other hand, is often considered solely feminine, yet she exhibits early modern masculine characteristics when she acts within her commodity-driven surroundings to plot her husband's murder by using poisoned objects and coins. By using objects to exert masculinity, Moll and Alice reveal the early modern concern of women's abilities to adopt masculine qualities. The male responses within these plays show attempts to contain these women, as both are branded as criminals. Both women act against the law: Moll is a cutpurse, and Alice is an adulteress and, by the conclusion of the play, a murderess. Thus, *The Roaring Girl* and *Arden of Faversham* reveal the existence of female characters who defy the gender binary by using objects to adopt masculine characteristics. As they resist polarity, however, Moll and Alice must also exist within the realm of criminality.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Cut Purses and Poisoned Paintings: Resisting Gender Objectification	1
Works Cited	32

Cut Purses and Poisoned Paintings: Resisting Gender Objectification

Within early modern culture, gender was considered in fairly polarized terms. Masculine and feminine behavior were dictated by expectations and precedents connected to biological sex. A man was an agent of action and will, a woman of reaction and passivity. Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* presents a cross-dressing heroine who instigates plot events through her own willpower. The character of Moll Cutpurse presents a problematic figure for early modern English culture: often described as a transvestite, Moll challenges male characters to duels while defending female chastity. While the anonymous *Arden of Faversham* may not include a cross-dressing heroine of the urban space, Alice presents similar issues within the context of her society. Through utilizing feminine passivity in her husband's presence, Alice gains the necessary agency to exhibit masculine behavior as she plots his murder. Thus, both female characters exhibit qualities from both genders, unveiling the anxiety of contemporaries toward gender transgression within marital and social boundaries.

Masculine and Feminine Characteristics in Early Modern England

Masculinity and femininity were defined as almost polar opposites in early modern England. Particularly in contemporary plays, a character's masculinity was shown through his impulse to take actions, while one's femininity was tied to her reactions (Hansen 164). The actions of male characters often become the driving forces of the play. Female characters, however, can problematize this distinction. To provide a

brief example, the interchange between Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* spurs on the main plot. By cross-dressing, however, female characters like Portia become able to navigate the male space and instigate their own actions (Hansen 166). For our example, we will reference the court scene, as Portia's role within this scene is less definitive than often acknowledged. Portia, a character lauded for her actions within the court, must actually first react to the actions of Bassanio, Shylock, and Antonio to even appear on stage at this point in the play. She thus displays feminine reaction, as the men's actions result in her entrance to the courtroom. Once she arrives at court, however, Portia's own actions and argumentative strategies overturn the power dynamic in the play: Shylock, Antonio, Bassanio, and the other interlocutors of the court react to her words, enabling her to temporarily take control of the plot. Portia thus adopts the masculine characteristic of instigating her own actions, also demonstrating the slippery nature of the gender distinction of action and reaction.

Early modern English society generally viewed masculinity as an attribute that was not guaranteed among men. Stephen Orgel describes the early modern moralist view of masculinity as "not a natural condition but a quality to be striven for and maintained only through constant vigilance, and even then with the utmost difficulty" (19). In this reading, one's masculinity is a matter of will and performance. This view leaves women an opportunity to engage in masculine behavior, while placing men in danger of losing their masculinity. While Moll's attire enables her to navigate the male sphere, she reveals her anxiety to maintain masculinity through her actions, particularly as she engages in sword duels and swears loudly during conversation. Alice, on the other hand, performs masculinity in a more subtle capacity. Unlike Moll, she retains female garb throughout

the play, so she must move into male-dominated discourse in a different mode. Her actions begin to drive the play as she assists in the plots for her husband's death. She specifically instigates some elements within the murder plot. For example, Alice devises the plan for a fight to break out, which she hopes will result in Arden's seemingly accidental murder. She tells Mosby:

First tell me how you like my new device:
Soon, when my husband is returning back,
You and I both marching arm in arm,
Like loving friends, we'll meet him on the way,
And boldly beard and brave him to his teeth.
When words grow hot and blows begin to rise,
I'll call those cutters forth your tenement,
Who, in a manner to take up the fray,
Shall wound my husband Hornsby to the death (12.60-68).

In this quote, Alice constructs and spurs on the action, also planning a part for Mosby. At the beginning, she hurriedly describes her plan, indicating a sense of urgency that points to the will and determination involved in this display of masculine action. Thus, while Alice does not cross-dress to achieve masculinity, she formulates a plan of action, to which Mosby reacts as they execute the plot. She therefore defies the typical gender divide.

It must be noted that Moll and Alice also exhibit senses of feminine reaction, but they do so in strikingly different ways. Moll displays masculinity through her actions, yet she often acts in response to other characters. When she challenges Laxton to a duel, for example, Moll is actually reacting to his comments that question her potential promiscuity and the sexual nature of women in general. Additionally, her assistance in Sebastian's plot also displays some reaction, since she must be paid in order to act. Thus, while Moll does act on her own accord, certain circumstances must arise before she

moves. Her character therefore combines male and female roles of action and reaction, problematizing the contemporary gender divide. Alice, on the other hand, performs feminine reaction to shield her impulses to action as she obeys Arden's directives while in his presence in order to attempt to resist suspicion. For example, we first encounter Alice as she responds to her husband's call, "How, Alice!" (1.56). She later wordlessly exits the stage at his command, when he states, "Alice, make ready my breakfast; I must hence" (1.299). By obeying Arden while she is in his presence, Alice attempts to protect herself as she arranges several murder plots against her husband. Therefore, both Moll and Alice blur the line of action and reaction that defines gender within early modern drama, as they both appropriate the masculine characteristic of action within their performances.

The willpower of both Alice and Moll enables them to embody masculine characteristics. Related to this connection between masculinity and will is Jean Howard's distinction of passion and reason as pointing to femininity and masculinity, respectively. Howard describes masculinity as the ability to exert rationality to control one's passions, while she defines femininity as placing passion before reason (96-97). She takes the *Henry VI* plays as a case study, claiming that Henry VI fails partially because he grows effeminate, enabling his passion to control his actions (96). Margaret, on the other hand, exhibits rationality—and therefore masculinity—as she leads Henry's men into battle (Howard 97). Howard furthers this distinction by examining the character of Jack Cade, the lower class rebel whose "most notable attributes are an artisanal physical vigor and raw, class-based anger at the nobility" (99). While Cade exhibits some sense of passion through his anger, Howard claims the control associated with this passion, as it is directed

at the nobility, maintains his masculinity (99). Moll and Alice reveal the slippery nature of gender association implicit in the distinction Howard describes. For example, during Moll's encounter with Laxton, when she challenges him to a duel, she retains her rationality as she gives a lengthy speech concerning female chastity and the incorrect views of women that men harbor. She states that she will duel Laxton in a sword fight in order to "teach" his "base thoughts manners" because he is "one of those / That thinks each woman thy [his] fond flexible whore" (3.1.68-69). Moll generalizes the male sex as she states that Laxton believes women as open to their sexual advances. Although the men in this play tend to think that Moll—and women in general—is an easy target for their sexual advances, she states that these men have no reason with which they can bolster this position. Moll takes this point further by stating, "I scorn to prostitute myself to a man, / I that can prostitute a man to me" (3.1.107-108.). In these lines, Moll utilizes masculine reason as she becomes the agent of female chastity, overturning the typical idea of men as sexually tempting women and stating that she can do the same to men, if she chose to do so. While still an outburst of passion toward Laxton's words, Moll's argument exhibits directed passion and convincing rhetoric as she proves Laxton's assumptions incorrect. She even suggests that men are more subject to passion than she is, contradicting the typical distinction between passion and reason present in her context.

Alice, on the other hand, can be considered to be acting within this passion-reason divide in two different ways. One approach would be to view her as mainly controlled by passion, as her attraction to Mosby results in the plot of the play. She articulates this point as she states, "Yet nothing could enforce me to the deed / But Mosby's love" (1.273-275). At the same time, however, Alice's ability to control the plot against her husband

maintains directed rationality. As Mary Floyd-Wilson aptly describes, Alice “demonstrates a knack for bringing people into her murderous web. She privately negotiates Michael's involvement, she relies on Susan's loyalty, she speaks to Green in secret, persuading him to murder, and she has the hard-bitten Black Will and Shakebag hoping to please her” (53). Thus, although her goals are affected by passion toward Mosby, Alice illustrates a profound sense of direction, exhibiting masculinity through reason. Both Moll and Alice therefore present blurred gender distinctions within the passion-reason dynamic Howard describes, performing both feminine and masculine roles as they direct passion and maintain reason.

Resisting Gender Classification Through Objects: Introduction

As Moll and Alice both resist general social expectations of early modern women. We most clearly view their acknowledgement and rejection of these expectations and assumptions through the objects they use. *Arden of Faversham* and *The Roaring Girl* both feature women who utilize objects that enable them to traverse gender boundaries and stereotypes. Even though Alice operates in the female sphere and attempts to employ poison—a typically female mode of harm—within soup and paintings, her monetary transactions with her husband’s potential murderers and her acknowledgement of property entitlement suggest more masculine qualities. Moll Cutpurse, on the other hand, occupies the public space of the city, donning a codpiece and sword, yet argues for female chastity and defends the truth. The objects Moll and Alice use as they defy the strict gender labels of their time are inextricably connected to the traditional expectations of early modern women.

Alice's Marital Roles: Property, Money, and Poison in *Arden of Faversham*

One of the major differences between Alice and Moll lies in their position as married or single. While Moll adamantly states that she will remain a single woman, Alice actually yearns to transfer herself from one marriage to another. Akiko Kusunoki explores the difference between a wife's outward appearance and inner sense of self, which enlightens the conversation concerning Alice's feminine behavior toward her husband, compared to her masculine actions that are instrumental in his murder. While Kusunoki addresses married aristocratic women in particular, her conception of the disjointedness between marital expectations and actual personalities relates greatly to Alice's characterization (125). The gap between private thoughts and outward appearance enabled women to identify their interior senses of self (Kusunoki 125, 127). Kusunoki defines this sense of self as only partially related to the patriarchal society in which women live. (127). She states that a woman's persona was additionally influenced by social concepts of gender and contemporary economic conditions, both of which contributed to the creation of a new conception of womanhood that was different from traditional views (Kusunoki 127). Citing Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Kusunoki claims that this construction of married women's senses of self stemmed from their desire to free themselves from social and cultural assumptions concerning womanhood (127). Kusunoki states that *Arden of Faversham* represents Alice as within this new idea of the self: therefore, her inward ideas of her persona and her outward appearance create a double role (132). This duality created by the conjunction of inner self and outward appearance enables Alice's sexual transgression by causing little suspicion on Arden's

part (Kusunoki 132). By consciously maintaining her outward appearance, Alice performs the role of the wife in Arden's presence, while her private thoughts retain affection toward Mosby. This dual role also allows for her to exhibit subjection in Arden's presence, as she follows directives and acts within the household, while also allowing increased masculine agency in his absence. When apart from Arden, Alice's inner self can surface and exert more control over the murder plot because she distances herself from the role of the wife when physically separate from her husband.

Alice therefore works against the identity of the wife during key points of the play, particularly when she moves into the male sphere of commerce and property. Marriage was the social expectation for early modern women, and, under the doctrine of coverture, the man and woman would become one person in the husband (Mendelson and Crawford 37). Thus, the married woman's position regarding property ownership and trading is nearly nonexistent under legal parameters. Alice's plan to murder Arden usurps this social construct, as her husband's property would legally transfer to her. Once a widow, Alice intends to marry Mosby, which would also result in a second exchange of the property to her new husband. Therefore, through her actions, Alice attempts to take control of Arden's property, defying traditional legal standards of the married woman. While doing so, however, Alice continues to inhabit the female space, as she maintains the cliché social roles of women as wife, widow, and—had her plan worked—wife again.

Upon consideration of the early modern English definition of a widow, Alice partially acts as if Arden has already died. Alice is largely ungoverned by her husband, and she handles her own monetary property and directs servants of the estate. Both of these rights were gained when a woman was widowed in early modern England

(Jankowski 36). Widows were also often associated with promiscuity by the general population. Since widowed women would lose their legal identities upon remarriage, they sometimes chose not to remarry (Jankowski 36). This decision typically elicited the general social belief that widows were promiscuous (Jankowski 36). Jankowski argues that there was no factual basis to this claim, but this accusation reflects social ideology of women at the time (36). She expands upon the ramifications of this view as she states:

Branding widows as social pariahs did accomplish one thing: it served to contain that one group of women who could exist with a legal identity without direct control of a man. The technique of naming widows ‘whore’ serves to reinforce the fact that uncontrolled women were perceived as threats. Widows could not be directly controlled by laws, because the law granted them an identity. Thus, they were controlled by name-calling (Jankowski 36).

While Alice is not yet a widow, she performs her own limited legal identity as she organizes Arden’s murder, particularly as she participates in commercial exchange, commodifying her husband’s death by placing a price upon it. This social role with which Alice engages—yet does not fully claim—threatened the public order because it enabled women to maintain roles within the typically male-dominated legal and commercial spheres.

While utilizing some methods of the widow role to exert some control over her servants and within monetary interactions, Alice also commits the crimes of a married woman. She violates her chastity, speaks of her own accord, and disobeys her husband (Jankowski 38). Jankowski claims that the subversive possibilities of the woman’s body can be related to the violation of its openings (38). As an emblem of the house, an early modern woman who lets a man into these openings also gives him access to her husband’s home and possessions (Jankowski 38). Arden even articulates this social

anxiety as he and Franklin discuss their return home, stating that, if he were to go to London with Franklin, “Then that base Mosby doth usurp my room / And makes his triumph of my being thence” (4.29-30). Mosby and Alice actually acknowledge this transgression, as Mosby states, “I hope now Master Arden is from home, / You’ll give me leave to play your husband’s part” (1.637-638). His word choice implies that Alice holds control over his entrance into the home and his usurpation of Arden’s role, as she must allow him to do so. She responds, “Mosby, you know who’s master of my heart; / He well may be the master of the house” (1.639-640). Thus, she enables Mosby to step inside the physical and emotional space through her speech. Arden refuses to fully acknowledge Mosby’s entrance into his home, however, by locating the home in his heart: “At home or not at home, where’er I be, / Here, here it lies, [*Points to his heart*] ah, Franklin, here it lies / That will not out till wretched Arden dies” (4.31-33). Arden thus attempts to reject the typical ideology of the home by claiming that he actually embodies the space. By doing so, he states that no one can claim the home until he dies. Alice, however, has already allowed Mosby into the house through the openings Jankowski mentions: her mouth directs the murder and converses with her lover, while she is also open for him to commit adultery with her. Additionally, by planning the transference of Arden’s possessions to Mosby, Alice rejects Arden’s defiance of the conception of the home. She therefore resists typical marital roles as she allows another man to enter into her husband’s home physically and symbolically, through the door and by adultery. It then becomes ironic that Arden insists Mosby come to his house as often as possible, to display he means no harm. In actuality, Mosby has already entered the home through

Alice, whose plans regarding Arden's property indicate her expectation of the widow role, which retains some masculinity due to the additional control it offers.

Alice also approaches more masculine behavior as she turns to methods within a more public sphere. While the custom of London allowed some married women to trade under *feme sole* status, Alice notably lives outside of the urban space (Mendelson and Crawford 39). She is expected to adhere to the more typical standard, which dictated that married woman could rarely trade on her own account (Mendelson and Crawford 169). Although wives were able to own very little, except for their individual clothing and food, they were expected to produce, prepare, and maintain various items within the home, like meals, household goods, herbs, tools, and utensils (Mendelson and Crawford 38, 220). Several of Alice's conceptions for Arden's murder work within this mode of the housewife. She uses or considers using poison—a typically female approach to murder—in several attempts.

Notably, Mosby is the first to suggest poison, as he describes to Alice a nearby painter's skill to “temper poison with his oil / That whoso looks upon the work he draws” shall die (1.229-230). He tells Alice his plan for the painter to “draw thy [Alice's] counterfeit, / That Arden may by gazing on it perish” (1.233-234). Alice quickly responds with possible flaws to the plan, like the lack of control toward whoever views the painting, but Mosby insists she leave the responsibility to him. As the painter Clarke enters the scene, Alice claims that “nothing could enforce me to the deed / But Mobsy's love” (1.273-274). She seems to displace the blame for the plan onto Mosby in these lines, but, after Mosby's suggestion to pursue a different method of poison, Alice offers her own alternative plot: “Ay, such as might be put into his broth, / And yet in taste not

be found at all” (1.280-281). By suggesting this route, Alice places control of the plot within her own hands, as she must put the poison in the soup, which she must prepare as the woman of the house. When she abandons the attempt when Arden questions the broth’s flavor, Alice performs the role of a scorned wife, claiming that Arden dislikes the soup because he distrusts her. Mosby even acknowledges her acting, stating, “It was cunningly performed” (1.419). Thus, Alice uses the space of the household to both attempt to poison her husband and to cover her tracks when Arden brings the soup into question. By considering and utilizing these household items—particularly the soup—for her murder attempts, Alice works within the traditionally female space in her early attempts to murder her husband. As the play progresses, however, she increasingly develops a doubled role by exhibiting agency and moving into the masculine realm of commercial exchange.

Wives were not typically able to trade within the social sphere on their own accounts, even with most items they produced (Mendelson and Crawford 219). While a few outliers to this general statement exist, such as egg money, wives rarely entered the commercial space (Mendelson and Crawford 220). Their culture of exchange existed in the neighborhood setting, and they particularly traded material goods with other wives who lived nearby (Mendelson and Crawford 220-221). In *Arden of Faversham*, however, Alice does not engage with the neighbors, whose presence is acknowledged by Arden’s statement that the neighbors would watch and comment upon Mosby’s visits. When her attempt at poison fails, Alice does not reach out for help within the womanly space of the neighborhood. Instead, she transgresses the role of the wife and engages in commercial exchange, hiring Greene, Black Will, and Shakebag and paying them directly. Shortly

after the failure of the poisoned soup, Alice engages in conversation with Greene, claiming that her relationship with Arden is in shambles: “Ah, Master Greene, be it spoken in secret here, / I never live good day with him alone” (1.492-493). After soiling Arden’s reputation in Greene’s eyes by painting Arden as physically abusive and adulterous, Greene states that “I shall be the man / Shall set you free from all discontent” (1.510-511). After manipulating him, Alice gives Greene money to hire someone to kill Arden, promising him more money, along with restoration of previous land ownership, once the deed is complete. She even shakes his hand to seal the deal, fully performing masculine practice within the commercial space. When she and Mosby meet the group consisting of Greene, Black Will and Shakebag after several failed attempts at murdering Arden, Alice again provides them with funds, to “pay for a fire and good cheer” (12.53). She then directs them to go to the Flower-de-Luce inn at Faversham to rest before their next attempt, again using money so she can give orders. By directly engaging in commercial exchange, Alice inhabits a typically male space, resisting the role of the wife in her attempt to make herself a widow who can remarry.

Using Sir Thomas Overbury’s 1614 poem *A Wife*, Akiko Kusunoki identifies four characteristics Jacobean authors envisioned for the ideal wife, most of which Alice rejects. These attributes include goodness, or obedience to Christian morality, with particular emphasis upon marital chastity (Kusunoki 4). Due to its connection to religion, marital chastity involved purity of the soul; therefore, adultery was considered a serious sin (Kusunoki 5). In literary tradition, Kusunoki states that “murder was considered to be the natural consequence of adultery,” indicating that many adulteresses in early modern

drama also become involved in murder (5).¹ Alice's character follows this tradition, and her sin as an adulteress and a murderess results in the occult nature of her downfall. Mary Floyd-Wilson connects the occult aspects of *Arden of Faversham* with the concept of contagion on the part of Alice. Floyd-Wilson states that the "bold woman, whose strong emotions infected those around her, was repeatedly cited as an exemplum of occult transmission" (47). Alice's power of persuasion enables her to contaminate others, particularly through her immoral and adulterous behavior (Floyd-Wilson 52). This aspect of her persona results in the occult nature of Arden's corpse: it exhibits cruentations, which Floyd-Wilson defines as a dead body bleeding when the murderer is present (58). This reaction of the corpse physically manifests the infection Alice begins with her adulterous acts. Through her resistance to wifely chastity, Alice follows the tradition of the adulterous woman by causing Arden's murder, even causing occult contagion through her actions.

Other characteristics of a wife as described by Overbury include limited knowledge. While intelligence was considered as necessary for women, education was regarded unfavorably because Jacobean believed learned women would become more vocal concerning their opinions, which was considered a masculine characteristic (Kusunoki 6-7). While we learn little about Alice's education, Alice often expresses her opinions when Arden is not present on stage. For example, she rejects Black Will's plan to stab Arden within a crowd as "unpossible" (14.74). Soon after, she declares Black Will's following plot to wrap a towel around Arden and pull him to the ground so he can stab him as "A fine device!" (14.123) Thus, in this example, Alice critically considers

¹ Notably, this connection between adultery and murder can also occur in different ways, like how men may murder women because they believe them to be adulteresses, as in the case of Othello.

possibilities for future murder attempts before giving Black Will the affirmative to act, promising more money if the plot succeeds. Related to Alice's opinionated speech is her rejection of wifely modesty, also labeled as discretion by Overbury (Kusunoki 9).

Kusunoki states that the social expectation of modesty discouraged wives from "initiating action or expressing their true feelings eloquently" (9). Alice, as shown when she considers and directs murder plots, does both in the play, while also disregarding the fourth characteristic for wives that Overbury describes: fitness, or "submission to male authority" (Kusunoki 11). Alice often follows Arden's directives while both characters are on stage, but she continuously acts against her husband when he is not present, illustrating the dual roles she performs. Additionally, in the case of this specific conversation with Black Will, she actually makes Black Will submit to her authority through her opinionated speech and through her promises for additional money. Thus, while analyzing Alice's performance as a wife in terms of Kusunoki's connections to Overbury, we learn that Alice fails as a wife not only by planning her husband's murder but also by rejecting the typical social expectations of wives.

Resistance Through Speech: Alice's Duplicity

Directly speaking one's thoughts was considered a masculine characteristic because it resisted the passivity typically associated with women, but also because vocalizing opinions illustrates internal knowledge of one's own power. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford identify the scold as a cliché feminine role in which words were used as weapons (215). While Alice does not directly embody the role of the scold, since she varies her language styles drastically depending on the role she chooses to inhabit,

she adopts the language of the scold toward both Arden and Mosby, both of whom she views as husband figures. Linda Boose claims that contemporary court records complicate the general definition of the scold, stating that the term could include women who demonstrate physical violence and promiscuity, but, for the sake of this paper, we will focus upon the verbal violence a scold enacts (186, 189). Typically a female category of community life, the term scold was often given and defined by men (Boose 189). A scold resisted and challenged male authority, often verbally, in order to air her own opinions (Boose 189). Boose states that women were categorized as scolds in the courtroom and received public punishment for this behavior, indicating that the title is tied to criminality (189). Thus, by enacting public retribution toward this threat to male authority, men acknowledged and attempted to contain the danger of the scold. Alice adopts the language of verbal attack in the play, toward both of the figures she sees as husband. When Mosby attempts to break his relationship with Alice early in the play, stating, “henceforward know me not,” Alice replies: “Have I for this given thee so many favours, / Incurred my husband’s hate, and—out, alas!— / Made shipwreck of mine honour for thy sake?” (1.184,187-189). When Mosby’s indecisiveness threatens her plans, therefore, Alice adopts the language of the scold by declaring the price she paid for Mosby’s love by posing rhetorical questions to him. Mosby backtracks in his response, claiming that he tested her constancy in their relationship and quickly reconciles with her. By using this speech style, Alice directly argues for her position in the relationship, taking a very active role in the conversation. She employs similar language again after Arden survives her plot to anger Arden to blows with Mosby: “Ah, Arden, what folly blinded thee? . . . When we, to welcome thee, intended sport, / Came lovingly to meet

thee on thy way, / Thou drew'st thy sword, enraged with jealousy” (13.88, 90-92).

Following these statements with a string of questions, Alice forces Arden to relent, and he states: “Then pardon me, sweet Alice, and forgive me this fault” (13.117). In both of these cases, Alice uses questions to frame her opinions and persuade the two husband figures, and she achieves her objectives and demonstrates conversational power. By adopting the language of the scold, therefore, Alice embodies the Renaissance anxiety concerning women who are conscious of their own power.

Joseph Swetnam's 1615 pamphlet *The Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and vnconstant women* emphasizes this fear among men. Swetnam often equates women with the devil, particularly by arguing that a woman's beautiful appearance shields her deceitful nature (Kusunoki 38). Once knowledgeable of the power that can arise from duplicity, argues Swetnam, women can bewitch men to achieve their own goals (Kusunoki 38). Alice, through disobeying Arden's directives when he is offstage to instead implement her own orders, demonstrates her knowledge of the potential of deceit; thus—to borrow Swetnam's terminology—she can enchant other characters to do her bidding. Near the end of the play, Franklin addresses Alice's ability to control and bewitch the male characters. He states that she is at the forefront of the murder plot, as the devil's instrument: “He whom the devil drives must go perforce. / Poor gentleman [Arden], how soon he is bewitched. / And yet, because his wife is the instrument, / His friends must not be lavish in their speech” (13.152-155). In this statement, Franklin connects Alice's duplicity and ability to bewitch to the devil, indicating an interpretation of womanly acts similar to Swetnam's argument. Interestingly, earlier in the play, Alice places the accusation of bewitchment upon Mosby, employing conventional love

discourse as she tells him, “Even in my forehead is thy name engraven, / A mean artificer, that low-born name. / I was bewitched; woe worth the hapless hour. / And all the causes that enchanted me” (8.76-79). Through this mode of language, Alice displaces the accusation of bewitchment upon Mosby. Even though she displays more conversational power than typically accepted of contemporary women in her statements, Alice also performs subjection to her passion toward Mosby, rather than to her husband. In actuality, however, Alice’s interior self, which retains the capacity for masculine characteristics like action and reason, maintains agency over both Mosby and her husband, as she convinces both to follow her will. As the conversation continues, Mosby attempts to overturn the bewitchment allegation in his response, as he states that Alice charmed him into rejecting a different marriage opportunity: “And thou unhallowed hast enchanted me” (8.94). Mosby also indicates the devil in his statement, claiming that he will “break thy [Alice’s] spells and exorcisms,” but he capitulates after Alice convinces him with additional love discourse (8.95). She claims that she will burn her prayerbook, which contains “the holy word that had converted” her, exchanging it for Mosby’s words (8.117). In this statement, she argues that she will exchange religion for Mosby, which enables her to convince him to cease arguing and to make amends with her. Thus, Alice’s knowledge of the power that arises from deceit and the performance of subjection enables her to entice male characters to help achieve her goals. At the same time, however, she operates within a feminine mode that caused great anxiety among her contemporaries by vocalizing and acting upon her own will, performing a sense of masculinity that was strongly discouraged.

Due to her conscious performance of dual roles, Alice's speech style drastically changes depending on to whom she talks. While her interactions with Arden are often concerned with feminine reaction, her conversations with Mosby, Michael, and other male characters illustrate her more masculine ability to act based upon her own will. As she, Arden, and Franklin discuss Arden and Franklin's departure, for example, she asks how long they will stay in London, receiving Arden's answer that "No longer than till my affairs be done" (1.83). She responds in a feminine fashion, deploring the time and exaggerating its effect upon her, "A month? Ay me! Sweet Arden, come again / Within a day or two or else I shall die" (1.85-86). Her style of speech becomes more assertive when she addresses other male characters, shifting a third time as she addresses Mosby in more affectionate language. She illustrates both of these language styles as Mosby comes on stage while she makes arrangements with Michael early in the play, stating "Michael, get thee gone, / And let not him nor any know thy drifts. / Mosby, my love!" She shifts from giving Michael a direct order—a typically more masculine behavior—to addressing Mosby as the object of her love. With Mosby, she demonstrates an affectionate pattern of speech, but she also feels more free to quarrel with him. For example, she teases him when she states, "I deserve not Mosby's muddy looks. / A fount once troubled is not thickened still; / Be clear again, I'll ne'er more trouble thee" (8.132-134). In these lines, Alice implies that she and Mosby negatively affect each other: Mosby's looks disturb her, the fount, but she also indicates a lack of clarity on his account. In this statement, she also orders him to "be clear again," indicating a more masculine pattern of speech (8.134). Alice switches her approach, however, upon hearing Mosby's joking response, which is, "My wings are feathered for a lowly flight. / Mosby? Fie, no! Not for a thousand pound. /

Make love to you? Why, 'tis unpardonable; / We beggars must not breathe where gentles are" (8.135-139). She affectionately replies in the language of courtship, "Sweet Mosby is as gentle as a king," and that his father was "gentle by his worth" (8.140, 145). In these lines, we view an interesting facet of Alice and Mosby's relationship, one in which mutual teasing and even orders factor into their conversation, unlike Alice's interactions with her husband. Therefore, although Alice obeys her husband's directives, she demonstrates more control within conversations with her lover. Notably, she also undercuts Arden's household role by ordering a servant to disobey his master. Within the two latter types of conversation, Alice blends masculine and feminine modes of speech, demonstrating her awareness of her ability to appropriate masculine roles to act upon her own will.

Within Alice's characterization, we view her ability to navigate the feminine space while also displaying masculine characteristics. Her speech toward Arden mostly involves reactions and obedience, while her words to Michael and other male characters reveal her ability to act on her own accord. Her interactions with Mosby further complicate this division, as she exhibits affection, teasing, and even orders while she talks with him. The objects she uses within the murder plot also problematize a clear division of gender in her persona: as the play progresses, she moves from feminine objects, such as soup and a portrait of herself, to objects typically within male control, like property and money. Therefore, as the play progresses, Alice exhibits increased masculine agency, but she refuses to abandon feminine modes of speech and marital roles, indicating a doubled sense of performance that creates a combination of gender that resists polarization.

Moll Cutpurse: Transgression Through Performativity

The term masculine was attributed to women when they resisted social expectations (Kusunoki 45). While Alice from *Arden of Faversham* both rejects some traditional standards and adheres to others, Moll Cutpurse from Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* actually fabricates her own persona in order to project her image of masculinity. She adopts objects associated with men, like the codpiece and a sword, as she cross-dresses, but she also characterizes herself as masculine during her interactions with other male characters. Her self-fabrication is revealed through her focus on her own performativity and her speech patterns, which include her defense of chastity and her impulse to challenge men to duels.

Moll's focus on her own performativity reveals her self-characterization. She articulates various gestures, such as when she states, "I have struck up the heel of the high German's size ere now" after she kicks Trapdoor's legs out from under him (2.1.323). The stage directions also lend themselves to this style of performance. The numerous asides and physical directions often add to Moll's commentary on her own actions, such as the direction near the previously mentioned line, which dictates for the actor, "Moll trips up his [Trapdoor's] heels" (2.1). This note also appears in the 1611 Quarto. Thus, Moll's character emphasizes both articulated and physical cues, indicating a keen sense of performance that seems exaggerated, as her reliance upon speaking her movements reveals a sense of over-acting. By relying upon physicality to excess, she demonstrates the performativity associated with the persona she creates, which, in turn, emphasizes her biological sex as an inherent part of her identity. Additionally, by referring to her own sense of fabrication, Moll points to the boy actor who resides

underneath two layers of cross-dressing, which enables the audience to see character and actor simultaneously.

Moll Cutpurse exhibits psychological androgyny because she claims attributes of both sexes. She claims masculinity as she cross-dresses, but she reveals her biological sex by over-performing and by defending female chastity. Additionally, this transparency of her character indicates the boy actor, who exists as a third performer who plays both gender roles while not fully inhabiting either. Therefore, by articulating her stage directions and physical actions, Moll reminds us of the three shadows of her role: the outward masculine persona, the hidden female sex, and the underlying actor's identity.

These three shadows of Moll's persona enact an interesting sense of desire and anxiety among the male characters within *The Roaring Girl*. Stephen Orgel states that boys on stage who played women's roles were "acknowledged objects of sexual attraction" for both men and women within the contemporary audience (70-71). To adopt Orgel's example from *The Roaring Girl*, as Sebastian kisses his temporarily cross-dressed lover Mary, Moll adopts the viewpoint of an onlooker as she comments, "How strange this shows, one man to kiss another!" (70). Sebastian replies, however, that he would "kiss such men to choose, Moll; / Methinks a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet" (70). As Orgel suggests, Sebastian's comment indicates the general attraction of the audience toward boy actors who cross-dress to play female characters. Similar to the audience's interpretation of the combination of the boy actor and female role, Sebastian conflates Mary's gender with that of the boy page she performs, making both genders objects of desire. This brief conversation reflects upon Moll also, since she, like Mary, is doubly cross-dressed when one considers the boy actor. While Moll acts as an agent of

chastity through her speeches and her actions, which enable Mary and Sebastian's marriage at the conclusion, the combination of gender she embodies also creates anxiety and desire among the male characters of *The Roaring Girl*. The anxiety stems from her style of dress and her aggressive tendencies, while desire results from her role as a virgin who claims her own body.

The Cross-Dressing Virgin: Moll Cutpurse, the Cod Piece, and the Duel

As a virgin in early modern England, Moll instantly presents a threat. Theodora A. Jankowski describes the marriage paradigm as the male control of women in order to ensure true heirs, which necessitates marital chastity (Jankowski 24). She states that virginity, since it opposes traditional ideology of the nature and purpose of female sexuality, was considered radical, particularly as a woman grew older (Jankowski 27). Jankowski particularly focuses upon the prospects of virginity within Christian life, but her claim that some women chose chaste lives because they maintained "complete autonomy over their own bodies" proves useful for our consideration of Moll (Jankowski 28). Moll's ownership over her own body threatens notions of women's typical behavior as submissive and subordinated to men. Some male characters in *The Roaring Girl* assume they can control Moll's body, as exhibited when Trapdoor and Alexander first initiate the plot to ensnare Moll. Alexander instructs Trapdoor to attract Moll with money, which Trapdoor agrees would "draw all the whores i' the town to dance in a morris" (1.2.219). Thus, they believe Moll is easily wooed and bought, suggesting prostitution. Trapdoor agrees to become Moll's servant in order to get close to her, stating, "when her breeches are off, she shall follow me" (1.2.222). Thus, Alexander and

Trapdoor assume, once Trapdoor hypothetically succeeds in sleeping with Moll, that she would suddenly become submissive toward Trapdoor. Other characters also share this view of Moll: Laxton, upon first seeing her on the stage states that, “I’ll lay hard siege to her: money is that aquafortis that eats into many a maidenhead; where the walls are flesh and blood, I’ll ever pierce through with a golden auger” (2.1.170-172). Like Trapdoor and Alexander, Laxton believes that Moll’s virginity can be bought. Laxton in particular focuses on physicality, especially in his description of unwilling entrance. In both cases, these men assume an easy ability to have sex with Moll, indicating their conception of how they may be able to control her body and place her into either the typical early modern marriage paradigm or into the role of a prostitute. Moll thwarts these ideas in the end, as she retains her chastity throughout the play, even guaranteeing the chastity of Mary, whose marriage she successfully aids. Moll’s relationship with chastity is problematic, however. While Moll retains her chastity, the apex of femininity, she also resists the societal norms considering marriage and male sexual dominance. She furthers this transgression of gender roles in flamboyant ways.

One of the most extreme violations of general norms in early modern England was for a woman to dress in men’s clothes, which Kusunoki states was “attacked severely as both a symptom and a cause of social disorder” (45). High fashion in early modern England had less regard for gender boundaries, which allowed for some interchangeability of gender (Orgel 94). Clothing fashions were often viewed as cross-dressing, but, in actuality, more masculinity was being displayed in women’s apparel. A sense of androgyny resulted from this stylistic choice, which, according to the general public view, capitalized upon “male aggressiveness and female sexuality,” according to

Michael Shapiro (21). Publicly criticized, the style was dubbed “monstrous and hermaphroditic,” especially since its goal was not disguise but purposeful “confrontation of symbolic transgressions” (Shapiro 21). As a woman who boisterously challenges men to duels, whose physical form is questioned, and who is envisioned as promiscuous by male characters, Moll embodies the form of transgression Shapiro describes. At the same time, however, Moll Frith’s adoption of a codpiece and sword into her style of dress still indicates the traditional sense of cross-dressing, which is tangential but still connected to the high style of masculine dress that Shapiro describes. Moll’s adoption of cross-dressing features two specific items that proclaim masculinity: the codpiece and the sword.

Before discussing Moll’s use of the codpiece as she attempts to establish her masculinity, we must first establish how early modern society viewed male and female bodies, since Moll’s use of the accessory problematizes the connection of gender to the body. Moll Frith’s first name directly relates to the term “molly,” which indicated a prostitute, who existed on the fringes of society. In his book *The Gendering of Men*, Thomas King states that the connection between this term and the names Moll, Margery, Meg, and Mary resulted in the use of the names for transgressive, unruly women within early modern texts (King 204). These women, who were typically of low social status and often cross-dressed in men’s clothing, were called “roaring girls,” the term that Middleton and Dekker attribute to Moll in the title of the play (King 204).² These women

² King’s chapter concerning mollies focuses more on the adoption of the term by “effeminate sodomites” within early eighteenth century London (139). This specific group dressed in women’s clothing, sometimes acting as prostitutes and often parodying cliché women’s roles, such as the boastful wife or the drunken gossip (143, 195). While these men adopted specific women’s roles, Moll performs a dramatic imagination of the man’s role within the social scene. Thus, the term molly remained within the realm of gender

were called “monsters and hermaphrodites,” and they were skilled fighters who commonly swore and smoked (King 204). This description of the roaring girl fits Moll well, and it is particularly related to how characters in the play discuss the possibilities of what lies behind the codpiece.

Described by Alexander, Moll inhabits both the male and female sexes because she is unnaturally constructed. For early modern physicians, the issue of the hermaphrodite was complex. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford state that early modern society believed that the female body was a deviation from the normal, male body, constructing women as the “other” (18). Both men and women were described in terms of the four humors; men were hot and dry, indicating active, strong behavior, while women were cold and moist, leading to passivity and gentleness (Mendelson and Crawford 19-20). Physicians projected these characteristics of women onto female bodies, describing their physical forms as weaker and inferior than those of men because they saw them as less developed (Mendelson and Crawford 18). Thus, hermaphroditic bodies presented a problem. As they could not imagine one person as inhabiting both genders, physicians reasoned that hermaphrodites were females who had “extra matter which could be removed” (Mendelson and Crawford 19). In the play, Alexander describes Moll as a hermaphrodite. As the play opens, Sebastian argues with his father Alexander, who is deceived into believing that Sebastian would place Moll in his romantic sights. Alexander describes Moll as “A creature...nature hath brought forth / To mock the sex of woman” (1.2.127-128). Alexander addresses Moll’s problematic sense of gender identity by terming it a mockery. By citing nature as bringing her forth, Alexander

transgression as the decades wore on, but it soon also encompassed conceptions of imitation and performance.

indicates that Moll likely always exhibited masculine characteristics. As he continues in his description, Alexander states, “her birth began / Ere she was all made: ‘tis woman more than man, / Man more than woman; and, which to none can hap, / The sun gives her two shadows to one shape” (1.2.129-132). In these lines, Alexander indicates that Moll was born prematurely, before she had been properly configured within her mother’s womb. His identification of two shadows to one shape indicates a conflation of male and female within one body, implying that Moll has some intermediate variation of genitalia, resulting in her double identity of man and woman. This description of Moll illustrates the anxiety of men toward those who possibly share their genitalia, which enables her to embody a challenge to the patriarchal constructs present in the early modern period.

Regardless of whether Moll is actually a hermaphrodite, she uses male dress to portray herself as a man. In particular, the codpiece contributes to her adoption of the male gender. Will Fisher provides extensive background and analysis on the significance of the codpiece in early modern culture. He states that they were first used to cover the genital area in men’s clothing, but he argues that the codpiece also resulted in the reconceptualization of masculinity in early modern England (Fisher 59, 62). Early modern literature often conflates the codpiece with the genitals, referencing it as a form of display (Fisher 66-67). By appropriating the codpiece as an accessory, Moll purposefully uses outward appearance to attempt to claim her own masculinity. Citing Garber, Fisher particularly focuses upon the detachability of the object as embodying gender questionability, since the codpiece can signify both presence and absence (68).

Marjorie Garber connects Moll’s fashion choices with the play’s anxiety over sexual identity, referring to Alexander’s comment when the tailor comes to take Moll’s

measurements (223). Alexander fears his son will “marry a monster with two / trinkets,” (2.2.73-74). Garber demonstrates that the trinkets reference the male anatomy (223-224). Notably, Alexander’s line break indicates the social anxiety surrounding the question of Moll’s sex, as he breaks the line before following through with his reference to male genitalia. Garber finds that the clothing constructs the gender in this scenario, as Alexander’s comment only results from the tailor’s question to Moll regarding her measurements (224). Garber locates the phallus as the mark of desire in the play, so the possibility of its presence and lack behind the codpiece produces anxiety among characters (231). She finds that “the female transvestite is the complexly overdetermined marker of that lack—is, in fact, a sign of overdetermination *itself*, as well as itself an overdetermined sign” (231). Moll’s cross-dressing enables what Garber defines as the “anxiety about the ownership of desire” (232). Characters like Laxton and Trapdoor seem obsessed with having sex with Moll, suggesting the implicit desire to assert sexual dominance. Significant in this ownership model is Laxton’s name, which implies that he may lack the ability to fully act upon his desire toward Moll. Since Moll exhibits intermediacy between man and woman, masculine and feminine, through her fashion choices and the questions surrounding her sex, she induces the anxiety regarding lack among the male characters of the play. The male characters’ various articulations of sexual desire toward Moll reveal the underlying anxiety associated with the codpiece, as they are never quite sure of what lies underneath it.

Since the accessory must be attached and removed like any other piece of clothing, it demonstrates a sense of performance, particularly emphasizing sexual prowess, according to Fisher (69). By donning a codpiece, Moll attempts to adopt the

tradition of asserting masculinity through the accessory. Interestingly, the codpiece became out of fashion around the turn of the seventeenth century, when *The Roaring Girl* was written and produced (Fisher 74-75). While Moll's codpiece might seem to contribute to her masculinity—as she likely believes—it actually also undermines it. By the time of the play, the codpiece became generally considered a “forgerie,” which C. G. Gent describes as falsifying what God granted in his 1600 *The Minte of Deformities* (Fisher 77). Additionally, the transferability of the codpiece was emphasized in seventeenth-century literature in order to weaken the connection between the codpiece and masculinity, and the term “codpiece daughter” was generally given to women who adopted the codpiece when they dressed as men (Fisher 78). Moll's use of the codpiece, therefore, seems intended to assert masculinity, but it actually reveals the performativity associated with her character. Her exaggerated and boisterous behavior also undermines her persona, and both are particularly displayed as she challenges men to sword duels.

Moll exhibits masculine action as she threatens men to duels. Dueling was inconsistent with the feminine quality of modesty, which Jennifer Low describes as considered a prominent fixture of a woman's honor (275). While Moll duels to defend the honor of the female sex, her actions mix the intentions of duelists, which are divided by gender. As Low states, a woman who attempted to duel to defend her own honor would undercut her modesty and further stain her honor (275). In literary duels, however, female duelists mainly engaged in the fight to attempt to correct bad behavior of male characters (Low 277-278). Duels between men, on the other hand, were primarily held to restore honor or reputation (Low 277-278). Moll, however, engages in duels for both reasons: she confronts men like Laxton both in response to his claims of her promiscuity

and to correct his behavior with the intent to uphold the honor of the female sex. In one encounter, she even appropriates the role of a judge: “Draw, or I’ll serve an execution on thee, / Shall lay thee up till doomsday” (3.1.65-66). As a result of this skirmish, Laxton relents to her and states that Moll “wounded me gallantly” (3.1.122-123). Thus, Moll claims both masculine and feminine modes of dueling, even exhibiting prowess. While Low states that Moll engages in duels only to reestablish truth, I think her actions to defend female chastity cannot be completely separated from accusations regarding her potential promiscuity, and thus her honor, as they are too closely tied. Therefore, in my view, Moll uses the sword to duel for both masculine and feminine concerns, both honor and truth, which reveals her performance of gender as a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics determined by her own will.

Conclusion

The objects that Moll and Alice use and reference enable them to exhibit masculinity, but, as they employ these items, Alice and Moll also become criminals. Alice fashions several murder plots through poisoned objects and monetary exchanges, becoming an adulterous and murderess who adopts the judicially punishable language of the scold. Moll’s use of a codpiece and sword lend her the masculine power necessary to oppose authority, but she is also placed within the realm of criminality as a cutpurse and due to the social assumptions of her prostitution through her name and through gossip. Therefore, the objects Moll and Alice use simultaneously enable masculinity and criminality. By creating this connection between objects, masculine attributes, and

criminality within Moll and Alice's characterizations, we view the anxiety attached to gender transgression among the contemporary male population.

The ability to attain masculinity through willpower makes the male gender identity more volatile than contemporary men would have been inclined to admit; thus, their reaction to women who exhibit this behavior is to declare them criminals. As Catherine Belsey suggests near the end of her analysis of Alice Arden's crime, perhaps the true crime of Alice—and also, in this analysis, Moll—is that her actions question the definition of womanhood (148). By utilizing objects like poison and a sword as they become subjects in control of their actions, Alice and Moll resist the contemporary polarized view of gender, unveiling the potential fluidity of gender within the period. They both exhibit masculine and feminine attributes, performing both characteristics through exerting their individual wills. Additionally, both women resist marital control, attempting to assert increased subjecthood and ownership over their own bodies and sexuality. By branding Alice and Moll as criminals, we view an attempt at social containment of women who exhibit masculine characteristics, which reveals that male legislators cannot fully control this type of transgression. Thus, while Moll and Alice defy legality by using objects that lend themselves to masculine characteristics, their challenges to the contemporary gender polarity and even the definition of womanhood are their most potent crimes.

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