
Erotic Politics

Desire on the Renaissance stage

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Sex and social conflict

The erotics of *The Roaring Girl*

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In the printed preface to *The Roaring Girl*, entitled 'To the Comic Play-Readers, Venery and Laughter', the play advertises an intention to address erotic matter in a comic fashion.¹ Venery, in its double meanings of (a) the practice or sport of hunting beasts of game, and (b) the practice or pursuit of sexual pleasure, dominates this text. Most of the venery is overtly sexual. Young men hunt maids, and gallants pursue city wives for sexual satisfaction inside or outside marriage. Yet not all of the venery of this text is so relentlessly heterosexual as this summary suggests, and the sexual hunt provokes other types of venery as well, as angry fathers hound, harass, and entrap their wayward sons, and angry husbands stalk cuckolding gallants. At the centre of this complex world stands Moll Cuppurse, Venus 'in doublet and breeches' (Gomme 1976: Preface, 1.14), a figure who not only provokes erotic desire and sexualized aggression in others, but who also remains an erotic subject in her own right. As such, she threatens her culture's conventions for managing female desire. By examining various aspects of 'venery' in this drama I hope to show several things: first, that this site of licensed 'play' affords glimpses of a landscape of erotic desire and practice whose contours cannot quite be mapped in twentieth-century terms; second, that the manifest contradictions surrounding the play's representations of sexuality, marriage, and gender roles suggest that these were contested cultural phenomena – the source of anxiety and conflict as much as of laughter; third, that homoerotic bonds between men subtend this textual world and are not always easily reconciled with cultural imperatives to marry and reproduce; and, finally, that female sexual desire remains the most intractable aspect of the play's sexual economy.

Recently, feminist, gay, lesbian, and queer critics (the four categories are not necessarily discrete) have emphasized the political necessity and the analytic utility of investigating sexuality as a relatively autonomous system of cultural meaning and site of social struggle, one that cannot simply be subsumed under an analysis of gender difference and hierarchy (Sedgwick 1990: 27–35; Traub, forthcoming 1992).² As Gayle Rubin has written, in revision of her own earlier conflation of sex and gender into one system,

'Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice' (Rubin 1984: 308). In this essay I will attend to the specificity of sexuality by looking at how sexual practices and desires are represented in this text and points of conflict within the sexual economy rendered visible. But at the same time I will try to show *interconnections* between sexuality and other systems through which social conflict was regulated and registered in early modern England, especially the effect on sexual practice of class antagonisms and of a gender ideology that sexualized the desiring, speaking, publicly visible woman and simultaneously made her a threat to man's gender dominance and to patriarchal constructions of 'the good wife'.

Like gender, sexuality has increasingly been revealed as less an essential biological given than a socially constructed, historically variable set of practices and ideologies.³ As gay and lesbian scholars have made clear, homosexuality, for example, does not have one set of meanings through time. In discussing same-sex relationships in early modern England, Alan Bray argues that while there were certainly sodomitical acts committed in the Renaissance, they were not undertaken by 'homosexuals', that is, by people for whom same-sex sexual orientation constituted a primary category of identity or subjectivity.⁴ Rather than a distinct identity, homosexuality constituted a potential within everyone, a point on a continuum of possible sexual practices (Bray 1988: 25). Consequently, there may have been more fluidity in the matter of object choice, especially for men, than is 'normal' today when homosexual and heterosexual are typically taken to signal unitary and fixed sexual identities. In addition, Galenic biological models depicting both boys and women as unfinished men may have enabled adult males – to some as yet undefined extent – to treat boys and women as interchangeable sexual objects (Laqueur 1990: 63–148). As I hope to show, however, a greater fluidity for men, at least, in the matter of sexual object choice did not mean that early modern England was a polymorphous paradise in which conflicts never arose between different modalities of erotic desire and sexual practice. Boys and women were 'the same' in their hierarchical relationship to adult males, but they were also 'different', if only in the crucial matter of their respective roles in reproduction. In addition, sexuality was certainly not 'free' in some absolute sense, but was regulated by the state, by village custom, by changing ideological imperatives.

Sodomy, for example, was a crime for which a man could die. Of course, for a long while sodomy was a comprehensive term for many 'devilish' or stigmatized practices including witchcraft, atheism, etc. Only gradually in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did the term come to stress, in legal and popular discourse, anal penetration of one man by

another, an act that to be prosecuted usually had to involve force and be perpetrated on a young child.⁵ However, even though the definition of sodomy became more particularized as a specific sexual crime during this period, few were prosecuted for it. Despite a handful of notorious sodomy cases involving children or enemies of the state, there seems to have been wide cultural acceptance of what we would now call homosexual practices among Renaissance men, especially but not exclusively between men of unequal status or in clear positions of dependency and control such as servants and masters, students and schoolmen.⁶ None the less, this form of sexual practice – as opposed to heterosexuality undertaken within marriage – was always potentially susceptible to severe punishment.

In texts that have survived, early modern English writers say less about sexual encounters between women than between men, though there are passages such as the report in Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* of women whose clitorises were so enlarged they could be used as penis-substitutes in sexual relations with other women. Writing of the clitoris, Sharp says:

commonly it is but a small sprout, lying close hid under the wings, and not easily felt, yet sometimes it grows so long that it hangs forth at the slit like a Yard, and it will swell and stand stiff if it be provoked, and some lewd women have endeavoured to use it as men do theirs. In the Indies and Egypt they are frequent, but I never heard but of one in this Country, if there be any they will do what they can for shame to keep it close. (1671: 32)

Interestingly, the fear of what we would now call lesbian eroticism is projected on to the dark women of India and Egypt, though as Harriette Andreadis has pointed out in regard to Katherine Philips, some women were quite open about having intimate same-sex friendships with other women. What we don't know is whether such intimate relationships involved genital sexuality or if the erotic components of such friendships found other avenues of expression.⁷

If same-sex erotic relations were understood *differently* in the early modern period than they are today, the same is true for what we now call 'heterosexuality'. While marriage, and hence some degree of heterosexual activity, was the norm in Protestant England, sexual relations with women were often constructed as dangerous to men and compared, unfavourably, to the 'safer' and more ennobling realm of male friendship (Orgel 1989: 26; Rackin, forthcoming 1992). Men who displayed excessive passion for women were termed effeminate because they became like women in allowing passion to override their reason and self-control. Moreover, women themselves were often viewed as creatures with such strong sexual appetites that it was only with difficulty that men could retain proper control over these libidinous creatures. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find mis-

ogyny and fear of women's sexual appetites informing a number of cultural productions from the period. On the other hand, while heterosexuality was often stigmatized as dangerous and demeaning to men, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries also saw increased cultural emphasis upon marriage, especially among the middling sort, as the affective focus of their lives and not simply as an economic necessity (Belsey 1985: 192–221). Many texts from the period celebrate marriage and present women as the proper and 'natural' objects of masculine erotic desire.

This being the case, it is not surprising to find what Bruce Smith has termed a 'contest' in some literary works of the period between homoerotic male friendship and the claims of heterosexual marriage (Smith 1991: 64–7). Genre, of course, mattered a great deal in representing this contest. Read enough Renaissance romantic comedies and one might think the theatre was part of a vast bourgeois apparatus to make heterosexuality compulsory, though not necessarily in ways equally advantageous to both sexes. When a woman like Hermia in *Midsummer Night's Dream* gets to wed the man of her desires, this achievement is often coupled with the loss of the woman's voice, mobility, and independence. On the other hand, read enough Renaissance tragedy and one might think the Renaissance theatre was a vast aristocratic apparatus for weaning men away from heterosexuality since so many of these texts offer only representations of devouring, cuckolding, sexualized women and highlight the intense bonds and aggressions between men.

Yet to speak monolithically of the connection between sexuality and dramatic genre is of limited usefulness because it misses much of what was uniquely volatile and contradictory about the production of erotic desire at the site of the stage where, for example, even a heterosexual marriage plot was acted out, literally, by a man and a boy actor.⁸ Moreover, not only did the stage mime the desire of fictitious persons, but commentators of the period remark upon it as a space where erotic desire flowed between spectators, as well. Some of that desire was provoked by happenings on the stage, but some by the conditions under which spectatorship occurred. Amphitheatre playing made spectators as visible to one another as were the players; and since those spectators were both men and women, anti-theatricalists worried aloud about the sexual outrages that might be perpetrated by same-sex or by opposite-sex partners either at the theatre or in the taverns and inns to which theatre-goers and actors would subsequently repair (Howard 1989: 31–49). I suggest that this particular theatre – with its all-male acting troupes, its mixed audiences (mixed by both gender and class), its penchant for plots of transvestite disguise, and its daylight conditions of playing such that stage and audience were equally spectacles – created conditions of erotic volatility in which desire could flow in many and often contradictory directions and where sexuality could become a staging ground for many forms of social struggle.

The conflicted terrain of erotic possibility

As a city comedy, *The Roaring Girl* stages erotic desire in a complex and often highly contradictory fashion that bears little resemblance to the treatment of 'venery' in the often timeless, relatively unlocalized world of Shakespearean romantic comedy. Urban and suburban spaces are particularized in this play, as are the social groups – young gallants, petty merchants, cutpurses and canters – who struggle for pre-eminence, and sometimes just for survival, in a cityscape that seems to fuel the fires of desire and to invite the intermingling of venereal and economic pursuits. In this setting sexuality repeatedly comes under scrutiny, and under contest, revealing an erotic terrain fraught with conflict and contradiction.

Consider, for example, a provocative and – to modern readers – puzzling moment in Act 4 when the hero, Sebastian, secretly brings his beloved, Mary Fitz-Allard, to his father's chamber. In typical comedy fashion, these two lovers have been scheming from the first scene of the play to outwit the covetous father, Sir Alexander Wengrave, who is blocking their marriage because he is worried about 'what gold/This marriage would draw from him' (1.1.79–80) and scorns Mary's dowry of five thousand marks (1.1.84). In Act 4, Sebastian meets Mary in his father's chamber. Moll Curpurse, dressed 'in man's clothes' (4.1.39), accompanies the two lovers and, somewhat surprisingly, Mary *also* wears men's clothing. She is suited 'like a page' (4.1.39) in apparel rigged up by Moll's tailor. It is not altogether clear why this disguise is necessary. Mary is not like the plucky heroines of Shakespeare's plays who use their male disguises to protect themselves from sexual aggression during long pursuits of the men they love and whose disguises often are accompanied by a temporary assumption of masculine prerogatives of freedom of speech and action. Mary is a tamer version of these women, probably donning male disguise to enter Sir Wengrave's chamber unnoted, but hardly, like Portia, to argue in a courtroom or, like Rosalind, to educate her beloved as to the proper way to love a woman. The disguise, far from giving Mary the upper hand by concealing her identity from the world in general and her lover in particular, instead makes her more fully the object of Sebastian's erotic fancies. For example, when Moll, watching the two of them kiss, comments: 'How strange this shows, one man to kiss another' (4.1.46). Sebastian replies: 'I'd kiss such men to choose, Moll,/Methinks a woman's lip tastes well in a doublet' (4.1.47–8), and further, 'As some have a conceit their drink tastes better/In an outlandish cup than in our own,/So methinks every kiss she gives me now/In this strange form, is worth a pair 'of two' (4.1.54–7). The exchange simultaneously calls attention to the 'strangeness' of a seemingly same-sex erotic embrace, and also to its desirability.

Why is kissing a mannishly-clad woman so thrilling? Several answers are possible. One would stress the general transgressiveness of the scene and

the setting. Sebastian is rebelling against his father by pursuing Mary, and at this moment he is doing so in his father's very chamber and in the company of a notorious roaring girl, Moll Curpurse, who is *also* dressed as a man. In such a context, kissing the bride-to-be while she is dressed as a boy, 'outlandishly' transformed, could simply offer an added dimension of transgression to this highly transgressive moment. But another possibility is that it is not the context that makes the kiss 'worth a pair of two', but the very fact that Sebastian is kissing what looks, on the outside, like a boy; in sum, that his most intense erotic pleasure is what we would now call homoerotic in nature or, framed in accordance with Galenic notions of biology, it is the potential man within the young woman that constitutes the true object of Sebastian's desire.⁹ Indeed, the name Sebastian itself in some quarters carried homoerotic connotations in the Renaissance, largely because of the long iconographic tradition of representing the arrow-pierced saint and his intimate relationship with Christ as 'an indirect ideal of homoerotic love' (Saslow 1977: 63).¹⁰ Moreover, dressed as a page, Mary enacts the role of a gentleman's servant, one of the social positions most often marked out as constituting a culturally sanctioned object for a master's erotic investments.

The multiple sexual valences of this scene are further complicated, of course, by the fact that on the Renaissance stage Mary and Moll were played by male actors, not by women. While in performance the fact of the boy beneath the woman's clothes could usually have been ignored by playgoers, it could *also* at any time have been brought to consciousness by a self-reflexive gesture or comment. At those instances when audience attention is directed to the boy actor *as* boy, or when within the terms of a fiction such as *The Roaring Girl* a male stage character expresses delight at kissing a masculinely clad boy – at such moments a multiplicity of sexual possibilities open before the male spectator, in particular, a multiplicity fostered by the gap between the heterosexual imperatives of the marriage plot and the homoerotic reality of the material conditions of stage production and/or the expressed desires of particular male characters such as Sebastian.

Such moments seem to me productively multiple and contradictory in their erotic valences, making it impossible, for example, simply to characterize Renaissance stage comedy as an apparatus for producing bourgeois heterosexuality and channelling erotic energy into the emerging cultural form of companionate marriage. The stage drew upon, produced, and reproduced more than a single sexual discourse. At the level of the plot, plays ending in multiple marriages often contain a submerged, and sometimes an overt, resistance to heterosexual coupling. In *The Roaring Girl* that resistance is complexly staged. In the main plot, while Sebastian overtly pursues a heterosexual marriage, I have already commented on the fact that in doing so he finds particular piquancy in kissing his beloved when he/she is dressed

as a man. Moreover, the aristocratic world in which he moves is largely a homosocial world devoid of women. Sir Alexander's house in the play's second scene is peopled entirely by men – Sir Adam Appleton, Sir Davy Dapper, Goshawk, Laxton, Greenwit, and other 'gentlemen'. Sebastian seems to have no mother. Among the gentlemen who at the play's end gather at Sir Alexander's are Sir Thomas Long and Sir Beateous Ganymede, a pair whose names suggest, respectively, phallic endowment, and homoerotic beauty.¹¹ In Act 5 Sir Thomas asks Jack Dapper about his 'sweet-faced boy' (5.1.23), and earlier Jack's father accuses him of wasting his money on worthless companions, including 'ningles/(Beasts Adam ne'er gave name to)' (3.3.62–3). Despite the fact the plot focuses on getting Sebastian married, the 'gentleman' class as a whole seems less interested in marriage than in various modalities of same-sex bonding.

Where marriage *does* get emphasized is in the middle-class subplot. Here issues of sexuality have their own complexity. Shakespearean comedy, of course, rarely moved beyond the portrayal of courtship to engage the actuality of marriage. City comedy frequently does, and in *The Roaring Girl* we have not only an aristocratic courtship plot involving Sebastian and Mary, but also the depiction of three actually existing marriages involving the Openworks, the Tilyards, and the Gallipots. Women, in the form of wives, are very visible in this plot in contrast to their near absence in the aristocratic plot. However, even in this merchant world, homoerotic bonds cut across heterosexual ties between men and their wives; and, just as importantly, class antagonisms and gender conflicts affect erotic desire and performance in complicated ways. 'Venery' becomes a site of profound contradiction, and in attempting to resolve these contradictions, the play often shunts aside or silences the women, leaving their sexual desires perpetually deferred or unfulfilled.

Class antagonisms play a large role in structuring sexual relations in this plot. Ted Leinwand has argued that many of the stereotypes of city comedy embody class ideologies. For example, 'the merchant is revealed as the personification of the gentry's fears, and the clever gallant represents the gentry's will to sexual mastery at a time when its social and financial potency was uncertain' (Leinwand 1986, 123). In *The Roaring Girl* Laxton's and Goshawk's attempts to seduce Mistress Gallipot and Mistress Openwork in part validate Leinwand's thesis. These gallants are poor, especially Laxton, and what he most seeks through a liaison with Gallipot's wife is access to her husband's money.

But while these merchants *have* money, there are strong suggestions they are not satisfying sexual partners for their wives. Gallipot embodies one type of Renaissance effeminacy in that he dotes on his wife to excess, excusing every fault, making no demands, but, it is implied, leaving her sexually unsatisfied. As she rails at her 'apron husband' (3.2.30–1), 'your love is all words; give me deeds, I cannot abide a man that's too fond over

me, so cookish; thou dost not know how to handle a woman in her kind' (3.2.23–5). By contrast, Mistress Openwork complains that her husband spends himself sexually with other women, leaving her no source of pleasure. This seems to be the basis for her anger in Act 2 at Moll who has come to her shop to buy the shag ruff. When Master Openwork greets Moll cordially, Mistress Openwork cries, 'How now, greetings, love-terms with a pox between you, have I found out one of your haunts? I send you for hollands, and you're i' th' low countries with a mischief. I'm served with good ware by th' shift, that makes it lie dead so long upon my hands, I were as good shut up shop, for when I open it I take nothing' (2.1.204–9). These marriages of sexual lack seem to indict the merchant-class man for impotency and the merchant-class woman for insatiability. Neither heterosexuality nor marriage seems very attractive in this depiction.

On the other hand, the gallants who hang about these merchant wives are represented through yet another class-based stereotype, that of the profligate aristocrat who has sold his family lands and whose degeneracy can be sexually symbolized. None of these gallants actually sleeps with the merchant wives, and the pun in Laxton's name suggests one reason. At least symbolically, he lacks a testicle; he is, in Mistress Gallipot's disillusioned words, 'a lame gelding' (4.2.38). The decaying branches of the aristocracy are in no position to challenge or reform the merchant class. In the end the wives are driven back to their husbands, not because these husbands become more sexually satisfying, but simply because they at least have money: 'we shopkeepers, when all's done, are sure to have 'em [the gallants] in our purse-nets at length, and when they are in, Lord, what simple animals they are' (4.2.45–7). She goes on to say, further, that when the gallants then importune with the merchant wives for favour, these wives then must 'ingle with our husbands abed, and we must swear they [the gallants] are our cousins, and able to do us a pleasure at court' (4.2.53–5).

It is worth pausing at the verb. Exactly what is it to 'ingle with one's husband'? The *OED* glosses this very passage as 'to fondle with' one's husband. But to me the verb also suggests to play the 'ingle', that is, the boy catamite, with one's husband, possibly meaning to engage in anal sex with him. While anal sex can certainly be part of eroticism between men and women, it seems important that the wives, as they describe giving special sexual pleasure to their husbands in order to wheedle something from them, use a word bringing to mind the specific sexual act connected with the boy partner, the 'ingle' or Ganymede. In 1598 in his *A Worlde of Wordes*, John Florio translated the Italian word *zanzzerare* as 'to ingle boies, to wantonly play with boyes against nature' (Florio 1598: 459), suggesting that the verb 'to ingle' *could* mean something more provocative and 'against nature' than mere fondling.

While the homoerotic implications of Mistress Gallipot's speech are indirect, they resonate in my mind with the stage moment in which

Sebastian takes double delight in kissing Mary dressed as a page. Such moments raise the possibility that for some men in this text erotic desire and pleasure are most intense when directed at and satisfied by other men or by women who assume the clothes or the 'positions' associated with the Ganymede.¹² In this play the cultural imperatives to marry seem strong, but it is not clear that erotic desire lines up neatly with cultural imperatives. Among the aristocracy the imperative to marry remains connected in this play to the consolidation and passage of land and property, but the Wengrave milieu contains no actual women except the women who will or might marry Sebastian and produce heirs and fortune for the Wengrave line.

For urban merchants the imperative to marry seems linked to economic realities of another sort. The merchant couples work together, keep economically afloat by dividing between them the labour of making their businesses profitable. The scenes involving these couples are studded with details reflecting the realities of a shopkeeper's life: getting cloth from Holland, preparing orders in a rush for valued customers, keeping abreast of the finery most sought after by the court gallants, as when Mistress Tilyard tells Jack Dapper which feathers are most in fashion among 'the beaver gallants, the stone riders, / The private stage's audience, the twelvepenny-stool gentlemen' (2.1.133-4). But these unions are not depicted as erotically fulfilling. There is the unmistakable implication that, like female play-goers, the publicly visible, economically useful urban wives were experienced by men as threatening figures: sexually demanding, potentially unchaste, and probably more interested, as a daily matter, in riding the stone horse from on top than in submissively 'ingling' with their husbands. These women are sexually attractive only to such spouses as the effeminate 'apron husband', Gallipot, whose vapid doting only proves the point that such wives, if uncontrolled, emasculate men and cause them to lose their proper masculine dominance.

I will return to the issue of the relationship between female subordination and female sexual attractiveness to men when I discuss Moll, but the resolution of the citizen plot reveals the deep strand of misogyny running through the merchant plot. These clever, economically useful women who demand more sex, or different sex, than their husbands afford them, are shunted aside at the end of Act 4 so that an orgy of bonding can occur between the merchant husbands and the aristocratic gallants. Goshawk's machinations to achieve Mistress Openwork having been revealed, Master Openwork says: 'Come, come, a trick of youth, and 'tis forgiven. / This rub put by, our love shall run more even' (4.2.215-16). In short, no contest involving a woman can disrupt male friendship. Class aggression pales before gender solidarity. Similarly, after Laxton has been exposed, Master Gallipot proclaims himself 'beholden - not to you, wife - / But Master Laxton, to your want of doing ill, / Which it seems you have not' (4.2.320-2). And as Master Openwork and Gallipot lead the way offstage to a feast of

reconciliation, Gallipot's final words are: 'wife, brag no more / Of holding out: who most brags is most whore' (4.2.325-6). In other words, a woman who opens her mouth is a prostitute, a commonplace of the period (Stallybrass 1986: 126), but one suggesting why these talkative women frighten their husbands with the spectre of a female sexual demand they cannot answer, an independent subjectivity they cannot master. As this plot suggests, satisfactory sex for adult men seems to involve more than the sex, male or female, of the desired partner. Equally important is that that person be properly subordinate, whether he/she is an ingle, a wife, or a whore.

The Roaring Girl and her viol

Moll's presence in the play both complicates and clarifies these issues. She is made up, textually, of competing ideological strands. The contradictions prevent her from being read as an entirely unified subjectivity, but they also function to show what is at stake in her representation, what nexus of gender, class, and sexual contests her textual presence mediates. Some parts of her representation answer to a patriarchal anxiety about how modernity - here represented by the market place, urbanization, the whirl of fashion - have turned gender and sexual relations on their head. Seen from this perspective, Moll's cross-dressing objectifies disorder in order to put it to rights. We therefore find her intervening in the Wengrave plot on the side of the young lovers, since the father's attempts to block that marriage are unnatural and unjust. But we also find her attacking unmanly men and braggarts: men who lack the 'stones' appropriate to their sex. Watching Jack Dapper buy a feather, she is moved to remark that 'the gallants of these times are shallow lechers, they put not their courtship home enough to a wench, 'tis impossible to know what woman is thoroughly honest, because she's ne'er thoroughly tried' (2.1.290-3). She ends by saying 'Women are courted but ne'er soundly tried, / As many walk in spurs that never ride' (2.1.298-9). The emphasis is on men's failure to be sexual 'riders'. And the failings of braggart men are what she seems to reprove both when she trips up Trapdoor (2.1.334) and when she bests Laxton at sword play in Lincoln's Inn Fields (3.1.115-29). It is also important that when she is written in the ideology of 'correction', there is animosity between her and the merchant wives. At one point Moll wishes Mistress Openwork were a man so Moll could give her a beating, presumably to silence her tongue and chasten her independence (2.1.215-21). If Moll's 'corrections' worked, women would again be docile and men manly, and happy marriages would thrive.

Fortunately - and I use the adverb from my contemporary position as a modern feminist - there is much more to Moll's representation. First, the *fact* of her cross-dressing destabilizes the very essentialist binarisms that the 'corrective' cross-dresser overtly wishes to uphold. Moll not only

dresses like a man, she behaves with all the ferocity and strength she seems eager to instil in men. She can fight and cant and smoke and support herself. The very fact she can do these things suggests that women are not inherently weak, silent, and dependent, nor men the only ones gifted with the sword. Moreover, Moll's connections with the shops of London and the commodities available from them further underscores how malleable are identities in a market place in which a commercial transaction can alter the self, right down, as Marjorie Garber has suggested, to the hint that Moll has acquired an artificial penis (Garber 1991: 223-4). One way to appropriate Moll as a radical figure is to stress those aspects of her representation that deconstruct the gender binarisms that underwrite patriarchal domination and to stress the way the expanding market economy, while increasing alienation and class exploitation, can also lead to results subversive of some forms of oppression, here the tyranny of an ideology of fixed gender characteristics. One's ability to transform one's appearance by the sartorial possibilities afforded by the market place thus becomes a potentially liberating phenomenon.¹³

Another way to appropriate Moll for radical purposes, and the one I will pursue, is to show how she lodges a critique of the specific material institutions and circumstances which oppressed women in early modern England. While many of Moll's actions point to a utopian future where oppressive hierarchies and binarisms have been undone, she also functions in the here-and-now of the play's world as an opponent of actually existing conditions that exploit women and other disadvantaged figures. To understand this aspect of Moll's representation and how she appears when read in a Marxist-feminist rather than a deconstructive-psychoanalytic problematic, it is necessary to examine how she functions in this text as erotic object and subject.

Interestingly, Moll *does* seem to function as erotic object in this text. Laxton, seeing Moll buying goods in the shops, dressed at that point as a woman, exclaims that he would 'give but too much money to be nibbling with that wench: life, sh' as the spirit of four great parishes, and a voice that will drown all the city: methinks a brave captain might get all his soldiers upon her' (2.1.169-72). This outspoken woman who often openly dresses as a man, doesn't marry, and roves about London buying things and con-sorting with canting underworld figures, is the most highly eroticized figure in the play. While Laxton actually tries to get her in a coach to speed off to a rendezvous in the suburbs, other men constantly speculate about Moll's genitalia, her erotic performance, and the possibility of engaging in sex with her. Trapdoor brags that when Moll's 'breeches are off, she shall follow me' (1.2.223), implying that in sexual intercourse he will take the lead which she typically takes in their daily relations of mistress and servant; later he tells her he has an immovable part 'to stand when you have occasion to use me' (2.1.327-8), again eroticizing their relationship. Alexander Wengrave,

terrified Moll will enthrall his son, and eager to cast her as a monster, says she casts 'two shadows' (1.2.132) and later alleges she has 'two trinkets' (2.2.74-5) in her breeches. The fact that the female Moll is personated by a male actor of course gives this accusation a particular piquancy in performance. Laxton, commenting on the sexual confusion engendered by Moll's cross-dressing, says that she 'might first cuckold the husband' (by sleeping with his wife) and then 'make him do as much for the wife' (by sleeping with the husband) (2.1.192-3). The point is that however odd and hermaphroditical Moll appears to some, she is constantly being discussed in erotic terms: as a potential bedmate, as one whose unfathomable 'double-ness' provokes speculation about her genital organs and her potential for a variety of sexual performances.

I would argue, moreover, that despite the fact Moll occasionally dresses as a man, in the first instance - though probably not exclusively - it is the *woman* in Moll that men seek, rather than the man. After all, from Moll's self-description, she hardly seems to embody the androgynous allure of the compliant young page, the part Mary assumes and the part usually seen as sexually attractive to adult men. Moll, however, is a loud, roving pipe-smoker: a roarer. This text, in fact, makes one long to know more about Elizabethan casting practices than we presently do. Was Moll played by the same type and age of actor as played Mary? Or was a slightly older, more full-bodied performer required, so that the contrast between the charming androgynous boy/woman and the more frightening, but alluring, hermaphroditical adult female could be registered? Whatever the casting choices made, what Laxton explicitly stresses when he fantasizes 'nibbling' with Moll is her prodigious female reproductive capacity (able to provide a captain with a whole regiment of soldiers), her enormous spirit (capturing the energies of four parishes), and her enormous voice (able to drown out all the city). He may in part wish to mate with her to produce a homosocial world of soldiers, but to achieve that end he has to acknowledge Moll's special reproductive capacities. Moreover, he has this fantasy of 'nibbling' with her while Moll is dressed in female clothing. At this moment she figures in his imagination as female excess, words spewing from an upper orifice, babies from a lower. In fact, the openness of her body is prefigured in the play's very title. A roaring girl, a version of the more common stage type, the roaring boy, is a woman given to copious, quarrelsome speech. To *be* a roaring girl is to have one's mouth open. Moll does, for a great deal of the play; and sometimes when it is open she is quarrelling and sometimes canting and sometimes just talking. And, of course, any woman whose mouth is opened in public spaces, in particular, is read as whoorish, as incontinent with other bodily orifices as much as with the mouth.

What makes Moll erotically alluring, I think, is exactly what keeps her from being an example of the construction of femininity suitable for wives. Rather than sewn up, locked up, and quiet (remember that Mary first came

to Sebastian's house dressed as a seamstress), Moll is open, excessive, mobile. Wives who exhibit the same characteristics are terrifically threatening because their openness seems to challenge husbands' proprietary rights in wives' bodies. But Moll is not a wife. She is, in fact, unmarried, notorious, and also lower class — hardly wife material for a Laxton or, as old Wengrave's horrified response attests, for a Sebastian. By contrast, Mary first comes to Sebastian in Act 1 as the docile seamstress, later as the androgynous servant, the page. While she is insistent in her pursuit of Sebastian, she always presents herself in properly subservient guises. Crucially, both Laxton and old Wengrave try to control the subversiveness of Moll, to subordinate her to them, by economic means. Assuming that money can buy her, Old Wengrave tries to get her to steal precious objects from his chamber so he can subordinate her to the power of the law (4.1.1–39). Laxton gives her money as he arranges their rendezvous in the coach. In fact, he gives her the ten angels (2.1.262) he received earlier in the same scene from Mistress Gallipot (2.1.93). The woman *from* whom he takes the money he does his best to avoid sexually (2.1.116–28); the woman *to* whom he gives it he does pursue sexually. The difference, obviously, has to do with Laxton's relative power in the two circumstances. In the first, he 'lacks stones' in relation to the economically prosperous middle-class merchants. Mistress Gallipot, while seen by him as sexually available, is not erotically stimulating, perhaps because she is powerful, if only economically, in ways he cannot control. But Moll lacks the cultural and economic status of the married merchant wife, and Laxton seems to feel that if he can further subordinate her by getting her to accept money for sexual favours, then he can enjoy the physical pleasures her openness seems to invite. Consequently, he tries to subordinate her with angels, a word whose punning associations with ingles (Rubenstein 1989: 12) raises the possibility, at least, that in turning Moll into his paid paramour, Laxton may want from her a variety of sexual pleasures, those associated with the ingle as well as with the woman as vessel of reproduction. What is clear, however, is that to act on his desires Laxton must symbolically subordinate Moll by making her his paid bedmate.

Moll, however, does not comply. While she initially accepts the ten angels from Laxton, when she meets him at Lincoln's Inn Fields she throws down his money, to which she adds ten angels of her own, and demands he fight her with swords for the lot. She then launches into a withering critique of his behaviour, a critique that reveals that in constructing the character of Moll, Middleton and Dekker tapped into discourses of radical protest (Shepherd 1981: 67–92) that provide the basis for a critique of the sex and gender systems that far exceeds the tamer demands for more manly men and womanly women voiced by Moll when she is represented as corrective 'reformer'. Moll is both a reformer and a radical. The voice of the latter is

on display when she castigates Laxton for thinking 'each woman thy fond flexible whore' (3.1.71), a critique which ends

In thee I defy all men, their worst hates,
And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts,
With which they entangle the poor spirits of fools.
Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives,
Fish that must needs bite or themselves be bitten,
Such hungry things as these may soon be took
With a worm fastened on a golden hook:
Those are the lecher's food, his prey, he watches
For quarrelling wedlocks, and poor shifting sisters,
'Tis the best fish he takes: but why, good fisherman,
Am I thought meat for you, that never yet
Had angling rod cast towards me? 'cause, you'll say,
I'm given to sport, I'm often merry, jest:
Had mirth no kindred in the world but lust?
Oh shame take all her friends then: but howe'er
Thou and the baser world censure my life,
'I'll send 'em word by thee, and write so much
Upon thy breast, 'cause thou shalt bear't in mind:
Tell them 'twere base to yield, where I have conquered.
I scorn to prostitute myself to a man
I that can prostitute a man to me,
And so I greet thee.

(3.1.90–111)

This is a refreshingly economic explanation for prostitution and a stunning declaration of Moll's own freedom from the economic necessity that drives some poor women into the flesh trade, i.e., that makes them prey to man's ingling/angling rod. In doing so, she reverses the power relations that have made Laxton assume he can safely use her as an erotic object, a fond flexible whore. Elsewhere, in explaining why she won't marry, Moll offers a critique of the whole institution for being premised on female subordination. For a woman, marriage means loss of control and freedom: 'marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i'th'place' (2.2.43–4). At such moments, Moll embodies a position much more radical than that she adopts when trying to 'adjust' men and women to the hierarchical positions society marks out for them. Rather than specifying the 'real' Moll (a task that assumes she is a self-consistent representation of a unified psyche), I wish to stress how thoroughly her representation is enmeshed in contradictions, a sure sign it is doing the work of mediating complex social tensions.

One thing Moll's representation foregrounds is the tension that exists in this text between the pressure of urgent female sexual desire and a

patriarchal culture in which women's sexuality is in theory subject to masculine control and regulation. Consider, for a moment, a striking feature of this play: its insistent linkage of Moll with the playing of a particular musical instrument, the viol. The original Moll Frith gained some of her considerable notoriety from playing a lute on the stage of the Fortune Theatre. As Linda Austern has shown, women playing musical instruments – usually the small stringed instruments or the virginals – were considered to be erotically stimulating to men, the combination of feminine beauty and the beauty of harmonious sound acting together to arouse uncontrollable passion (Austern 1989: 427). Consequently, if women played, they were to do so in private, for their own recreation or the delight of family and husband, and never in public. Moll Frith was thus transgressive in playing her lute on the public stage.

Moll Curpurse is even more transgressive in that her instrument is not the lute, able to be tucked decorously beneath the breast, but the viol, played with legs akimbo. Moreover, she seems to appropriate this instrument not so much to make herself an erotic object, as to express her own erotic subjectivity. In 2.2.18 she enters with a porter bearing a viol on his back, taking it to her chamber. In Act 4, when Mary and she, both dressed as men, go to old Wengrave's chamber to meet Sebastian, Moll actually plays upon a viol that is hanging on the wall. Her taking up of this instrument is the occasion for a great deal of bawdy banter concerning Moll's skills as a musician, whether or not she initiates the taking up of a gentleman's instrument, and whether or not, as some 'close' women say, it is unmanly to play on such an instrument. At the climax of this jesting, Moll says she does not care what other women say. When they accuse her of lewdness she falls asleep and dreams. Then, in two songs, she recounts her dreams, which turn out to be about two 'loose' women, one of whom gads about London and 'lays out the money' (4.1.104) and comes home 'with never a penny' (4.1.109), the other of whom sleeps with a man from the navy while her husband is in prison. These 'dreams' seem to function, doubly, as angry indictments of the hypocritical 'dames' who would call Moll whore and yet seize sexual pleasure for themselves, and as wishful projections of a longed-for freedom for herself. Moll seems to acknowledge the latter reading when, the songs over, she says 'Hang up the viol now, sir; all this while I was in a dream, one shall lie rudely then; but being awake, I keep my legs together' (4.1.127–9).

This encounter is absolutely riveting in the way it acknowledges, insists upon, female erotic desire, while making clear the cultural imperatives that operate to shape, channel, and control that eroticism. Except in dreams, Moll cannot be an autonomous sexual subject and escape being called a whore. The men who obsessively comment on her sexuality speculate about her 'doubleness', her ability to play either the man or the woman's part in sexual encounters. Moll herself, when refusing Sebastian's marriage pro-

posal, says: 'I love to lie o' both sides o'th' bed myself' (2.2.36–7) meaning, clearly, that she likes her independence, but perhaps also indicating she likes a certain unspecified variety in sexual partners and practices. My point, however, is not to define Moll's 'real' sexual orientation, since to do so is impossible. Instead, I want to emphasize that heterosexual marriage is the only 'legitimate' avenue open to Moll for acting on any of her sexual desires, whatever they might be. And marriage she rejects on political grounds as entailing an insupportable subordination and loss of independence. She is equally firm in refusing extramarital encounters with the braggarts Laxton and Trapdoor who would make her a bought woman or a sexual prize.

Yet Moll never denies her sexuality. She has and acknowledges her sexual dreams; she has and acknowledges her 'instrument', that viol with which she is so insistently linked, the fingering of which seems to symbolize her skill at clitoral masturbation, as well as her potential skill at manual stimulation of the male penis. When Sebastian describes Moll's skill as a musician to his father, he calls her a musician 'of excellent fingering' (4.1.168) with 'the most delicate stroke' (4.1.170). Sir Alexander immediately sees these as the skills of a whore servicing, and undoing, men (4.1.173). But on the stage when Moll actually plays her instrument what the spectator sees is a woman whose strokes and clever fingering occur in the space between her own legs.¹⁴ Her viol suggests her own sexual instrument and her masturbatory playing of it a final defiance of patriarchal, phallus-oriented, sexuality. At the play's end, joking with Sir Alexander Wengrave, now her friend, Moll says: 'and you can cuck me, spare not: Hang up my viol by me, and I care not' (5.2.253–4). She can imagine enduring public humiliation for the sexual being she is. Through her one realizes that the culturally sanctioned ways for women to express erotic desire may exact too high a price to be employed. For Moll there seems to be no way, outside of dream and solitary pricksong, to gratify eros without enduring an unendurable subordination and exploitation. Yet in her jaunty defiance she makes us feel she is no victim, that keeping her legs together, outside of dreams, and retaining her mighty voice, her outlandish dress and her mobility are preferable to any other bargain she might have struck with her culture.

The ending of the play, which leaves Moll defiantly outside the marriage fold and Mary submissively within, is a fine example of the significant contradictions of this text's handling of the 'comic' matter of vengery. This drama doesn't tell a single or simple story about sexuality and its relationship to institutions such as marriage. In its inability to do so it reveals the pressure points in the culture's ways of making sense of its multivalent and changing practices. For example, while this text privileges marriage as the central fact of middle-class life and the necessary means for the aristocracy to reproduce itself and pass on its money, marriage *per se* is not depicted as an untroubled or attractive institution, and sexual desire does not lodge

inside it easily. The play suggests that for some men this is because they find more compelling the erotic allure of the boy page, for whom the cross-dressed virgin stands as simulacrum, than the erotic allure of the woman in and of herself. While, at least for men, there seems to be more fluidity in object choice than our current ideology of fixed sexual identities allows, none the less there is an implicit contest between the pull of the homosocial world embodied in the Wengrave milieu and the male-female bond of marriage, a bond given actual depiction only in the offputting antagonisms visible in the citizens' marital alliances.

There is much evidence in the play, moreover, for the complex way in which erotic desire is intimately entwined with power relations. For adult males the subordination of the sexual partner seems necessary. In Mary's case, she assumes the clothes and the acquiescent manner of the young male servant, the page. In Moll's case, Laxton tries to subordinate her with the angels that turn a free woman into a whore. The most sexually shunned woman is, predictably, the outspoken, publicly visible, economically productive wife. She is legitimate, but not entirely subordinate, caught as she is in the nowhere land between the actualities of marriage as a functioning economic institution that demands her visibility and independence and the ideologies of acquiescent femininity associated with the concept of wife.

The play, moreover, while raising quite explicitly the problem of female sexual desire, provides schizophrenic solutions to its satisfaction. While Mary supposedly gets her desire satisfied by marriage, the absence of actual wives in the Wengrave milieu, coupled with Sebastian's pleasure in her page's disguise, makes one wonder whether Mary-as-woman will continue to exist in any real form after marriage, and whether *her* sexual desires will be fulfilled. Certainly the experience of the citizens' wives is not encouraging. Moll, by contrast, resists marriage, knowing that whatever pleasures the institution affords to women are fundamentally premised on her subordination. What remains, for Moll, are the eroticisms of solitary fantasy and self-pleasure. Importantly, no sustaining community of women, parallel to the male homosocial and homosexual networks visible behind the foregrounded heterosexual couplings of the text, exists to absorb Moll. The citizen wives gossip with one another, but are jealous of Moll, and while Moll is kind to Mary, their female friendship does not seem to embrace the degrees of intimacy implied by the presence of a Sir Beateous Ganymede among the men.

In short, *The Roaring Girl's* representations of venery are fraught with frustrations and antagonisms. Much more starkly than in Shakespeare's comedies, for example, the idealizations of the heterosexual romance plot clash with the competing investments of male homoeroticism and the negative, satirical conventions by which middle-class marriage was frequently represented in misogynist literature and city comedy. The result is no green world of laughter and fulfilled desire, but the rough inequalities of an urban

landscape of friction and of difference, in which desire, especially woman's desire, finds no easy fulfillment.

Notes

- 1 All citations from *The Roaring Girl* refer to the New Mermaids edition edited by Andor Gomme (1976). For rigorous and generous readings of this essay I am especially grateful to Mario DiGangi, Phyllis Rackin, and Susan Zimmerman.
- 2 The word *queer* is a hotly contested one in gay and lesbian scholarship. For discussion of the term and for examples of 'queer critical practice', see *Social Text* 29 and *Differences* 3, 2, especially the lead essays by Warner (1991) and de Lauretis (1991) respectively. I use the term *queer* to indicate alternatives to normative heterosexuality. The value of the word for me lies in its ability to draw attention to sexuality as a primary site of oppression, but also of collective possibility and resistance, in a way that sidesteps the usual gendering and division of marginalized sexualities into gay, lesbian, and bisexual categories.
- 3 In the last decade there has been an enormous amount of work done on historicizing sexuality. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1980) remains a key text for literary and historical scholars.
- 4 Since Bray's book, debate has continued on the question of whether, for men, non-heterosexual emotional investments and practices constituted the basis for identity formation or a lifestyle in early modern England. While both Smith (1991) and Bredbeck (1991) accept the view that only the nineteenth century saw the emergence of 'the homosexual' as a medical/legal category, both also seem to entertain the idea that in some writing of the period there was 'the possibility of a homosexual subjectivity' (Smith 1991: 223). For Bredbeck's (1991) argument that such a subjectivity arises only 'subjunctively', in the imagined difference from the sodomitical monster of legal discourse, see especially Chapter IV, 'Tradition and the individual sodomite', pp. 143-85.
- 5 For a careful account of the legal discourses concerning sodomy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England see Smith (1991: esp. 42-55).
- 6 Alan Bray (1988: esp. 48-56) has called attention to the ways early modern hierarchies of status, age, and economic power underwrote homosexual practices in schools, universities, households, the theatre and other social sites. For discussions of forms of homoerotic bonding between men of the same age and status in early modern literature see Smith (1991: 31-77).
- 7 For a good discussion of the difficulties of finding an appropriate language to talk about same-sex female intimacy in the early modern period, see Andreadis (1989).
- 8 There is now a considerable literature talking about the gender and sexual implications of cross-dressing on the Renaissance stage. I summarize much of that literature in my essay 'Crossdressing, the theatre, and gender struggle in early modern England' (1988). See also Orgel (1989).
- 9 Thomas Laqueur (1990: esp. 63-148) provides a stunning analysis of the one-sex Galenic model of human anatomy widely held in the early modern period. Literary scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt (1988: 66-93, especially 92) have referred to Laqueur's work in suggesting 'an apparent homoeroticism in all sexuality' in the early modern period. I would argue that there *are* many representations of homoeroticism in early modern texts, representations which a heterosexist criticism has often been unable to acknowledge. On the other hand, there are many cultural reasons for this besides the existence of Galenic biological

models, including the relatively late age of most marriages and the existence of many exclusively male institutions such as universities, Inns of Court, etc. In addition, as Greenblatt also acknowledges, much effort was expended in early modern England to secure gender difference and to promote heterosexual passion and its institutionalization in marriage. I therefore find it more useful, rather than stressing that at some level all sexuality was homoerotic, to emphasize the mixture of erotic interpellations operating on individual subjects, especially male subjects. The drama at times represents the negotiation of these competing interpellations as untroubled and at times as vexed and contestatory.

10 I am indebted to Mario DiGangi for pointing out to me the homoerotic significance of Sebastian's name and for pointing me toward both the Saslow article (1977) and one by Cynthia Lewis (1989) in which she explores the late mediaeval and early Renaissance associations of St Anthony with St Sebastian as embodiments, among other things, of homoerotic attraction. Obviously, the existence of these visual traditions gives further weight to a homoerotic reading of the Antonio-Sebastian friendship in *Twelfth Night* and the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, Bastiano being the Italian diminutive for the name Sebastian (Lewis 1989: 205).

11 For excellent work on the significance of the names in this play see Garber (1991).

12 What I find impossible to resolve is the degree to which, when a woman 'ingles' her partner's pleasure depends on her being 'like a boy' at that moment or on her being 'like a *submissioe* woman'. I think we are dealing here with two complexity related variables: sex (male/female) of object choice and status (subordinate/superior) of object choice. Though Galenic biology, at least, did not provide a basis for establishing sexual difference in modern terms, the culture generated many other ways of thinking about male and female as different 'kinds'. I cannot accept, therefore, the absolute interchangeability of woman and boy as social and sexual categories, though there was obviously more slippage between them than we can easily imagine today. *Both* the sex and the relative power and status of the sexual object seem factors in the erotic economy of this text.

13 The numerous sartorial transformations of various characters in this play give strong support to the position that the market destabilizes various traditional means of marking identity, since appearance can be altered at will. Moll, of course, takes the lead in sartorial alterations of self. In her first stage appearance she attempts to purchase a shag ruff; later she discusses with a tailor's messenger the measurements for a new pair of Dutch slops. It is probably the same tailor she later employs to make up a suit of men's clothes for Mary Fitz-Allard to wear when going to the chamber of Sebastian's father. Moll, of course, sometimes appears in women's clothes – a frieze jerkin, safeguard and short dagger, and sometimes in men's – breeches, doublet and sword. Hers are the most startling transformations of self, but other characters also remake themselves: Trapdoor appears in Act 5 as a wounded soldier; Mary Fitz-Allard comes on stage dressed at various times as a seamstress, a lady, and a male page; Greenwit tries to use a wig to pass as a summoner; the citizens' wives don masks as they are contemplating setting off for Brainford; and foolish Jack Dapper tries to make himself a proper gallant by buying a feather at Tillyard's shop.

14 I call attention to Moll's autoeroticism to in part affirm the possibility of female sexual pleasure in a textual world thoroughly dominated by concerns with men's erotic desires and fulfillments, and also to call in question the contemporary

presumption that sexualities, whether heterosexual or homoerotic, involve primarily alloerotic relations. In this regard see Sedgwick (1991).

When I had finished this essay Bruce Smith found and gave to me the following poem which he had discovered in a mid-seventeenth century (1655) miscellany entitled *Wits Interpreter, The English Parnassus* compiled by one J. C. (John Cotgrave?). Many of the poems in the volume date from the early seventeenth century. The poem in question, 'The Violin', quite explicitly eroticizes the virgin's playing of the viol in ways suggesting autoeroticism.

The Violin

To play upon a Viol, if

A Virgin will begin,

She first of all must know her cliff,

And all the stops therein.

Her prick she must hold long enough,

Her backfals gently take;

Her touch must gentle be, not rough,

She at each stroak must shake.

Her body must by no means bend,

But stick close to her fiddle;

Her feet must hold the lower end,

Her knees must hold the middle.

She boldly to the bowe must file,

As if she'd make it crack;

Two fingers on the hair must lie,

And two upon the back.

And when she hath as she would have,

She must it gently thrust,

Up, down, swift, slow, at any rate

As she herself doth list.

And when she once begins to find

That she growes something cunning,

She'll nere be quiet in her mind,

Untill she find it running.

(123-4)

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