

MATT CARTER

‘Untruss a Point’—Interiority, Sword Combat, and Gender in *The Roaring Girl*

This article discusses the critical apparatus surrounding Dekker and Middleton’s well-known play The Roaring Girl. While previous discussions of the text have focused mostly on Moll’s cross-dressing, I instead look at Moll’s sword skills to show how the lascivious behaviour of London’s men produces her gender performance, which seems unruly by early modern standards. I also examine other rituals of gender construction that texture previous analyses of Moll.

Early modern fencing manuals stressed that a fencer must be able to hide his or her true intentions behind a series of sword tricks and footwork. Manuals throughout the early modern period describe the point of a sword as the outside and label the grip (or hilt) and forte (the half of the blade closest to the hilt) as the interior. These manuals insist that the outer half of the blade (known as the foible) is deceptive because it is weaker at parrying incoming blows but useful for tricking and misleading an opponent. The Italian fencing legend Camillo Agrippa explains it this way: ‘The sort of people who do this try to oppose with the half of the blade closest to the point, which is dangerous and causes the weapon to fall from their hands.’¹ The exterior of the blade was primarily useful, according to Agrippa, for ‘always threatening the adversary with the point either to hit him or keep him away’.² The point thus became the part of the sword that established distance between the fencer and bodily harm.

Rapier play demanded that a fencer distinguish between his body and will, hiding intentions while seeking to ascertain those of the opponent. This distinction between interior and exterior drew parallels between the sword itself and the swordsman. A fencer who let intentions become externally visible was in danger; using the body as a screen for the fencer’s will was akin to using the sword’s point to hide the weapon’s movement. This kind of subterfuge resembled, at least

Matt Carter (mccarte2@uncg.edu) is a lecturer in the English department at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

on a functional level, that exercised by the stock character known as the stage Machiavel.

In Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*, Moll Cutpurse dresses like a man, smokes like a man, and notably fights like a man. By engaging in duels, Moll exerts the same kind of authority and interiority as a duelist, but she uses those skills to instantiate agency over her body and her social self. Katharine Eisaman Maus explains that the conventions that created the stage Machiavel influenced the way early modern thinkers constructed the body but notes that 'in real-world Renaissance Britain, a woman's moral worth was inevitably involved with the fate of her vulnerable body'.³ Moll similarly proves her own worthiness by defending the ingress of her body against both sexual and combative domination. By using both sword and clothing to divide her interior from her exterior, Moll claims her own sexual agency, destabilizing normative expectations of gender while confounding attempts to control her. Moll situates her embodied self within the gendered context of a loud young man and her social self within the gendered context of a self-controlled, self-directed woman.

In an early modern context, Moll might seem something other than self-controlled. After all, one of the criticisms the anonymous author of *Hic Mulier*, a polemic against cross-dressing women, levies against androgynous women is that they exchange 'for needles, swords'.⁴ The accusation here concerns gendered social place; the author expects women to leave the fighting to men and prioritize domestic work. Despite the pamphleteer's insistence that women with swords were deviating from their established place, early modern drama offers numerous examples of women wearing male clothing and sometimes even using bladed weapons. Viola in *Twelfth Night* wields a weapon, while Portia in *Merchant of Venice* promises to 'wear my dagger with the braver grace' (3.4.65),⁵ just to name a couple of examples. Unlike Portia and Viola, however, Moll's male dress is not a disguise at all. Mary Beth Rose illustrates:

In contrast to Moll, who insists on being recognized as a woman, heroines like Rosalind and Viola seek to conceal their identities and to protect themselves by masquerading as men ... the heroine gladly sheds her disguise with its accompanying freedoms at the end of the play, in order to accept the customary social role of wife, thereby allowing the play's androgynous vision to remain spiritual and symbolic without awakening the audience's dissatisfaction or desire for social change.⁶

Moll's androgyny — sometimes evinced by her dressing as a man while perceiving herself as a woman and sometimes by her acting like a woman in a half-masculine,

half-feminine outfit — creates an indistinct gender performance that serves as a central motif of the play. Her choice to engage in rapier fighting makes Moll's gender performance in *The Roaring Girl* particularly complex. Deploying a kind of interiority characteristic of rapier training, Moll simultaneously occupies male and female subjectivities as a way of asserting her own sexual agency.

***The Roaring Girl* in Context**

The majority of criticism on *The Roaring Girl* has focused, justifiably, on Moll's cross-dressing; after all, while it was not unheard of for women to dress as men, this was not common behaviour, and early modern society typically reserved such cross-dressing only for occasions when women needed to don men's garb to do particular tasks.⁷ As Jennifer C. Vaught points out, 'Clothing or other bodily ornaments were focal markers of various kinds of masculinity in the Renaissance and reflected shifts in perceptions of acceptable gender roles'.⁸ Many scholars make the case that Moll's clothing, like that of other women who dressed as men, challenged gender norms of the period. When women wore masculine outfits for reasons beyond necessity, argues Jane Baston, they became dangerous figures, standing breeched in the streets as a walking challenge to the social expectations of female containment.⁹ Marion Wynne-Davies asserts that 'Mary Frith through her dress, habits, and "lascivious speech" challenged moral codes'.¹⁰ Jean E. Howard insists that seeing a woman dressed as a man excited erotic undertones, which were subliminally bisexual (by modern standards).¹¹ Arguments such as these depend, and insist, on the transgressive nature of Moll's outfits. The play certainly recognizes how unusual it is that Moll dresses like a man. Most of the dramatic tension comes from other characters' reactions to Moll's outfits. Scholars who argue that Moll is transgressive see Moll's clothing as destabilizing to gendered social contracts. As Mary Beth Rose states, 'the breakdown of polarized gender identities and sexual roles' staged in *The Roaring Girl* outlines a threat to 'legitimate, faithful erotic relations'.¹²

Others see the destabilization of gendered norms represented in the play as liberating. These arguments rely on the notion that the clothes women wore, or at least the social realities that expected women to dress as they did in the period, limited their freedom, often by making them sexually vulnerable. Patricia Simons, for instance, explains that women's dresses, understood as easily-entered, open and explorable spaces, were coded as inherently vaginal — a notion that seems to have developed from the fact that women did not wear undergarments between their legs.¹³ Scholars who describe Moll's behaviour as liberating necessarily see a

tension between the normative social expectations of the period and a social reality that was variegated and complex. As Howard explains, 'The stage drew upon, produced, and reproduced more than a single sexual discourse ... In *The Roaring Girl*, that resistance is complexly staged'.¹⁴ This multifaceted representation of sexual agency allows Moll to enhance the power and influence she exerts over her own body, or, as Adrienne L. Eastwood puts it, 'she eludes containment (at least temporarily), expanding agency and redefining femininity through performances of social rank, gender, and sexuality'.¹⁵ Mark Breitenberg similarly explains that 'distinct gendered identities require forms of erotic desire: androgyny confuses and confounds both'.¹⁶ Lloyd Edward Kermode has voiced this line of thinking by explaining that 'What she [Moll] supports and begins to erect is the order that contemporary society fails to be. This new order may still be a male-ruled one, and it may even require women to stay on one side of the bed, but it is an ordered society where the essence of each citizen is understood and respected'.¹⁷ Perhaps most metatextual of all, Jo Miller argues that 'By making us self-conscious about our own participation in the play's economy of exploitation, Moll Cutpurse invites us to reevaluate our responses to her and to understand better the freedom and nobility of the tomboy figure on the Renaissance stage who ignores and disrupts her society's rigid constraint of women's subjectivity'.¹⁸

My thoughts on Moll are most aligned with Heather Hirschfeld, however. Viewing Moll's gender through the myth of Tiresias, who had at various points been both a man and a woman, Hirschfeld suggests that Moll possesses particular, secret knowledge that positions her as a disruptive agent: awareness of both male and female subjectivity. She becomes an attractive/disruptive figure, depending on the viewer, because she is able to understand both sides of an unstable gender binary. Hirschfeld explains, 'Her threat, in other words, is not simply her possession of such knowledge but that, unlike Tiresias, she refuses to reveal what she knows. Despite her so-called roaring, at crucial moments she *holds* a tongue that, in its very silence, insists it has a secret to tell'.¹⁹ My analysis agrees that Moll transgresses and transcends the fraught gender structures of early modern England by being simultaneously male and female, but while Hirschfeld understands Moll's secret to be knowledge of both male and female subjectivity, I argue that the Machiavellian interiority afforded by Moll's sword training allows her to hide — and therefore protect — a female subjectivity, fully possessed of sexual agency beneath an impenetrable, youthfully masculine shell.

The Role of the Sword

Moll's use of a sword is a special element of her masculine dress. The 1611 quarto of the play shows Moll smoking and holding a loop-hilt rapier across her shoulder.²⁰ The loop hilt was relatively simple compared to more-intricate contemporary hilt designs and was primarily used on shorter rapier blades.²¹ According to A.V.B. Norman's typology of blade weapons, the specific hilt is likely to be type 69, which was prevalent circa 1560–1640.²² The pommel, spherical with a tang-button, is almost certainly type 14.²³ Moll's use of the rapier in *The Roaring Girl* is an important aspect of her gender performance, and while scholars often describe examples of her using the weapon as a form of gendered violence, such as Jonathan Gil Harris's notion that the sword fight provides a form of castration,²⁴ the sword should be even more central to understandings of her gender. The nature of rapier play significantly shapes Moll's gender performance precisely because rapier techniques insist upon a division between a person's interior and exterior selves. We understand this division as interiority, but early modern audiences may have viewed such interiority as Machiavellianism. Katharine Eisaman Maus explains how early modern people might understand this difficulty: 'The body is, in fact, a positive distraction, because its visibility to others, and its similarity to other human bodies, falsely obscures the variability of inward experience'.²⁵ Moll's gender exists in different states simultaneously, a balance she strikes in hopes of protecting her own agency while retaining a feminine gender identity. Such dualism, a division between the inner and outer selves, is imperative to proper fencing techniques, and teachers of the day sought to teach inwardness as a virtue, despite the negative connotations sometimes ascribed to it.

Rapier masters of the period understood their students' inwardness as an important factor in surviving violent encounters and employed the practice of inwardness as part of their training regimen. Part of the reason for this phenomenon is that etiquette manuals such as Castiglione's *The Courtier* heavily influenced dueling — the context in which most sword fights took place in the period. According to Markku Peltonen, being a good courtier 'demanded two kinds of behaviour. On the one hand, the courtier had to master a technique of self-representation — to offer as good a picture of himself as possible. On the other hand, he had to take his fellow courtiers and gentlemen into account and to accommodate his outward behaviour accordingly'.²⁶ The good courtier, in short, could modulate his behaviour in order to safely navigate the trials of court life. This emphasis on interiority transferred almost directly into the period's fencing

manuals. The French fencing master Henri de Saint-Didier, for instance, asserts that

the reason for deciding on one of the strikes is that the exterior, which is the point of the sword, is guided and directed by the interior, which is the will, and the point of the sword, which is the exterior, cannot know to be so useful that the eyes and by consequence the sight judges [sic] the strike to gain tempo.²⁷

Like a person's wit, the sword's intentions are ultimately obfuscated from sight, and the fencer must look beyond exterior movements in order to determine truth. Even noted misogynist Joseph Swetnam, who spends pages of his combat manual praising the virtues of the rapier and dagger combination, sees the weapon as worthy of study precisely because of its capacity for deceit: 'I will speak more in commendations of the rapier and dagger, note it well, for it is the finest and the comeliest weapon that was ever used in England, for so much cunning to this weapon belongeth as to no weapon the like'.²⁸ *The Roaring Girl* directly references the idea that the weapon was associated with cunning. Sebastian describes his relationship with his father as a fencing bout and relies directly on the perception of the rapier as dishonest: 'How finely, like a fencer, my father fetches his by-blows to hit me; but if I beat you not at your own weapon of subtlety' (2.112–14). Giacomo di Grassi, an Italian fencing master whose works were readily available in England, even suggests that fencers use their cloaks to ward and hide blows (though, as he points out, doing so is a last resort, when daggers or shields were not available). He calls the practice 'a manner altogether deceitful'.²⁹ Later in the same treatise, di Grassi dedicates an entire section to specific rapier techniques described as 'deceits' and 'falsings'.³⁰ Nicoletto Giganti, master of the Venetian rapier style, regularly recommends attacks that 'hit [one's opponent] for sure, without him even realizing what you are doing'.³¹ Rapier play, in short, had at its heart a sense that successful fencers could hide their true intentions from their opponents.

Not only rapier techniques relied on subterfuge; the culture of dueling in the early modern period was likewise invested in the kind of interiority described by scholars such as Maus. The duelists in early modern France understood the act of dueling itself as exhibiting a kind of tension between openness and secrecy. François Billacois points out that fencing, which took place in "shirtsleeve" confrontation without helmet or shield' left duelists 'almost naked'.³² At the same time, duels were private affairs, usually hidden from the public eye precisely because of their quasi-legal nature.³³ The play pays homage to the dueling culture of

the day by particularly emphasizing this dualism. When Moll prepares to fight Laxton, she drops her cloak and draws. Laxton replies, 'What, wilt thou untruss a point, Moll?' (5.61). While Laxton hopes she will take off her clothes, this line also obliquely refers to Rocco Bonetti, the famous Italian fencer. Bonetti, demonstrating his pride in the Italian fencing technique, assured opponents that he could remove the buttons from any English fencer's clothing.³⁴ Bonetti's boast that he could strip his opponents' clothing highlights the similarities between the body's permeable boundaries and the fencer's ward. As in Billacois's assessment of the period's dueling culture, the relative exposure of rapier fencing bears striking parallels to making oneself naked. The successful rapier duelist preserved the innards of his or her own body while revealing the interior (both metaphorical and physical) of the enemy. As Jennifer Low puts it, 'The frequency with which fencing manuals conflate the body and the defensive ward suggests that the penetration of the ward was interpreted as penetration of the body'.³⁵ The entire culture of rapier play, from the techniques used in battle to the circumstances surrounding duels and brawls, assumed a sword-wielder could and should create a division between outside behaviour and inner self. To fail to do so invited physical injury and pseudo-sexual domination. This skill became essential to duelists who hoped to preserve the barriers of their own bodies against fast-moving rapier blades and the fencers who wielded them.

The fencer's ability to hide his or her intentions works in the play as a gendered concept. The men in the play react to Moll's gender identity with a mixture of awe and derision. Making a crude joke on her masculine comportment, Laxton comments that 'Methinks a brave captain might get all his soldiers upon her, and ne'er be beholding to a company of Mile End milksops, if he should come on, and come off quick enough' (3.196–9). Immediately after the slight, however, he decides he will 'lay hard siege to her' (201). Moll, in turn, reacts to the expectations of patriarchal structures, and her fencing abilities work in tandem with her masculine raiment as a way of navigating a city that is full of sexually voracious men. Most of Moll's behaviour in *The Roaring Girl* asserts a kind of sexual agency that the men try to subvert, and her swordsmanship allows her to protect herself. Low explains that 'Moll's duel is prompted by the arrogant and sexist assumptions of Laxton, the gallant who, on making her acquaintance, attempts to buy sex from her'.³⁶ We can see that Moll employs clothing, canting, and fencing to assert a kind of agency over the ingress and egress of a porous female body.

Valerie Traub, in her argument regarding maternal imagery in Shakespeare's *Henriad*, suggests that 'the symbolic functioning of bodily processes of menstruation, pregnancy, child bearing, and lactation that render women, particularly in

respect to their genitals and breasts open, protuberant, and never-quite-sealed-off, all metonymically instantiate the maternal body as “grotesque”.³⁷ The openness and permeability of the female body becomes difficult when women attempt to express bodily agency, especially when the piercing of the body in a fencing bout comes to mean, as Jennifer Low puts it, that ‘The language of combat in fencing manuals furthers implications about the gendering of leakiness and permeability’.³⁸ If a sword fight is an act of combat between two individuals attempting to pierce one another’s skin, and that piercing has the intention of raising or lower one’s social status, then the fight between Moll and Laxton is central to the play’s understanding of gender. Adrienne L. Eastwood importantly highlights the fact that ‘*The Roaring Girl* taps into an ideological struggle that took at its extremes those who would advocate female independence and agency and those who would align themselves with the position voiced by Swetnam’.³⁹ Moll manages to negotiate these difficulties by asserting a masculine agency over her body, while always being careful not to supersede her feminine will.

This plurality of gendered agency is central to Moll’s character. Other scholars have described Moll’s gender identity as plural, though these arguments often elaborate that she switches between different modes of being. Susan E. Krantz, for instance, asserts that Moll exhibits ‘at least three different sexual identities’ and that she ‘is sometimes female ... Sometimes she is identified as “monster” and is capable of ‘combining the idea of female and male into one being’.⁴⁰ I agree that the key to understanding Moll’s gender is to recognize it as a plural identity, but I believe that Moll’s masculine and feminine genders exist simultaneously and that her sword training makes this pluralism possible. Machiavellian subterfuge becomes a site of anxiety for the men in the play who insist that Moll’s outside should match her interior, but, for Moll herself, strategic deception provides an extra layer of protection from invasive men.⁴¹ James Bromley insightfully posits that ‘if Moll’s crossdressing produces these unresolved anxieties [that Moll is subverting established norms], it does so because her clothes suggest she has that within which passeth show or because they fail to provide a stable, material signifier for a deep personhood assumed to be the most or only desirable way of inhabiting one’s body’.⁴² Moll’s sword training equips her with such an interiority. Moll learns to exhibit two genders simultaneously because she is imbricated within a culture of violence that has complex, contradictory implications for what constitutes appropriate behaviour.

Of course, early modern culture had little patience for women who transgressed those gendered expectations, contradictory or not. *Hic Mulier* criticizes the exact kind of deportment for which Moll is famous: ‘You have taken the monstrousness

of deformity in apparel, exchanging the modest attire ... to the cloudy ruffianly [clothes of a man].⁴³ Although the writer describes in negative terms the armed women who exchange 'for needles, swords',⁴⁴ the tract offers an alternative, and the alternative exhibits parallels to Middleton's fight scene. The anonymous author suggests that the way to combat the 'monstrous' behaviour of the mannish women is to be excessively chaste: 'Are all women then turned masculine? No, God forbid, there are a world full of holy thoughts, modest carriage, and severe chastity'.⁴⁵ Moll's complex selfhood challenges notions that modesty and chastity are defining traits of only the more traditional woman. The pamphleteer suggests that women ought to 'keep those parts concealed from the eyes, that may not be touched with the hands'.⁴⁶ Moll, however, finds herself better able to protect her body from unsolicited grabbing in the clothes of a man.

As it turns out, Moll's boisterous, masculine exterior offers her agency over her own body and defends her from the accusations levied by characters such as Alexander. Alexander initially imagines Moll's outfits to signify prostitution and witchcraft: 'Thou has so bewitched my son, / No care will mend the work that thou hast done' (8.207–8). Over the course of the play, Alexander starts recognizing Moll's sexual agency as that of 'impenetrability', rather than hyper-penetrability, and begins to amend his accusations to criminality over sexual voracity. He grumbles to his friends, 'My son marry a thief! That impudent girl / Whom all the world stick their worst eyes upon!' (11.1–2). Of course, by the end of the play, Alexander recognizes his mistakes and promises 'To make thy wrongs amends' (256). Moll uses her masculine agency to teach the men of London a lesson; her choice to smoke, fight, and reject sumptuary laws leads to more freedom and personal agency. Moll uses her 'impudent' behaviour to protect herself from harsher criticism.

We see a similar process at work in Moll's facility with music. Like her sartorial choices, Moll's decision to play the viol situates her outside the normal realm of modest feminine behaviour. Mendelson and Crawford point out that musical instruments that opened legs 'were forbidden women ... [because they] could only be played in an "immodest" and unfeminine posture'.⁴⁷ Like a man, or as she puts it, 'As a musician' (11.252), Moll uses her viol skills to make money, and even invites the men to challenge her for her unladylike behaviour, chiding 'Follow the law, and you can cuckold me, spare not; / Hang up my viol by me, and I care not!' (253–4). The moment echoes several earlier attempts on the part of London's men to pay Moll for sex; her exterior may be masculine, but she rejects accusations of harlotry when she insists that she has earned everything honestly, from her gold to her sexual agency. Even Alexander, in the previous example, comes to realize

Moll's position, as evinced by his promise to pay her back for the trouble he caused her. Throughout the play, Moll exerts agency over the other men of London by forcing them to face their own shortcomings, and her own dual gender enables Moll to position herself as a teacher. As Moll asserts, she is simultaneously a woman and 'As good a man' (153) as many of the male characters in the play. Lloyd Edward Kermode explains that 'Self-identity is determined by its reaction to the other, and specifically on its difference to the other'.⁴⁸ Rather than letting the men of London define her, Moll forces them to cope with a 'reaction to the other' that Kermode interprets as the quintessential factor in manufacturing the self. In short, Moll's dual gender identity, which troubles many of her detractors throughout the play, serves not only to protect her, but also to teach them that she deserves the right to speak and act for herself.

The Performativity of Two Genders

If close attention to the nature of rapier combat extends previous arguments about Moll's gender identity (which rely primarily on her clothing), then Dekker and Middleton's representation of her gender becomes clear in moments where Moll engages in violence. We see Moll defending her own sexual agency through violence very early in the play. When Moll spies '*a fellow with a long rapier by his side,*' (3.252.5), she publicly beards him. 'You remember, slave, how you abused me t'other / night in a tavern' (258–9), she exclaims, 'you have tricks to / save your oaths, reservations have you, and I have / reserved somewhat for you. [*Strikes him*]' (261–3). While it is impossible to know if the situation that Moll describes is real or part of her 'tough act' for Laxton's benefit, the valences of the rapier give us insight into why the scene exists. The long rapier, which is typically about four or five feet long, has more capability to penetrate an opponent's guard than the average sword. As Swetnam colourfully puts it, 'for in a word a short sword and dagger to encounter against a skillful man with [*long*] rapier and dagger, I hold it a little better than a tobacco-pipe or a fox-tail'.⁴⁹ Moll, by approaching the man, shows that she is capable of taking all comers, even when they have the mechanical advantage. In so doing, she denies the mechanical advantage of the long rapier — just as she denies the notion that biological sex serves as a marker of power.

Moll eventually overcomes Laxton in the same way, penetrating his ward and disgracing him. The important difference between what Moll does as a roaring girl and the behaviour of the roaring boys of the period is that Moll aggressively defends her own agency, which shows her to be a well-adjusted member

of society (even though her dress and demeanour undoubtedly exist outside of societal norms). The roaring boys certainly acted the way they did as a means of establishing agency, or, as Alexandra Shepard puts it, 'These were the actions of young men performing rituals of bravado through which they temporarily claimed dominance'. Such exhibitions of pomposity, misrule, and violence 'espoused potent inversions of normative meanings of manhood ... In their bids for manhood, young men embraced precisely the kinds of behaviour ... condemned by moralists as unmanly, effeminate, and beast-like'.⁵⁰ This behaviour contrasted with older, more mature masculine ideals. While younger men used violence as a way to negotiate social power, older men understood fencing as just that — self-enclosure. Jennifer Forsyth, for instance, explains that 'to be masculine implied the ability to become violent since manhood was so strongly correlated to defense'.⁵¹ For those deemed boys, roaring could signify they were uncontrolled, young, effeminate men, but Moll disrupts this association by employing roaring as a way to gain control — not only over herself, but also over those who might override her agency.

Moll's roaring becomes a kind of hyper-control that shelters her feminine will-power from outside interference while recoding her body as an unassailable, masculine entity. Moll's division between her will and her body mirrors the same gendered dichotomy that early modern medicine assigned to classical and grotesque bodies. As Ronda Arab explains, 'This hierarchy was gendered, with significant social implications, in terms of male as mind or spirit and female as body'.⁵² Moll reverses this expectation, making her body more masculine — and therefore less permeable — and her will feminine. The hierarchy this cultural dichotomy created — in essence, mind over matter — saw the masculine spirit as the controlling factor. Consider for instance Carole Levin's assessment of Elizabeth I's notion that she had the 'heart and stomach of a king'. Levin notes that Elizabeth maintained power because 'her success came from how fluid and multi-faceted her representations of self were'.⁵³ In the case of Elizabeth, it was an ability to 'capitalize on the expectations of her behavior as a woman and use them to her advantage'.⁵⁴ Moll, conversely, establishes power by allowing her body to be the dominant force, coding that body as outwardly male and sheltering a feminine-coded spirit. Doing so makes Moll unassailable, whether by sword or phallus.

The ultimate expression of Moll's control over her own sexual agency happens shortly after her encounter with the gallant bearing a long rapier. In Scene 5, Moll lures Laxton into a fight under the pretence that they can have a tryst. Throughout the play, others only identify Moll as female, but in the duel with Laxton, she exercises the masculine virtues of the sort of youthful, urban male described

above. As Jennifer Low points out, when Laxton appeals to her mercy (an attribute that Low associates with femininity), Moll refuses to spare him. She only accepts Laxton's surrender on the same terms as a man. 'When Laxton begs for his life,' Low explains, 'taking Moll as seriously as a man, she treats him according to the code between gentlemen'.⁵⁵ While Low understands Moll's dealings with Laxton as merciless, I view Moll's behaviour as the merciful action of a self-controlled man. 'I scorn to strike thee basely' (5.123), she intones. This sentiment was commonplace during the period; Joseph Swetnam instructs the victor of a duel to 'be not hasty in thy wrath, but pause although thy weapon be drawn, for the thrust being given, and the blow once fallen, it will be too late to repent'.⁵⁶ The use of the term 'basely' had a specific currency in the period, as well. Alexandra Shephard explains that 'The term "rascal", often prefaced by the adjective "base", insinuated low birth and a suspect character ... Debasing insults, or "slightings" ... [involve] both the denial of reputation and the inversion of expected chains of deference'.⁵⁷ By describing a killing blow as 'base', Moll comports herself as a noble man would in any bladed encounter.

Laxton, however, refuses Moll's agency over her own gender, just as he initially sought to override her sexual agency. His loss in the fight, coupled with Moll's merciful response, helps define their respective characters. Jennifer Feather explains that the righteousness of combat — and, by extension, the identity of the warrior — directly relates to the way in which the fighter actualizes the fight.⁵⁸ It is not, in short, enough to fight skillfully — one must fight honorably. While the craven Laxton appeals to Moll's preferred gender identity when she spares him — 'Spoke like a noble girl, i'faith!' (5.124) — his subsequent aside reveals his shame at having lost the fight to a woman: 'Heart, I think I fight with a familiar, or the ghost of a fencer' (125–6). Laxton is utterly incapable of admitting to himself that a woman has bested him; he falls into flights of fancy, imagining that she must be a witch, if not possessed. Again, we see the disconcerted results of what Kermode calls the 'reaction to the other'.⁵⁹ Laxton cannot define Moll in the same terms that she uses to define herself, so he seeks to recategorize her selfhood in a way that lessens his own disgrace. If Moll is some sort of monster, then Laxton's loss in the fight does not tarnish his own reputation. Zirka Z. Filipczak has explained that 'guides to behavior advised men not to reveal a sense of shame outwardly, and if wrongdoing elicited that feeling, it "should be internal rather than apparent."'⁶⁰ Moll, however, overcomes Laxton as a *hic mulier*, forcing Laxton's shame out into the open. This exposure, contrasted by Moll's own impenetrable inwardness, leaves him scrambling for a way to alleviate his own dishonour.

Of course, part of the reason Laxton struggles in reconciling Moll's gender identity with his loss in combat is that Moll, possessed of a sword, threatens the permeability of his own body and with it, his masculine solidity. Gail Kern Paster explains that classical ideas about the body, still in use during the Renaissance, held that the body was porous and capable of penetration. Piercing the skin constituted an invasion of the self — a kind of conquest.⁶¹ As we have seen, Moll rejects the openness to bodily invasion that categorized some traditional notions of femininity. Because she thwarts Laxton's advances, however, Moll threatens his own sense of sexual agency. In Kermode's terms, he is unable to define himself as a conquering male because Moll exhibits male qualities of temperance and bodily fortitude. Moll's use of the rapier helps her act as a penetrator to preserve her own sexual agency while her male clothes offer a protective layer that prevents penetration by others. The interiority afforded by the rapier allows Moll to continue defining herself in feminine terms on the inside despite her outwardly masculine behaviour. Her sword and clothing serve as a protective, masculine shell around her feminine interior.

As Moll serves as the protector of her own body, she takes on a role most often reserved for a husband. Moll, however, recognizes that she is the protector of her own sexuality. Her chastising speech indicates that she is engaging in an honour duel in her own defense:

What durst move you, sir,
 To think me whorish? A name which I'd tear out
 From the high German's throat if it lay ledger there
 To dispatch privy slanders against me! (5.88–91)

Moll understands her victory in the brawl as more than just an opportunity to put Laxton in his place; her conquest sends a message to all the other men of London. Her impassioned accusation of Laxton — which she wishes could carry on to all men — urges London's men to reconsider their constant pursuit of women such as Moll:

Would the spirits
 Of all my slanderers were clasped in thine,
 That I might vex an army at one time. (113–15)

In the literature of the period, men fight each other to punish insults. Women, conversely, fight for didactic reasons. 'Unlike early modern male duelists,' explains Jennifer Low, 'these female characters approach the duel as a possibility for rehabilitation rather than as an opportunity for punishment'.⁶²

In this way, Moll's femininity again manifests itself, but it manifests through behaviours typically reserved for men. By drawing Laxton's blood, Moll heals him of the heat that would drive him to sexually dominate her: 'She's wounded me gallantly I would the coach were here now to carry me to the surgeon's' (5.126, 130–1). As Paster explains, 'men and women routinely underwent phlebotomy ... in order to rid themselves of excess blood their bodies could not turn into nutriment or to remedy one of many conditions'.⁶³ By denying his rights to interiority, Moll defends her own agency through an enforced bloodletting — and Laxton directly mentions that he has quite a bit of excess fluid: 'Here's blood would have served me this seven year in broken heads and cut / fingers, and it now runs out all together' (128–9). In piercing Laxton's skin and releasing his blood, Moll claims dominance over Laxton, as well, establishing her authority over the ingress of both bodies. The purging of the blood is understood to be curative; Laxton's salacity has resulted in an excess of blood. The process of relieving fluids like blood could, like the purging of ejaculate, could be healthy, since having too frequent — or too infrequent — expenditures of blood or semen was thought to unbalance the male body.⁶⁴ When Moll draws out Laxton's blood, she does so as a way of cooling his lecherous blood and thereby neutralizing the threat to her own bodily sovereignty.

Here we see the important distinction between Moll and a biologically male agent. The roaring boys of the period were aggressive only because they had no temperance. The fencing master Vincentio Saviolo, for instance, declaims against their failure to exhibit proper composure: 'This manner of proceeding and behavior doth plainly show that these men (although peradventure they have learned the use of the weapon) have not been sufficiently instructed in the Art of Arms'.⁶⁵ The 'Art of Arms' is the understanding of proper comportment in battle, and Saviolo delineates a difference between those who fight with aggression and rage versus those who behave calmly and temperately: 'also must I tell you that men's fashions are diverse, for some set upon their enemies in running, and there are others which assail them with rage and fury after the fashion of Rams, and both these sorts of men for the most part are slain and come to misfortune'.⁶⁶ Many linked this kind of youthful, violent exuberance to asserting agency. Alexandra Shephard explains that 'men mimicked forms of judicial punishment designed to shame and humiliate in order to demonstrate their power'.⁶⁷ Moll couples her dexterous swordplay with a gruff, noisy exterior to perform a kind of adolescent masculinity, but she seems to do so in order to defend a self-contained inner woman.

Beyond Moll's Clothing

Margo Hendricks deemphasizes the importance of Moll's clothing choices, finding that it is Moll's agency regarding her sexuality (her disavowal of marriage specifically) that makes her dangerous in early modern society: 'The representation of Moll Cutpurse, therefore, can best be explored not by addressing the question of whether women crossdressed or not, but by seeking to comprehend what may have lead [sic.] some women to shun what ... was the single most important responsibility of a woman, marriage'.⁶⁸ These moments of combat make perhaps the strongest case for Moll's transcendence of conformity. I would suggest that Moll does acknowledge society's expectations of female sexuality; she simply goes against those same expectations by protecting her sexual agency for and by herself. According to Jennifer Feather, 'the purpose of combat is to produce a victor whose power, in fact his very agency, lies in defeating his opponent'.⁶⁹ By objectifying Laxton, Moll lays claim to her own agency, using a performance of masculinity for her own ends.

Moll's situation, in which lecherous men surround her, cannot be solved from without. What Middleton and Dekker dramatize in *The Roaring Girl* is a woman who simultaneously exhibits two distinct genders at the same time, one of which is performed in her clothing and outside behaviour, the other internally. While Moll does not kill Laxton, which would be a just punishment for his attempted ravishment — 'I scorn to strike thee basely' (5.123) — she does reassert her own agency over her body by defeating him in the combat. The punishment takes on the desired didactic function, though, and Moll wishes that the lesson would translate to the other men of London (113–15).

Throughout the play, Moll repeatedly refers to herself as female only to immediately mention her own masculinity. For instance, 'Methinks you should be proud of such a daughter', she tells Alexander, 'As good a man as your son' (11.152–3). In *The Roaring Girl*, Moll exerts the same kind of sexual agency as a young, aristocratic male so successfully that her presence emasculates the men around her by comparison. This kind of agency would not be common for a woman to the same degree; a man generally would be needed to prevent — or avenge — attempts to violate Moll. To return to Hendricks's point, Moll confounds the men around her by successfully speaking for herself without a husband to protect her. In fact, Moll refuses to relinquish control of her own body to a man. As she understands it, 'marriage is but a chopping and a changing, where a maid loses one head, and has a worse one i'th' place (4.45–7). If Moll's adventures in London are anything to go by, there is not a man in town who could provide her with better headship than

she gives herself (regardless of whether she even wants a husband). Many scholars have noted that Moll's single status at the end of the play serves as a sign that she has subverted the usual social order.⁷⁰ Viviana Comensoli, for instance, indicates that 'Moll rejects marriage because it denies a woman freedom to act as she pleases in the world'.⁷¹ The men that Moll might be willing to consider as potential mates are woefully underpowered compared to her, or as she herself puts it:

But howe'er
 Thou and that baser world censure my life

 I scorn to prostitute myself to a man,
 I that can prostitute a man to me. (5.106–7, 111–12)

Moll recognizes that her masculine dress might be associated with socially unacceptable behaviours,⁷² but when one views the play through the valences of the sword, the lesson at work appears to be that Moll's sword training grants her the ability to divide her body from her will, creating two simultaneous gender performances. The result is a kind of liberation much more meaningful than a violation of the sumptuary laws of England; Moll finds in the practice of masculine agency an ability to be self-directed. Lecherously assailed on all sides, Moll's use of manly clothing is at least practical; the world of the play is overrun with predatory men, and Moll decides to wear clothing that walls them off. I do not mean to imply that fighting is the only reason Moll dresses as a man. Through the lens I have established here, however, Moll's cross-dressing is justified by the traditions of rapier dueling as a response to London's unsafe masculinist culture. Moll upholds her own sexual agency through a separation of the social self and the body.

In this sense, the sword shows us not only that Moll's gender is not linked to biological sex, but also the rapier enables a kind of re-sexing of the body based on ingress/egress models. Moll insists that she must retain her own womanhood, but her body, primarily because access to its insides is restricted from invasive men, seems functionally to be gendered as masculine. Moll uses the interiority afforded by the rapier to push her feminine side (and, by extension, her social self) so far into her interior that her clothes begin to function more like impermeable male skin. Her sword almost completely divests her social self from her body. Because Moll is impermeable (both by keeping her clothes on and refusing to be pierced with a sword), she can with certainty claim to be the best man in the city, while retaining the aspects of her identity that encode her as a girl, roaring or otherwise.

Notes

I wish to thank Jennifer Feather for tireless attention to my work, excellent advice, and careful guidance.

- 1 Camillo Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* (New York, 2009), 57.
- 2 Ibid, 17.
- 3 Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, 1996), 205.
- 4 Anonymous, *Hic Mulier* (London, 1610; STC: 13375.5), *Early English Books Online (EEBO)*, A5r–A6r.
- 5 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Drakakis (London, 2013).
- 6 Mary Beth Rose, 'Women in Men's Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in *The Roaring Girl*', *English Literary Renaissance* 14.3 (1984), 387–8, <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1984.tb00871.x>.
- 7 For example, activities that required wearing masculine doublets, such as hunting and riding, were less contentious than the most commonly cited activity, prostitution.
- 8 Jennifer C. Vaught, *Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern English Literature* (New York, 2016), 79.
- 9 Jane Baston, 'Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*', *Studies in English Literature* 37.2 (1997), 321, <http://doi.org/10.2307/450836>.
- 10 Marion Wynne-Davies, 'Orange-Women, Female Spectators, and Roaring Girls: Women and Theatre in Early Modern England', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 22. (2009), 23.
- 11 Jean Howard, 'Sex and Social Conflict: The Erotics of *The Roaring Girl*', Suzan Zimmerman (ed.), *Erotic Politics* (New York, 1992), 174–5.
- 12 Rose, 'Women in Men's Clothing', 374.
- 13 Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), 45–6.
- 14 Howard, 'Sex and Social Conflict', 175.
- 15 Adrienne L. Eastwood, 'Controversy and the Single Woman in *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Roaring Girl*', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 58.2 (2004), 9, <http://doi.org/10.2307/1566550>.
- 16 Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1996), 151.
- 17 Lloyd Edward Kermode, 'Destination Doomsday: Desires for Change and Changeable Desires in *The Roaring Girl*', *English Literary Renaissance* 27.3 (1997) 441, <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1997.tb01113.x>.

- 18 Jo E. Miller, 'Women and the Market in *The Roaring Girl*', *Renaissance and Reformation* 14.1 (1990), 12.
- 19 Heather Hirschfeld, 'What do Women Know?: *The Roaring Girl* and the Wisdom of Tiresias', *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003), 126, <http://doi.org/10.1086/rd.32.41917378>; emphasis Hirschfeld's.
- 20 This image is reproduced in Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (eds), *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (Oxford, 2010), 721. All citations to the play text reference this edition. *The Roaring Girl* text is cited parenthetically, referencing this edition.
- 21 Ewart Oakeshott, *European Weapons and Armour From the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution* (Woodbridge, 2000), 162.
- 22 A.V.B. Norman, *The Rapier and Small-Sword, 1460–1820* (New York, 1980), 141.
- 23 Ibid, 243.
- 24 Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare's England* (Philadelphia, 2004), 182.
- 25 Maus, *Inwardness*, 170.
- 26 Markku Peltonen. *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness and Honour* (Cambridge, 2003), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511490651>.
- 27 Sainct-Didier, *Secrets of the Sword Alone* (Montreal, 2014), 11.
- 28 Joseph Swetnam, *The School of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defense* (London, 1617; stc: 13375.5), *EEBO*, A5r–A6r.
- 29 Giacomo di Grassi, *His True Art of Defense Plainly Teaching by Infallible Demonstrations Apt Figures and Perfect Rules the Manner and Form how a Man May Safely Handle all Sorts of Weapons as well Offensive as Defensive 1594* (London, 1594; stc: 12190), *EEBO*, H2r. Note that I have modernized spelling in this text.
- 30 Ibid, Aa2r.
- 31 Nicoletto Giganti, *Venetian Rapier: The School, or Salle* [1606], ed. Tom Leoni (Wheaton, 2010), 16.
- 32 François Billacois, *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern England* (New Haven, 1990), 121.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Adolph L. Soens, 'Tybalt's Spanish Fencing in *Romeo and Juliet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20.2 (1969), 123.
- 35 Jennifer Low, *Manhood and the Duel: Masculinity in Early Modern Drama and Culture* (New York, 2003), 44.
- 36 Ibid, 155.

- 37 Valerie Traub, 'Prince Hal's Falstaff: Positioning Psychoanalysis and the Female Reproductive Body', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40.4 (1989), 463, <http://doi.org/10.2307/2870611>.
- 38 Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 71.
- 39 Eastwood, 'Controversy and the Single Woman', 17.
- 40 Susan E. Krantz, 'The Sexual Identities of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*', *Renaissance and Reformation* 19.1 (1995), 8.
- 41 A similar kind of anxiety plays out in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which Orlando, commenting on Rosalind/Ganymede's swoon, suggest that she lacks a manly heart. Her coy response, 'I do so, I confess it ... A body would think this was well / counterfeited' (4.3.164–6), echoes this insistence upon aligning the interior and exterior. See William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London, 2007).
- 42 James Bromley, "'Quilted with Might Words to Lean Purpose': Clothing and Queer Style in *The Roaring Girl*', *Renaissance Drama* 43.2 (2015), 152, <http://doi.org/10.1086/683105>.
- 43 Anonymous, *Hic Mulier*, A5r–A6r.
- 44 Ibid, A6r.
- 45 Ibid, A3r.
- 46 Ibid, B3r.
- 47 Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 224.
- 48 Lloyd Edward Kermode, *Aliens and Englishness in Elizabethan Drama* (Cambridge, 2009), 7.
- 49 Swetnam, *Paradoxes, EEBO Editions: The School of the Noble and Worthy Science of Defense* (Oxford, 2010), 173.
- 50 Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 93–4.
- 51 Jennifer Forsyth, 'Cutting Words and Healing Wounds: Friendship and Violence in Early Modern Drama', Jennifer Feather and Catherine E. Thomas (eds), *Violent Masculinities: Male Aggression in Early Modern Texts and Culture* (New York, 2013), 68.
- 52 Ronda Arab, *Manly Mechanicals on the Early Modern English Stage* (Selinsgrove, 2010), 45.
- 53 Carole Levin, *Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia, 1994), 2.
- 54 Ibid, 1.
- 55 Jennifer Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 156.
- 56 Swetnam, *Paradoxes*, 3.

- 57 Shephard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 174–6.
- 58 Jennifer Feather, *The Pen and the Sword: Writing Combat and the Self in Early Modern English Literature* (New York, 2011), 83.
- 59 Lloyd Edward Kermode, *Aliens and Englishness in Elizabethan Drama* (Cambridge, 2009), 7.
- 60 Zirka Z. Filipczak, 'Poses and Passions: Mona Lisa's 'Closely Folded' Hands', Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson (eds), *Reading the Early Modern Passions* (New York 1989), 79.
- 61 Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1993), 14–15.
- 62 Low, *Manhood and the Duel*, 140.
- 63 Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 79.
- 64 Simons, *The Sex of Men*, 164
- 65 Saviolo, *His Practice*, B2r.
- 66 Ibid, B7r.
- 67 Shephard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 99.
- 68 Margo Hendricks, 'A Painter's Eye: Gender and Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*', *Women's Studies* 18.2 (1990), 193, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1990.9978830>.
- 69 Feather, *The Pen and the Sword*, 3.
- 70 Baston, 'Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion', 328.
- 71 Viviana Comensoli, 'Play-making, Domestic Conduct, and the Multiple Plot in *The Roaring Girl*', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 27 (1987), 258, <http://doi.org/10.2307/450465>.
- 72 Jane Baston, for instance, points out that prostitutes often dressed in similar outfits to that which Moll wears in order to facilitate easy access to their bodies. See 'Rehabilitation Moll's Subversion', 322.