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### Mary Frith at the Fortune

Sir Alexander Wengrave's remarks in *The Roaring Girl* (1611), as he surveys the audience, gesture playfully to the Fortune's reputation for cutpurses, connecting the place of performance with the play's subject. This speech is an early sign of the play's complex relationship with Mary Frith, and from the scholar's vantage-point an unwittingly ironic moment of metatheatre.<sup>1</sup> Observing to his companions that 'Th'inner room was too close; how do you like / This parlour, gentlemen?' (1.2.6–7), he casts his eye on the faces above, below, and around:<sup>2</sup>

Nay, when you look into my galleries –  
How bravely they are trimmed up – you all shall swear  
You're highly pleased to see what's set down there:  
Stories of men and women, mixed together  
Fair ones with foul, like sunshine in wet weather –  
Within one square a thousand heads are laid  
So close that all of heads the room seems made;  
As many faces there, filled with blithe looks,  
Show like the promising titles of new books  
Writ merrily, the readers being their own eyes,  
Which seem to move and give plaudities;  
And here and there, whilst with obsequious ears  
Thronged heaps do listen, a cutpurse thrusts and leers  
With hawk's eyes for his prey – I need not show him:  
By a hanging villainous look yourselves may know him,  
The face is drawn so rarely. Then, sir, below,  
The very floor, as 'twere, waves to and fro,  
And, like a floating island, seems to move  
Upon a sea bound in with shores above. (1.2.14–32)

Likening playgoers' faces to portraits in 'galleries' brings the audience into play, but what appears to be a compliment is characteristically double-edged: 'what's set down there' are 'Stories of men and women, mixed together / Fair ones with foul, like sunshine in wet weather'. He may distinguish between those in the galleries and the groundlings in the yard,<sup>3</sup> as the almost italicized 'below' suggests, but more importantly he has his eye, figuratively speaking, on something – or someone – more specific. Sir Alexander's dismay at his son's plans to marry the eponymous protagonist is revealed here (anticipating his device to entrap Sebastian later in the scene) as he seems to spy a 'cutpurse [who] thrusts and leers / With hawk's eyes for his prey'. The play goes on to exploit the on- and offstage audience's fascination with the cutpurse world on a number of levels, culminating in the appearance of Trapdoor and Tearcat in 5.1. But Sir Alexander's fears – and the audience's hopes – are most dramatically realized in the entrance of the subject herself when she takes to the stage.

The account, though well known receives surprisingly little discussion.<sup>4</sup> Yet its ramifications go to the heart of the debate over the play's representation of gender politics. While the episode raises rather more questions than it answers – what role (if it was such) she played, and the circumstances surrounding it – Frith's participation invites a reconsideration of the dramatists' strategy, the play, and its contemporary reception. What follows is a teasing out of the implications of this material. While the printed text both appropriates Mary Frith as celebrity and incorporates her appearance at the Fortune, she may well have been a much less willing collaborator in Middleton and Dekker's version of her life than the quarto's closing advertisement suggests. This essay examines how and where her intervention took place, speculates about its impact, and concludes that it was neither scripted nor authorised by the dramatists or actors. Situating this episode in the wider context of her other known exploits around this time, I argue that far from reinforcing the play (and its portrait), Frith's intervention challenged the authority of the play (and the playhouse), just as elsewhere she sought to subvert the state's attempts to discipline and punish her.

*The Roaring Girl* exploited Frith's notoriety, but in turn also contributed significantly to her fame in ways Middleton and Dekker could not have anticipated. Apparently, during the run the play enjoyed in 1611, Frith was living up to her reputation. On 27 January 1612, some nine months after its earliest performance<sup>5</sup> and only weeks after publication,<sup>6</sup> Frith was charged

with various misdemeanours, as recorded in *The Consistory of London Correction Book*:

This day & place the sayd Mary appeared personally & then & there voluntarily confessed *that* she had long frequented all or most of the disorderly & licentious places in this Cittie as namely she hath vsually in the habite of a man resorted to alehouses Tavernes Tobacco shops & also to play howses there to see plaies and pryses[.]<sup>7</sup>

For the authorities, unsurprisingly, ‘alehouses Tavernes Tobacco shops & ... play howses’ spelt loose and immoral behaviour, while scholars understandably have focused primarily on her adoption of ‘the habite of a man’.<sup>8</sup> But the entry continues:

& namely being at a playe about 3 quarters of a yeare since at *the* ffortune in mans apparell & in her bootes & with a sword by her syde, she told the company there *present that* she thought many of them were of opinion *that* she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should finde that she is a woman & some other immodest and lascivious speaches she also vsed at *that* time And also sat there vppon the stage in the publike viewe of all the people there *presente* in mans apparrell & playd vppon her lute & sange a songe.<sup>9</sup>

The revelation that a woman performed ‘vppon a stage’ is remarkable, because of course prohibited, but it appears to be confirmed (and complicated) by the Epilogue of the 1611 quarto, which promises just such an event:<sup>10</sup>

In striving to please all, [we] please none at all.  
 Yet for such faults, as either the writers’ wit  
 Or negligence of the actors do commit,  
 Both crave your pardons: if what both have done  
 Cannot pay your full expectation,  
 The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence,  
 Shall on this stage give larger recompense[.] (30–36)

This is a conventional ‘apology’ to playgoers who may have been disappointed by the play. But the promise that Frith herself ‘shall on this stage give larger recompense’ is a hostage to fortune, an act of appropriation that may already have backfired; indeed, if the actor playing Moll spoke these lines, as editors believe, the Epilogue is a finely ironic conceit that underscores the play’s ambiguous relationship to its subject.<sup>11</sup> As will become clear, the Epilogue’s

confident claim draws attention to a faultline that threatens to undermine the entire edifice.

Although the play exploits Frith's reputation, significantly it does not aim at verisimilitude.<sup>12</sup> In prefatory material Middleton and Dekker make clear that they are offering a corrective to popular perceptions, not confirmation. While the woodcut title-page of the 1611 quarto depicting Moll with a sword and smoking tobacco clearly taps into readers' knowledge and expectations, the play offers its own version of Frith. Occasionally the play allows Moll to act according to playgoers' likely expectations – besting Laxton and showing familiarity with cutpurses and canting language, for example – but for the most part she is presented as a sober, law-abiding, chaste figure, a righter of wrongs. What audiences made of this portrayal is unknown, but the Prologue acknowledges that playgoers have certain, if varied, expectations:

Each one comes  
And brings a play in's head with him; up he sums  
What he would of a roaring girl have writ –  
If that he finds not here, he mews at it. (3–6)

While the playgoer 'with covetous listening waits / To know what girl this roaring girl should be – / For of that tribe are many' (14–16), the warning is clear that the play will depart from expectations. Neither 'suburb roarers' (21) nor 'city-roaring girl[s]' (22) will feature:

None of these roaring girls is ours: she flies  
With wings more lofty. Thus her character lies –  
Yet what need characters, when to give a guess  
Is better than the person to express?  
But would you know who 'tis? Would you hear her name? –  
She is called Mad Moll; her life our acts proclaim! (25–30)

But of course, despite its protestations, the play cannot evade the very assumptions it aims to counter: she may 'fl[y] / With wings more lofty' but nonetheless remains 'Mad Moll'. This contradiction may not have mattered: spectators may simply have enjoyed yet another London comedy. But this faultline runs through the play, activated (or ignored) in performance by a knowledgeable auditory, and scholars identify it as central to the question of the play's interpretation.

This complex play tends to divide critics. In Moll's cross-dressing and refusal to submit to male authority is a figure who, as her nickname suggests, has usurped the roaring boys (as she does the gallants in the play), mapping out a life independent of patriarchal structures. In this respect, as she manoeuvres through but for the most part remains outside the social world of the play, Middleton and Dekker capture the paradox of Frith's 'place' as both marginalised and celebrated. Yet Moll of course is part of the plot: as much as the play emphasises (and indeed demonstrates) her resistance to various forms of authority, she is nonetheless subordinated to the city comedy genre. Indeed, in some respects she is an agent of orthodoxy, for whatever witty asides she is given her *role* is to thwart Sir Alexander and help her son marry his true love, Mary Fitzallard. The play ends, conventionally enough, with the old miser repenting his sins, and Sebastian and Mary's marriage plans back on track. Middleton and Dekker were well versed in writing the city, of course, but in the genre's accommodation of Moll, under the terms of which she has imposed upon her a specific plot function, it is arguable that the play delimits her radical potential. For some critics, then, the playwrights are guilty of 'sentimentaliz[ing] Moll', of 'soften[ing] and romanticiz[ing] her'.<sup>13</sup>

Equally, within the constraints of genre and plot, Moll's resistance to social mores is clear, as here when she explains her opposition to marriage:

I have no humour to marry. I love to lie o'both sides o'th'bed myself; and again, o'th'other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll ne'er go about it. ... I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head, and has a worse i'th'place. (2.2.36–45)

As Jean Howard points out, 'if comedy demands a marriage, it gets the marriage of Mary Fitz-Allard and Sebastian, but not the marriage of Moll'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, her victory over Laxton can be seen as both a function of the plot – contributing to the citizens' defeat of the gallants which the play celebrates – and an evocation of Frith's reputation that allows, here and elsewhere, an alternative voice to be heard despite the imposition of genre conventions. Certainly, the play gives rise to such tensions, and *The Roaring Girl* may be regarded as amplifying both early modern and more recent perspectives on patriarchal attitudes to women – particularly women who, like Frith, resisted demands that they follow social convention. But the scholarly debate has revolved around Moll, rather than Frith. The remainder of this essay recal-

brates the issue by considering what happened when the subject herself took part.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Frith was not out of place at the Fortune; indeed it seems she may have been a regular.<sup>16</sup> Sir Alexander's remark about cutpurses was sociologically accurate, and when Trapdoor and Tearcat appear, Moll remarks: 'One of them is a nip: I took him once i' the twopenny gallery at the Fortune' (5.1.283–4).<sup>17</sup> 'He that cuts the purse is called the *Nip*', observes Dekker in *The Belman of London* (1608),<sup>18</sup> and according to Robert Greene they operated in the yard and the galleries of outdoor playhouses, as well as at the entrances<sup>19</sup>:

At plaies, the Nip standeth there leaning like some mannerly gentleman against the doore as men go in, and there finding talke with some of his companions, spieth what everie man hath in his purse, and where, in what place, and in which sleeve or pocket he puts his boung and according to that so he worketh either where the thrust is great within, or else as they come out at the dores.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars are rightly cautious about reading cony-catching literature as evidence of actual behaviour, but it does give an idea of the contemporary perception of such activities.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, the Fortune's reputation for attracting such a clientele was well established. In one sense, Frith's movement to the stage was in part the play's self-fulfilling prophecy, a conjuring act that produced the (un)desired cutpurse for public consumption. In *Kemps nine daies wonder* (1600) Will Kemp recalls how he 'rembred one of them to be a noted Cut-purse, such a one as we tye to a poast on our stage, for all people to wonder at, when at a play they are taken pilfring'.<sup>22</sup> Such an atmosphere is fostered in *The Roaring Girl*, and in the audience by Sir Alexander, but it seems unlikely that she made such an undignified entrance onto the stage as Kemp's unfortunate victim. The *Correction Book* entry gives few details of her transgression of acting conventions, instead drawing attention to her 'mans apparell' and 'lascivious speaches'; nor, unfortunately, does her 'autobiography', published half a century later. It is, however, worth considering several possibilities. She may have performed on the stage before the play began; as the play's most recent editors contend, possibly she participated *in* the play, at 4.1; alternatively she may have performed at the play's end, the *Correction Book* account taken to refer to a jig; or, finally, she may have been on stage through much and perhaps all of the play, participating at some point or points during the performance.

No evidence supports the first of these suggestions, at least in the extant text of the play: it is surely unlikely, if not impossible, that Frith delivered the Prologue. It *is* possible she gave an impromptu performance, before the actor speaking the Prologue came on stage, suggesting both an uninvited and perhaps a one-off event. But in the absence of further evidence this is mere speculation. Nonetheless, if the *Correction Book* record is interpreted as implying that Frith's 'act' was unscripted (if not necessarily undesired, by the Prince's Men, and certainly, one might expect, by fellow playgoers), then it is tempting to imagine Frith's seeing an opportunity to perform in an arena before a ready audience who had, after all, come to watch a play about her, and taking to the stage and performing the kind of 'act' spectators had come to expect.

In their desire no doubt to ground such speculation in the text, commentators have been attracted by the proposal that she took part in the play proper. Conceivably, Frith participated at one or more of several points in the play, but 4.1 is perhaps the most obvious candidate, for here the character Moll plays a musical instrument and sings. The *Correction Book* reports that Frith 'sat there vppon the stage in the publique viewe of all the people there present in mans apparrell & playd vppon her lute & sange a songe',<sup>23</sup> and this detail has proved sufficient to persuade editors that the real Frith most likely featured here. At the beginning of 4.1, Trapdoor tells Sir Alexander that Moll will appear 'In man's apparel' (4.1.5), and – they hope – fall into the trap prepared. After Sebastian, Mary Fitzallard, and Moll enter at 4.1.36, Sebastian presents Moll with an instrument (4.1.77 sd), which she proceeds to play. There is, however, a discrepancy here: in the play Sebastian gives Moll a viol, but the *Correction Book* record states that her instrument is a lute. The latter may be an error; the point is that Frith enacts a private performance (as indeed it is in the play) in public.<sup>24</sup> But the much more significant issue, unexplored by scholars, is precisely *how* such a cameo might have been effected. If Frith took the role of Moll – here or elsewhere – this hypothesis raises questions about how she took the actor's place, whether the performance lasted an entire scene, and (above all) what the implications of such a substitution might have been. When Moll enters with Sebastian and Mary she is (like Mary) 'costumed': Mary is in disguise, as the sempster she was in 1.1, wearing clothes, Moll reveals, she supplied (4.1.69); and Moll is in male attire. Plausibly, then, a switch allowed Frith to replace the actor playing Moll, entering at 4.1.36 and then singing her song. A still further complication arises, however, for there is no exit for Moll after the song; indeed, there are some one

hundred lines until the end of the scene, including an exchange between Moll and Sir Alexander. It is *possible* that Frith took Moll's part for the entire scene, which would in itself of course be an ironic reversal of the play's own dramatic device whereby Frith is played by an actor. Indeed, the inversion would work on several levels: a female figure, notorious for her cross-dressing, played on a public stage by a male actor as a woman, disguised as a man, and in turn replaced by the cross-dressed figure herself, a woman, in male dress, playing 'herself'. But the practical issue of *how* and under what circumstances such a substitution might be staged must call into question whether in fact Frith appeared in 4.1 at all. Aside from practical matters – Frith would, in taking the part of Moll, presumably have delivered the lines set down by Middleton and Dekker, perhaps 'spicing the dialogue with extempore jests'<sup>25</sup> – such a cameo would surely have presented difficulties once 'Moll', played by the actor, returned. Indeed, this possibility in turn raises questions over whether Frith's was a one-off performance, or was (or became) an integral part of the play.

Whether or not Frith participated before and/or during the play, she may have been there at the end: the *Correction Book* may refer to a jig. G.E. Bentley notes, 'On 1 October 1612 the General Sessions of the Peace at Westminster issued "An Order for the Suppressinge of Jigges att the ende of Playes"'.<sup>26</sup> Jigs had become associated with disturbances and disorder – and cutpurses – notably at the Fortune:

by reason of certayne lewde Jigges songes and daunces vsed and accustomed at the play-house called the Fortune in Goulding-lane divers cutt-purses and other lewde and ill disposed persons in greate multitudes doe resorte thither at th'end of euerye playe many tymes causinge tumults and outrages wherebye His Majesties peace is often broke and much mischiefe like to ensue thereby.<sup>27</sup>

Whether a direct connection existed between an incident involving Frith and the banning of jigs at the Fortune (and elsewhere) is not known, but this document underlines the Fortune's reputation for trouble.<sup>28</sup> So Frith may have performed at the end of the play; certainly, from the brief description of her singing a song, together with the report of banter and 'lascivious speeches', it is entirely plausible she provided a jig of some sort.<sup>29</sup>

These three possibilities all identify a specific point in the play (or before or after) for Frith's entrance. Alternatively, the detail 'sat there vpon the stage'<sup>30</sup> may suggest Frith sat on a stool – perhaps throughout the play.<sup>31</sup> 'Certainly in the printed text at V.i.', Andrew Gurr claims, 'she is utilised to



identify her cutpurse associates in the playhouse audience'.<sup>32</sup> In this scene Moll says of one of the two cutpurses who enter at 5.1.267: 'I took him once i' the twopenny gallery at the Fortune' (5.1.283–4). This reading may appear attractive but the character Moll, not the real Frith, is the one whom the play 'utilise[s]': there is no evidence that Frith is involved in this scene, directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, the possibility that she was onstage, if not *in the play*, for much or all of *The Roaring Girl* is intriguing, particularly since one of the playwrights had written about (and against) gallants sitting on the stage. In Chapter Six ('How a gallant should behave himself at a playhouse') of *The Gull's Hornbook* (1609), a satirical conduct book for gallants, Thomas Dekker makes clear how playwrights (and presumably actors) felt about playgoers who sat on the stage. Just as Jack Dapper in *The Roaring Girl* is mocked when he buys a feather, Dekker ridicules the 'feathered ostrich' who 'plant[s] himself] valiantly because impudently on the stage'.<sup>33</sup>

By sitting on the stage you have a signed patent to engross the whole commodity of censure; may lawfully presume to be a girder; and stand at the helm to steer the passage of scenes. Yet no man shall once offer to hinder you from obtaining the title of an insolent overweening coxcomb.<sup>34</sup>

The passage continues at length to criticise the behaviour of gallants. As Douglas Bruster observes, Dekker reveals here the frustrations of playwrights whose plays are subject to the distractions, judgements – and indeed interference of – stage-sitters.<sup>35</sup>

By spreading your body on the stage and by being a Justice in examining of plays you shall put yourself into such true scenical authority that some poet shall not dare to present his Muse rudely upon your eyes without having first unmasked her, rifled her and discovered all her bare and most mystical parts before you at a tavern, when you most knightly shall for his pains pay for both their suppers.<sup>36</sup>

*The Roaring Girl* depicts gallants getting their comeuppance, the citizens tried by, and then triumphing over, Laxton, Goshawk, and Greenwit. But if Frith displaced a gallant by sitting on a stool, perhaps her presence on stage was more than merely symbolic – indeed, it is difficult to imagine Frith *not* taking the opportunity afforded her by such a privileged position.

These four possibilities lead in turn to the key issue: the circumstances under which Frith performed. Was it agreed (and perhaps scripted) with the players (and possibly the playwrights) – in other words, was it a collaborative

role?<sup>37</sup> Or was it an impromptu act later appropriated by (and in) the printed text of the play? The ‘promissory performance’ advertised in the Epilogue is, in one reading, an act of containment.<sup>38</sup> Thus, regardless of the ‘terms’ of Frith’s performance – and whatever actually happened – the 1611 quarto accommodates Frith – effectively *silencing* her – by integrating her into the play, if only by gesturing towards a putative future performance that has, in fact, already taken place. But the ambiguity of the Epilogue’s claim extends beyond the text – and beyond the text’s ability to contain it. If the play seeks to appropriate Frith, first as its subject and then, subsequent to her appearance on stage, as a selling point to attract playgoers and/or readers – in turn exploiting her a second time, effectively marshalling her as an endorsement of the play that both produces and consumes her – critics’ lack of interest in pursuing the further ramifications of Frith’s participation in the making of meaning at the Fortune (and subsequently) has allowed the debate surrounding the play’s ideological bearings to remain grounded in the Middleton/Dekker text published in 1611. Frith’s voice has survived (if at all) only in the play’s ventriloquised version. While the subversion/containment debate surrounding the play is now recognised as simplistic and reductive, criticism of the play has been conducted in a vacuum that has ignored or displaced the most – potentially – disruptive figure ‘in’ the play.

In Stephen Orgel’s view, Frith’s ‘performance was certainly not impromptu, since it is announced as forthcoming’ in the Epilogue.<sup>39</sup> If this line is followed then the matter is relatively straightforward. Orgel surmises that ‘a large audience was obviously expected, and no trouble anticipated from the authorities, and both she and the theatre management must have made money out of it’.<sup>40</sup> That is, Orgel assumes that her appearance was a collaboration; if Frith’s was a ‘brief stage career’, Orgel is ambiguous about whether it was a one-off or not. His interpretation of the Epilogue, however, argues that Frith’s appearance was a planned, *future* event, rather than an impromptu performance recalled. For the critic, as for the actors and presumably for Frith, this interpretation implies an accommodation that made ‘The Roaring Girl’s’ recompense’ fit neatly with the play on the stage. It may not have mattered that Frith would appear to have little in common with Moll, nor that the *Correction Book* account of her performance would seem to sit oddly with the play: the novelty (even if it *was* repeated), perhaps, was all. So, whether scripted or otherwise approved – or not – a celebrity appearance may have gone down well regardless of context or its implicit challenge to the play.

Once again there appear to be four possible interpretations. Frith's 'act' was scripted (and therefore 'authorised'), performed once, and recalled in the play's 'afterlife', the Epilogue consecrating Frith's role as an integral feature of the play, re-imagined as a performance in the 1611 quarto. Or from the outset Frith's role was scripted (perhaps by the dramatists), and became part of the play, its very frequency drawing the attention of the authorities. Alternatively, it was unscripted, an impromptu performance by Frith, a one-off; or, finally, it was unscripted but became a fixture of the play in performance. There can be no definitive answer, but since what is clear is that Frith's participation must have been either with or without the approval of the players, the issue boils down to its circumstances and how Frith's participation may have affected the play proper. Although scholars implicitly accept that Frith's performance was authorised, as the 4.1 solution requires, the more likely scenario is that her appearance was unscripted, unauthorised, and perhaps a deal less comfortable than tends to be assumed. The Epilogue, it follows, is a smokescreen, apparently registering, playfully perhaps, the Prince's Men's understandable joy at their *coup d'theatre* – that they have managed not just to portray Frith but incorporate her into the play's very heart in a cameo performance. But it masks a more complex event in which Frith's appearance was very possibly rather more of an intervention than a collaboration.

As the Prologue recognises, playgoers knew Frith's behaviour had brought her considerable notoriety; the *Correction Book* evidence suggests that whatever moral some playgoers may have taken from *The Roaring Girl*, Frith was not persuaded. If the *Correction Book* is imprecise about the nature of the Fortune episode, in other ways and in conjunction with a witness account of the penance she was later sentenced to serve at St. Paul's it reveals something of Frith's attitude to authority and her delight in upstaging others. The *Correction Book* also records a recent indiscretion:

And further [she] confesseth *that* since she was punished for the misdemeanours afore mentioned in Bridewell she was since vpon Christmas day at night taken in Powles Church with her peticoate tucked vp about her in the fashion of a man with a mans cloake on her to the great scandal of diuers persons who vnderstood the same & to the disgrace of all womanhood[.]<sup>41</sup>

For her activities at the Fortune and elsewhere, 'his *Lordship*. thought fit to remand her to Bridewell';<sup>42</sup> undaunted, her behaviour at 'Powles Church' led to her penance at St Paul's on 9 February. In a letter to Sir Dudley Carleton

dated just three days later, Sir John Chamberlain describes Frith's performance there:

this last Sunday Mall Cut-purse a notorious baggage (that used to go in mans apparel and challenged the feild of divers gallants) was brought to the same place ['Paules Crosse'], where she wept bitterly and seemed very penitent, but yt is since doubted she was maudelin druncke, beeing discovered to have tiple of three quarts of sacke before she came to her penance: she had the daintiest preacher or ghostly father that ever I saw in pulpit, one Ratcliffe of Brazen Nose in Oxford, a likelier man to have led the revels in some ynne of court then to be where he was, but the best is he did extreem badly, and so wearied the audience that the best part went away, and the rest taried rather to heare Mall Cutpurse then him.<sup>43</sup>

Although appearing penitent, Frith was playing to the gallery, subverting the act (and place);<sup>44</sup> as Orgel points out, 'if Chamberlain's moral feelings remain outraged, he is in no doubt about the success of the performance'.<sup>45</sup> Fittingly enough, years later Middleton and Dekker's play was on sale at a stall 'conveniently situated near the scene of the penance in St. Paul's Churchyard'.<sup>46</sup>

Much later, in the text published in 1662 that may or may not be partly an autobiography, the narrator gives a telling account of this event:

an Accusation [was] exhibited against me for wearing undecent and manly apparel. I was advised by my Proctor to demur to the Jurisdiction of the Court, as for a Crime, if such, not cognizable there or elsewhere; but he did it to spin out my Cause, and get my mony; for in the conclusion, I was sentenced there to stand and do penance in a White Sheet at *Pauls* Cross during morning Sermon on a Sunday.<sup>47</sup>

Here Frith represents herself (or is represented) as being aggrieved at her treatment – not only by the court itself but by lawyers. Her response is to tailor her response accordingly:

They might as soon have shamed a Black Dog as Me, with any kind of such punishment; for saving the reverence due to those who enjoyned it, for a halfe-penny I would have Travelled to all the Market Towns in *England* with it, and been as proud of it as that Citizen who rode down to his Friends in his Livery-Gown and Hood: or that Parson who being enjoyned to wear the Surplice contrary to his will, when he had once put it on, wore it constantly in his own and other Towns, while he was complained of, for his abusing that decent Ministerial Garment. I am sure there were some few who had no cause to be merry or sport themselves at the sight; for my Emissaries were very busie without any regard to the sacredness of the place, but in revenge of this disgrace intended me, spoyled a good many

Cloaths by cutting of part of their Cloaks and Gowns, and sending them home as naked behind as an Apes Tayle ... I did not say as much whatever I thought when my penance was over; but this dealing with me therefore was so far from reclaiming me to the sobriety of decent apparel, that I was [ ] offended with it [.]<sup>48</sup>

The accuracy of this account is impossible to gauge, not least because it conforms in several respects to the cony-catching genre.<sup>49</sup> But together with Chamberlain's letter, it may be taken as further evidence of Frith's desire to subvert authority, her 'Emissaries' taking advantage of those who came to witness Frith's very public punishment.

In the light of her well-documented aversion to authority, then, it is surely unlikely that Frith allowed herself to be muzzled by the Prince's Men and play second fiddle to an actor, even if the play were in some ways an oblique compliment to her. An obvious temptation is to suggest that Frith intervened to object to the play's own (unavoidable) participation in a very specific form of gender control: the prohibition of female playing.<sup>50</sup> The play's central irony, in performance, is precisely that the medium of playing itself demarcated relations between genders; so on its own terms *The Roaring Girl* cannot fully stage the issues it raises. (Indeed, here only Frith, outside as well as inside the Fortune, and not the actor playing Moll, can offer most 'recompense', as she recognises in her bawdy invitation to the audience.) But to read Frith's act in this way is to risk imposing modern concerns.<sup>51</sup> It seems more plausible, and less risky, to return to the association for which she was notorious: the world of the cutpurse. If for Frith the theatre represented authority itself, her performance may in fact have had something in common with her other acts of defiance. The *Correction Book's* claim that she bantered with fellow playgoers about her gender, suggesting that if they came 'to her lodging they should finde that she is a woman' – even if she elivered this line from somewhere other than the stage (as the next clause 'And also sat there vpon the stage' perhaps indicates) – points to a subversion of Middleton and Dekker's attempt to re-orientate popular perceptions. Her playing and singing, then, might be interpreted as a reclamation of the stage by a cutpurse, an act of subversion not only of the play, but more significantly of the *place*. In moving from the audience to the stage (the most likely scenario), Mary Frith deconstructs the early modern playhouse's demarcation of territory, literalising the play's playful gestures to cutpurses in the audience by appropriating the stage space that, as Kemp's narrative reveals, sometimes served as a scaffold to enact punishment on the unfortunate 'nip' caught in the act.<sup>52</sup> Conceivably, Frith

designed her performance to aid the Fortune's cutpurses, as the 'autobiography' claims of the episode at St. Paul's Cross.

The various possibilities rehearsed here all point, in varying degrees, to an act of potential or actual subversion. In a recent debate on playgoing, Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin consider the possible significance of Sir Alexander Wengrave's metatheatrical address to the audience.<sup>53</sup> For Yachnin, the description of the audience 'as a library of self-reading books militates against a view of theatrical spectacle as penetrating or transformative. The players turn the tables on the playgoers, making the spectators into the spectacle'.<sup>54</sup> The key point, in this reading, is that the audience 'survey their own stories, either written in themselves or as those stories are reflected by the dramatized portrayal of London life': thus turning playgoers 'inward', 'rather than transforming the spectators into a collectivity'.<sup>55</sup> Returning to the same scene, Dawson focuses on the reference to the 'cutpurse [who] thrusts and leers' (1.2.26), and proposes that playgoers, 'as objects of the actors' look', connect the players' gaze to the cutpurses' intentions, as they weave among the spectators.<sup>56</sup> Central to both perspectives is the act of *looking* – and the issue of authority. According to Dawson

Playwrights and actors seem here to be asserting their ownership of the look and their power to control it – not in order to produce a sense of interiority, but as a way of managing the fundamental currency of theatrical exchange. And they do so paradoxically by casting the look back on the spectators who now must eye both themselves and each other, as well as the spectacle before them.<sup>57</sup>

Neither Yachnin nor Dawson involves Frith in their debate; yet in moving to the stage, shifting from playgoer to player, she becomes the focus of attention – for actors as well as spectators. The introspection generated by Sir Alexander's conceit that Yachnin finds is displaced by Frith's emergence *in*, or adjacent to, the play: the jibe at cutpurses in the audience comes back to haunt the actors from 'vppon the stage' itself. Similarly, Dawson's reliance on a binary that opposes the actors' (and playwrights') authority to the audience's comparative (and necessary) passivity is exposed by Frith, whose act surely wrests control of 'the fundamental currency of theatrical exchange'. Sir Alexander's objectification of spectators may well be both the character's and the company's attempt to assert control from the authority position of the stage – what Dawson calls 'scopic management'<sup>58</sup> – in parallel with the play's desire to present (and persuade with) its version of Mary Frith. But the

Fortune and its authority could not contain what Marjorie Garber has called Frith's 'unmasterable excess',<sup>59</sup> even if the play in performance, and the 1611 quarto, from the Prologue through to Epilogue, attempted to do just that.<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

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- 1 M.W. Sampson, *Modern Language Notes* 30 (1915), 195, was the first commentator to read in these lines a description of the interior of the Fortune; cited in Paul Mulholland (ed.), *The Roaring Girl* (Manchester, 1987), 83n. All subsequent references to the play are to this edition.
- 2 Clearly 'Th'inner room' alludes to the tiring house, from which the actors have just emerged, substantiating Sir Alexander's joke that the 'parlour' is rather more spacious. Similarly, as Mulholland's edition notes, 'galleries' (1.2.14) suggests both '(1) apartments for the exhibition of art works; (2) the tiered balconies of the Fortune Theatre'; cf. Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 1992), 224. 'Within one square a thousand heads' may indicate the capacity of the Fortune; Ann Jennalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London, 1576–1642* (Princeton, 1981), 187, interprets this line as indicating the capacity of the yard (ie, 1000); Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* 3rd edn (Cambridge, 2004), 303n., suggests the possibility that 'the galleries, also in the square, would be included in Middleton's [*sic*] figure, and that it shows the expected total attendance in a playhouse of at least twice that capacity'.
- 3 Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 1.2.19–21n.
- 4 Recent criticism on the play includes Paul Mulholland, 'The Date of the Roaring Girl', *Review of English Studies* 28 (1977): 18–31; Simon Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (Brighton, 1981), 67–92; Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Brighton, 1983), 159–61; Mary Beth Rose, 'Women in Men's Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in *The Roaring Girl*', *English Literary Renaissance* 14.3 (Autumn 1984): 367–91; Viviana Comensoli, 'Play-making, Domestic Conduct, and the Multiple Plot in *The Roaring Girl*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 27 (1987): 249–66; Jean E. Howard, 'Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.4 (Winter 1988): 418–40; Jo E. Miller, 'Women and the Market in *The Roaring Girl*', *Renaissance and Reformation* 26.1 (1990): 11–23; Marjorie Garber, 'The Logic of the Transvestite: *The Roaring Girl*', in David Scott Kastan & Peter Stallybrass (eds), *Sta-*

*ging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (New York & London, 1991), 221–34; Deborah Jacobs, ‘Critical Imperialism and Renaissance Drama: The Case of *The Roaring Girl*’, in Dale M. Bauer and Susan Janet McKinstry (eds), *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic* (Albany, 1991), 73–84; Paul Mulholland, ‘A Source for the Painter Analogue in the Epilogue of *The Roaring Girl*’, *The Modern Language Review* 86 (1991): 817–20; Stephen Orgel, ‘The Subtexts of *The Roaring Girl*’ and Jean E. Howard, ‘Sex and Social Conflict: the Erotics of *The Roaring Girl*’, both in Susan Zimmerman (ed.), *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage* (New York and London, 1992), 12–26 and 170–90, respectively; Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London & New York, 1994), 121–8; Jodi Mikalachki, ‘Gender, Cant, and Cross-talking in *The Roaring Girl*’, *Renaissance Drama* 25 (1994): 119–43; Susan E. Krantz, ‘The Sexual Identities of Moll Cutpurse in Dekker and Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl* and in London’, *Renaissance and Reformation* 19 (1995): 5–20; Swapan Chakravorty, *Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford, 1996), 86–96; David Cressy, ‘Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England’, *Journal of British Studies* 35 (1996): 438–65; Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare’s England* (Cambridge, 1996), 149–53; Jane Baston, ‘Rehabilitating Moll’s Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*’, *Studies in English Literature* 37 (1997): 317–35; Lloyd Edward Kermode, ‘Destination Doomsday: Desires for Change and Changeable Desires in *The Roaring Girl*’, *English Literary Renaissance* 27 (1997): 421–42; Tracey Sedinger, ‘“If Sight and Shape be True”: The Epistemology of Crossdressing on the London Stage’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.1 (Spring 1997): 63–79; Fiona McNeill, ‘Gynocentric London Spaces: (Re)Locating Masterless Women in Early Stuart Drama’, *Renaissance Drama* 28 (1997): 195–244; Craig Rustici, ‘The Smoking Girl: Tobacco and the Representation of Mary Frith’, *Studies in Philology* 96 (1999): 159–79; Gustav Ungerer, ‘Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse, in Life and Literature’, *Shakespeare Studies* 1 (2000): 42–84; Heather Hirschfeld, ‘What Do Women Know?: *The Roaring Girl* and the Wisdom of Tiresias’, *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 123–46; Mario Digangi, ‘Sexual Slander and Working Women in *The Roaring Girl*’, *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003): 147–76; William N. West, ‘Talking the Talk: Cant on the Jacobean Stage’, *English Literary Renaissance* 33 (2003): 228–51.

Mulholland, ‘The Date of *The Roaring Girl*’, 21, suggested as long ago as 1977 that the *Correction Book* material ‘encourage[s] speculation’, but this has not been pursued; of the criticism cited here, brief discussions of Frith’s appearance feature in Mulholland (1977), Shepherd (1981), Garber (1991), Mikalachki (1994), Krantz (1995), Chakravorty (1996), Orgel (1992, 1996), Baston (1997), McNeill (1997),



- Ungerer (2000), and Digangi (2003), along with Mulholland (1987) and Elizabeth Cook (ed.), *The Roaring Girl* (London, 1997).
- 5 *The Roaring Girl* may have been revived in 1640; see G.E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* 7 vols. (Oxford, 1941–68), 5.1401–2 (hereinafter *JCS*). John Day's *Madde Pranckes of Mery Mall of the Bancksie*, if it was ever printed, since no copy survives, was 'entered in the Stationer's Register 7 August 1610, [and] may be the earliest dependable reference to the real Moll, if she is indeed the title figure': Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 13. Frith also features in Nathan Field's *Amends for Ladies* (1611) and elsewhere; see Cook, *The Roaring Girl*, xx-xxi.
  - 6 Mulholland, 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', 25, states that 'the play almost certainly must have been printed before December 1611'.
  - 7 Quoted in Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 262; italics original.
  - 8 See for example Joseph Lenz, 'Base Trade: Theater as Prostitution', *English Literary History* 60.4 (Winter 1993): 833–55. On women playgoers, see for example Richard Levin, 'Women in the Renaissance Theatre Audience', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989): 165–74.
  - 9 Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 262.
  - 10 For an alternative reading, see Kermode, 'Destination Doomsday', 422: the Epilogue 'is not the promise of some boisterous fun, but a warning'.
  - 11 Both Mulholland and Cook take this view, as does Andor Gomme, ed., *The Roaring Girl* (London, 1976), who adds a stage direction '[spoken by MOLL]', 144.
  - 12 Unfortunately Frith – and/or the compilers of her 'autobiography' – makes no reference to her appearance at the Fortune. *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, Alias Mal Cutpurse* was published in 1662, some three years after Frith's death at the age of about 73; the text is included in Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing (eds), *Counterfeit Ladies: 'The Life and Death of Mal Cutpurse' [and] 'The Case of Mary Carleton'* (London, 1994).
  - 13 Bentley, *JCS*, 6.148; Orgel, *Impersonations*, 149. Cf. Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1980), 100.
  - 14 Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle*, 127.
  - 15 For a critique of critics who write on the play with modern concerns in mind, see especially Cressy, 'Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing'.
  - 16 Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 224.
  - 17 On playgoers' freedom to move around in the galleries as well as in the yard, see Tiffany Stern, "'You That Walk i'th Galleries': Standing and Walking in the Galleries of the Globe Theatre', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51 (2000): 211–16.
  - 18 Quoted in Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 5.1.281–92n.

- 19 Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 78.
- 20 Robert Greene, *The Second Part of Conny Catching* [1591], in Alexander Grossart (ed.), *Life and Works* (London, 1881), 10.105; quoted in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 250.
- 21 On the cony-catching genre and the dangers of reading such texts as 'historical' rather than 'literary' artefacts (a debate in which *The Roaring Girl* may be seen to participate), see for example Garrett Sullivan & Linda Woodbridge, 'Popular Culture in Print', in Arthur F. Kinney (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1500–1600* (Cambridge, 2000), 265–86, especially 278–83; Woodbridge, 'Imposters, Monsters, and Spies: What Rogue Literature Can Tell Us About Early Modern Subjectivity', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9 (Winter 2002): [www.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/Dialogues/01/woodbridge.html](http://www.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/Dialogues/01/woodbridge.html); Woodbridge, 'Jestbooks, the Literature of Roguery, and the Vagrant Poor in Renaissance England', *English Literary Renaissance* 33 (2003): 201–10; and Lee Beier, 'On the Boundaries of New and Old Historicism: Thomas Harman and the Literature of Roguery', *English Literary Renaissance* 33 (2003): 181–200.
- 22 Quoted in Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 258.
- 23 See Mulholland, 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', 22 and 262, and Cook, *The Roaring Girl*, xviii.
- 24 In *The Stage and Social Struggle*, 123–4, Jean Howard points out that Frith's act of playing in public is transgressive, since women were expected to play instruments in private. For a full discussion of these two instruments, see Christopher R. Wilson & Michela Calore, *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* (London, 2005), 252–8, 456–60.
- 25 Mulholland, 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', 22.
- 26 Bentley, *JCS* VI., 146; see also Mulholland, 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', 22.
- 27 Bentley, *JCS* VI., 146.
- 28 Mulholland, 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', 27–8, notes a likely contemporary reference to a recent court case concerning a scuffle at the Fortune between two butchers and several gentlemen.
- 29 Krantz, 'The Sexual Identities of Moll Cutpurse', 5, asserts that Frith's appearance was 'following a performance', as do Mikalacki, 'Gender, Cant, and Cross-talking', 133, and Ungerer, 'Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse', 56.
- 30 Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 262.
- 31 Mulholland, 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', 22.
- 32 Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 224.
- 33 Fools and feathers were often associated; see Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 2.1.117–18n.

- 34 Thomas Dekker, *The Gull's Horn-Book*, in E.D. Pendry (ed.), *Thomas Dekker: Selected Prose Writings* (London, 1967), 99.
- 35 Douglas Bruster, 'Local *Tempest*: Shakespeare and the Work of the Early Modern Playhouse', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 25(1) (1995), 38.
- 36 Pendry, *Thomas Dekker*, 99.
- 37 For a wide-ranging discussion of collaboration, see Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1997).
- 38 See Luke Wilson, 'Promissory Performances', *Renaissance Drama* 25 (1994): 59–87.
- 39 Orgel, *Impersonations*, 145–6; cf. Ungerer, 'Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse', 57, who makes a similar point.
- 40 Orgel, *Impersonations*, 146.
- 41 Quoted in Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 262–63.
- 42 Mulholland, 263.
- 43 Norman Egbert McClure (ed.), *The Letters of John Chamberlain* (Philadelphia, 1939), 1.334.
- 44 Cf. Baston, 'Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion', 323.
- 45 Orgel, *Impersonations*, 148.
- 46 See Mulholland, 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', 26, for a discussion of the transfer of copyright of the play in 1630/1.
- 47 Todd and Spearing, *Counterfeit Ladies*, 33–4. The text is discussed in Orgel, *Impersonations*, 139–44.
- 48 Todd and Spearing, *Counterfeit Ladies*, 34–5; the text is imperfect towards the end of this excerpt: see 139n.
- 49 Orgel, *Impersonations*, 141–3.
- 50 For an argument that female actors presented more of a threat to male spectators than did male actors, see Orgel, *Impersonations*, 10–30.
- 51 In addition to Cressy, 'Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing', see Mulholland, *The Roaring Girl*, 21.
- 52 On the space of the stage and its symbolic and theatrical role, see especially Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* ed. Robert Schwartz [1978] (Baltimore, 1987). For a discussion of similarities between the scaffold and the stage, see Molly Easo Smith, 'The Theater and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 32 (1992): 217–32.
- 53 Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England: A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge, 2001).
- 54 Dawson and Yachnin, 81.
- 55 Dawson and Yachnin, 81.

- 56 Dawson and Yachnin, 95.
- 57 Dawson and Yachnin, 96.
- 58 Dawson and Yachnin, 96.
- 59 Garber, 'The Logic of the Transvestite', 221.
- 60 Mulholland, 'A Source for the Painter Analogue', 819, proposes that '[I]n discouraging the casual suggestions of theatre-goers, the writer of *The Roaring Girl's* Epilogue appears to set a limit to the extent of collaboration he is willing to tolerate'.