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“THE EYES OF JUDGMENT”: PREJUDICE, MISPERCEPTION, AND SEXUALITY IN

THE ROARING GIRL

by

DONNA WROBLE

Under the Direction of James Hirsh, PhD

ABSTRACT

Existing scholarship on Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl, or Moll Cutpurse* primarily focuses on the title character and her unconventional gender presentation. This highlighting of Moll deemphasizes the other intriguing aspects of the play, including its thematic concerns involving issues of prejudice, reputation, gender, class, marriage, and sexuality. This thesis takes the spotlight off of Moll and shines it instead on a selection of other significant characters—including Sir Alexander Wengrave, Sebastian Wengrave, Mary Fitzallard, and a grouping of minor characters who have earned this play its designation as a city comedy: Laxton, Goshawk, the Openworks, and the Gallipots.

INDEX WORDS: judgment, identity, anxiety, masculinity, rank, cross-dressing, disguise, city comedy

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by

DONNA WROBLE

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Master of Arts

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2016

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Dedication

The following thesis is dedicated to my parents and my fiancé Matthew for encouraging me to find what I love to do and pursue it. Their confidence in me is what made completing this project possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl, or Moll Cutpurse*, first performed in 1611, dramatizes how various characters perceive—and often misperceive—the unusual, intriguing, and at times even confounding Roaring Girl, Moll Cutpurse. In a particularly revealing exchange in the second act of the play, Sir Alexander Wengrave and his son Sebastian negotiate their disparate perceptions of Moll, the woman Sebastian purportedly intends to marry:

SIR ALEXANDER: Methinks her very name should fright thee from her,

And never trouble me.

SEBASTIAN: Why, is the name of Moll so fatal, sir?

SIR ALEXANDER: Many one, sir, where suspect is entered,

Forseek all London from one end to t'other

More whores of that name than of any ten other.

SEBASTIAN: What's that to her? Let those blush for themselves.

Can any guilt in others condemn her?

...

He hates unworthily that by rote contemns,

For the name neither saves nor yet condemns. (2.2.152-9; 172-3)¹

Sir Alexander never directly responds to his son's accusation. The elder Wengrave, faced with the possibility of his heir's marriage to someone he regards as unsuitable, assumes the role of the stereotypical patriarch, attempting to use public opinion to bring his son back into the fold. Sir Alexander fixates on Moll's presumed sexual promiscuity. He is not alone in his attention to

¹Except where noted, all quotations from *The Roaring Girl* are taken from the Norton Critical Edition, edited by Jennifer Panek.

Moll: most of the play's characters comment in some manner on her reputation as well as her unconventional attire and behavior.

Much of the critical commentary on the play also centers on Moll and her undermining of various codes of conduct prescribed according to gender. In her introduction to the play from *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, published in 2007, Coppélia Kahn acknowledges critics' spotlighting of Moll: "Most readers have found her...irresistible as both focus and source of the play's energies" (725). Mary Beth Rose, an influential critic of the play, asserts that Moll's cross-dressing is "the central dramatic and symbolic issue of the play" (367). Moll's identity and actions are indeed a major focus of the play, but I propose that the identities, actions, and reactions of other characters serve important functions as well. Throughout the play, Moll and her fellow characters view events and one another through two lenses—that of society and that of their individual subjectivity. At key moments, these two modes of perception come into conflict, generating tension and anxiety among all of the play's characters.

Pursuing this tension, I suggest that Middleton and Dekker establish Moll Cutpurse as the primary—but not the only—focus of *The Roaring Girl* in an attempt not only to investigate issues surrounding female cross-dressing but more profoundly to dramatize epistemological concerns that arise from social interaction in general. Interwoven throughout the play are two pivotal themes: first, the complexities of presenting and perceiving identity, and second, the consequences of forming opinions and judgments of others based on socially-dictated norms. My thesis examines these overarching thematic concerns and traces the role that each of the major characters plays in presenting these themes—including but not limited to the Roaring Girl herself.

A further concern of this thesis is developing a broader understanding of the development and revision of social norms in Renaissance English society. The public theater played a pivotal role in this process. As Ivo Kamps asserts, the theater acted as a kind of “liminal” space, “cater[ing] to a heterogeneous audience while also striving for respectability and patronage” (8). In its occupation of this liminal space, the institution of the theater both reflected and influenced the society it aimed to entertain: “Although as a public institution the stage was required to endorse conventional paradigms...it also inverted those structures by positing alternatives in ways that renegotiated difference and sometimes contradicted traditional norms” (Comensoli and Russell 1). In my analysis of this particular play, I will explore the Renaissance theater’s depiction of the process by which both conventional and alternative viewpoints were formed, maintained, and disseminated. In *The Roaring Girl*, the most salient of these processes is the characters’ formation and understanding of other identities as well as their own identities. This formative process becomes especially interesting when the identity in question is virtually unintelligible to the existing social structure. The ensuing complications draw attention to the constructed nature of all identity, providing the opportunity for reflection and redefinitions to take place. *The Roaring Girl* dramatizes these complications as well as moments of reflection and redefinition.

The critical history of *The Roaring Girl* is nearly as intriguing as the play itself. Although the play was purported to be fairly successful in its time, it was not widely canonized as an important Renaissance text until the late 20th century, and there is no surviving record of any performance between the years 1611 and 1951 (Mulholland 48; Kahn 725). The intervening 340 years were equally quiet in terms of critical attention. Notable exceptions began to appear in the 1930’s, when academics, led especially by T.S. Eliot, began to examine and write about the play

as a significant work of Early Modern English literature. Since then, renewed interest in *The Roaring Girl* and several modern stage productions have led to a growing body of analysis, especially since the infusion of feminist criticism beginning in the 1980s. Today, the play continues to fascinate critics with the questions it poses about gender identity, the regulation of sexuality, and class relations.

T.S. Eliot originated modern critical interest in the play. In the introduction to the 1987 New Revels edition of the play, editor Paul A. Mulholland describes Eliot as decisively situating Moll, and Moll alone, as “the play’s centrepiece” (20). This focus on Moll, Mulholland argues, comes “at the expense of an understanding of the overall design and her part in it” (20). Eliot’s work on the play exhibits a stark contrast between his estimation of Moll’s character and his appraisal of the rest of the play. Eliot praises the playwrights for their rich characterization of Moll and asserts that *The Roaring Girl* is “one comedy which more than any other Elizabethan comedy realizes a free and noble womanhood” (100). He concentrates on Moll as a unique female figure within Elizabethan comedy, but Eliot’s fascination with and approval of Moll is particularly striking in light of his otherwise conservative political views. However, as Mulholland points out, Eliot largely denigrates the rest of the play when he writes that “we read with toil through a *mass of cheap conventional intrigue*, and suddenly realize that we are...observing a real and unique human being” (Eliot 89, emphasis mine). Throughout the play’s modern critical history, what Eliot describes as a “mass of cheap conventional intrigue” has often receded into the background of subsequent analyses. Like Eliot, scholars have typically focused on Moll Cutpurse, underrepresenting or dismissing the play’s other significant aspects. In this thesis I argue that the rest of the play contains incisive thematization as well as characterization; moreover, developing a more complete and nuanced understanding of

Middleton and Dekker's other characters, subplots, and themes will enhance existing criticism on the play.

Since the 1980's, critical scholarship on *The Roaring Girl* has largely focused on Moll Cutpurse as a gender-bending, feminist figure.² A groundbreaking study of the play's gender dynamics is Mary Beth Rose's 1984 article "Women in Men's Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in *The Roaring Girl*." Rose examines Moll's role within the context of seventeenth-century society and the reactions of the other characters in the play to her gender presentation. Rose extends her examination of these gender dynamics in a comprehensive analysis of two Jacobean pamphlets: *Hic Mulier, Or, The Man-Woman*, and *Haec Vir: Or The Womanish-Man*.³ These texts exemplify the cultural debate surrounding appropriate clothing for women within English society. Both documents were published anonymously, and each represented one side of the debate. The first of these pamphlets condemned women who were experimenting with men's styles, suggesting that these women were attempting either to become men or, worse, to tempt men—in either case going against nature. The second pamphlet responded to these allegations in the form of a dialogue in which the "Man-Woman" explains to the "Womanish-Man" that women, in experimenting with masculine clothing, are exercising free expression, which is an essential part of human nature. Instead of violating nature, as the author of *Hic Mulier* suggested, they were actually acting in accordance with their basic humanity. The connection between *The Roaring Girl* and these two pamphlets had not been highlighted until Rose examined all three in tandem in order to "show that, taken together, artistic representation and social commentary suggest a deep cultural ambivalence in the British Renaissance about female independence and equality between the sexes" (368). Rose locates moments in which Moll calls into question the

² See Howard, Garber, and Cressy.

³ For further commentary on the pamphlets, see Henderson and McManus.

justice of women's traditional role in society, but she ultimately argues that the play should not be read as what she calls a "sympathetic imaginative vision of sexual nonconformity, female independence, and equality between the sexes" (385). Instead, she concludes that the comedic ending re-inscribes each character into the social order. Rose moreover denies that Moll is an exception to this re-inscription. She claims that Moll's unconventionality remains unthreatening to the existing power structure, despite her personal refusal to marry or change. Rose's article brought *The Roaring Girl* to feminist scholars' attention, and her account of the text's interaction with Renaissance culture provides some important interpretations of Moll's characterization and that of a select few of the other characters. Overall, though, Rose views the rest of the play as a backdrop to Moll's display of Renaissance female independence, even though that independence ultimately has little influence on the patriarchal system.

Jane Baston presents a similar and no less important perspective on Moll and her trajectory as a gender-bending figure. In response to critics who identify Moll as a subversive feminist figure (whether successful or not), Baston interprets Moll's character as "a mere gesture towards subversion which is ultimately recuperated" (320). She argues that, although Moll often does subvert gender and class norms, she is "incorporated into the prevailing social apparatus of the play" as it progresses (320). Furthermore, Baston contends that this "prevailing social apparatus" has not been made more tolerant by her supposedly subversive influence. Rather, the play presents Moll as a deviant figure and brings her on stage only to undermine and even ridicule her (332).

Stephen Orgel's examination of *The Roaring Girl* is informed by contemporary concepts of gender as a spectrum of traits rather than as a simple dichotomy. Drawing on gender theory popularized by Judith Butler, Orgel discusses myriad ways of *performing* masculinity and

femininity. He locates several moments of tension in the play between gender expectations and the reality of gender diversity. Most significantly, he argues that Moll's ambiguous gender performance is, in fact, so challenging to the typical gender system that it becomes exotic and sexually exciting for the men around her (18). He describes the male characters' attempts to take advantage of Moll, whom they see as a loose woman because of her unconventional attire. Her besiegers are dramatized as inferior to her—physically, emotionally, mentally, and sexually. Just as much as Moll's ambiguous gender performance undermines social conventions, their lack of stereotypical masculinity undermines the fixed nature of gender distinctions. As Orgel concludes, "In the discourse of patriarchy, gender is the least certain of boundaries," (25) and this ambiguity is brought to the fore throughout *The Roaring Girl*.

Although it is not yet the norm to examine the play in a holistic manner, a few scholars have attempted (with varying degrees of success) to examine Moll and other select characters as complex and non-archetypal figures. For instance, Lloyd Kermode's article, "Destination Doomsday: Desires for Change and Changeable Desires in *The Roaring Girl*," questions the notion of Moll as an *archetypal* feminist or queer hero. He traces Moll's changeability throughout the play, highlighting her inconsistencies and treating her as a fallible human being rather than a representative of subversive Renaissance femininity. Kermode's analysis raises the questions: if Moll is an archetype, how can she be so changeable, and how can so many different characters develop disparate perceptions of her identity? She should be analyzed in the context of her environment to better understand both her idiosyncrasies and those of her fellow characters.

Employing a level of nuance similar to Kermode's, Ryan Singh Paul focuses on the tension between public opinion and individual subjectivity in *The Roaring Girl*. He explains the interplay between knowledge and ignorance within patriarchal social discourse:

Ignorance appears as an active participant in the construction of masculine subjectivity and feminine identity. The language and concepts of the debate became part of the very essence of early modern thought, hashed and re-hashed *ad infinitum* to define woman as an object of study for masculine intellectual discourses... concerned fundamentally with establishing authoritative male subjectivity through the epistemic objectification of women. (519)

Paul demonstrates how such “epistemic objectification” is crucial in several key scenes of *The Roaring Girl*, connecting this to the play’s overall concern with individual subjectivity and social discourse. As I seek to delineate the thematic concerns of the play, I carry Paul’s analysis further, demonstrating how the epistemological issues underlying individual identity and subjectivity affect each character in the play.

The main goal of the following analysis is to provide nuanced examinations of the play’s various characters. Close analysis of each character better illuminates the play’s significance as a dramatization of the social dynamics of a highly patriarchal society in transition than study of one character alone. Because the play can present these dynamics only through the exemplary actions and words of its characters, each character should be considered as one piece of an overall puzzle, rather than any one character overshadowing the rest.

In contrast to Rose and Baston’s work, which claims that Moll is a failed feminist character because conventional gender relations resume at the end of the play, my perspective on the play’s social dynamics will cast the ending in a different light. My thesis demonstrates that this estimation of Moll and her influence on the play’s events is largely unfair. While it is true that the young lovers Sebastian Wengrave and Mary Fitzallard enter into a seemingly traditional marriage, they are not entering into that union unchanged. Moll’s influence has had a noticeable

impact on their perspectives. By the end, even Sir Alexander, whose conventional attitudes cause much of the conflict throughout the play, has developed a more nuanced understanding of gender and social interaction in general. Rose and Baston argue that the conventionality of Sebastian and Mary's union negates these important changes, but I argue that the society does not return to its original state and is in fact changed—not only by Moll's influence but also by the interactions and development of other characters. I seek to examine the broader social dynamics of the play, rather than concentrating on one character that, in isolation, cannot represent the true weight of the work as a whole.

Another response to existing scholarship that my thesis provides is an expanded analysis of gender differences—and their consequences—throughout the play. Orgel's evaluation of these gender dynamics, for instance, is accurate and illuminating in most cases, but he does not address in sufficient detail exceptions like Sebastian Wengrave, who, by the end of the play, vehemently defends Moll to his father. Gender boundaries may be unstable in the play, but this does not mean that more gender-normative characters should be dismissed as completely ineffectual or insignificant; it is in fact how such characters handle the decision to conform to or diverge from society's view of Moll that reveals the complexities underlying the gender system in Renaissance England. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, significant psychological and epistemological issues are at work in this play, and they have not been sufficiently addressed in existing scholarship.

To that end, the following analysis is divided into three sections, each of which centers on particular characters. First, Chapter 2 examines Sir Alexander Wengrave and his son Sebastian; their relationship and differing attitudes concerning marriage and women drive much of the action of the play. While Sebastian comes into his own as a tolerant, self-possessed young

man, his father Sir Alexander's struggle to come to terms with Sebastian's marriage is further complicated and magnified by Sebastian's plot to woo Moll Cutpurse. Sir Alexander's prejudices and conservatism lead to his paranoid response to the changes occurring around him, and Middleton and Dekker dramatize not only his exploits but also his transformation to a more tolerant, humble individual. Next, Chapter 3 centers on Mary Fitzallard, a character whose influence and personality is rarely examined as anything more than her fiancé's counterpart. When examined on her own merit, Mary reveals an important alternative both to the traditional, subservient role prescribed by patriarchal institutions and to Moll's radical rejection of conventional femininity. Mary is neither radical nor traditional but instead displays her own unique characteristics that have a profound impact on the play. Finally, Chapter 4 groups together a set of minor characters who play important roles in bringing issues of sexuality, public opinion, and prejudice to the fore: Laxton, Goshawk, the Openworks, and the Gallipots. Critics' classification of *The Roaring Girl* as a city comedy is well-documented and explored; the characters I examine in Chapter 4 likewise qualify as city characters, influenced as they are by social norms and customs particular to London (as well as broader customs of the times). Chapter 4 examines the city characters in an attempt to triangulate traditional gender expectations as well as the sexual and economic exploitation that was endemic to interactions between the sexes in Jacobean London.

Chapter 2: The Wengraves & the Maintenance of Social Status

Middleton and Dekker devote substantial attention to the father-son conflict between Sir Alexander Wengrave and his son Sebastian. At the beginning of the play, this conflict has already reached a boiling point. For his own seemingly selfish reasons, Sir Alexander has forbidden Sebastian and his former betrothed, Mary Fitzallard, from seeing one another. Not one to be easily thwarted, Sebastian has hatched a covert plan to overcome his father's obstinacy, and it will not spare his father's conservative sensibilities. Within the context of Middleton and Dekker's England, this kind of father-son conflict would likely have been a recognizable—even intimately familiar—situation, especially given the importance of marriage ties among the upper classes. However, in this case, the situation between these two characters is much more nuanced than an oppressive father exerting control over a naïve and innocent son: Sebastian is an imperfect and sometimes even reprehensible hero, while his father is a redeemable and often respectable villain. These seeming contradictions provide the playwrights with the means to continue resisting binaries, as they have done with their title character; indeed, just as Moll Cutpurse challenges the conventionally polarized view of gender roles, the Wengraves blur the lines between hero and villain, fitting neatly into neither role but instead exhibiting human complexity.

The Wengraves' complexities demonstrate the perennial difficulty of mutual understanding and the pitfalls of self-interest. Indeed, the Wengrave plot does not only stand on its own as an intriguing and original portrait of father-son relations in Jacobean England; it also raises several important questions, including: how one's various roles as parent, child, lover, friend, and citizen impact one's relationships and communication with others; how intransigence and self-absorption can wreak havoc on one self and one's relationships; and how one's

commitment to stability and stasis can backfire in the face of an inherently changeable world. The following analysis considers these themes and examines the characters Sir Alexander and Sebastian Wengrave in light of the complex issues raised by their various overlapping and competing social roles.

In their recently published collection of Thomas Middleton's works, Taylor and Lavagnino point out that, although Moll Cutpurse speaks the most lines in the play with 547, Sir Alexander Wengrave is not far behind with 524; in fact, he speaks the second-most number of lines in the play (778). As I will show, Sir Alexander is an essential component of the play as a whole, a character indispensable to the overall impact on playgoers and modern audiences alike. His prominence in the play, indicated by his substantial number of lines, gives scholars a great deal of material to work with in parsing out his nature and influence. Sir Alexander's various concerns, anxieties, and opinions expressed in the play and demonstrate that, far from being a static blocking character, he is capable of and willing to change.

At first, playgoers are presented with a fairly clear picture of Sir Alexander Wengrave: the consummate aristocrat, primarily concerned with social status. He enters the play accompanied by his friends, associates, and fellow aristocrats of similar wealth to his own. He is intent on showing off his well appointed home to these men, to impress them with his wealth, his good taste, and the facility with which he discusses these finer qualities. He seems especially pleased to show them his "galleries," (1.2.14) wherein "[w]ithin one square a thousand heads are laid / So close that all of heads the room seems made" (1.2.19-20). As Sir Alexander gestures toward his paintings and discusses the people depicted within their "square" frames, the actor playing Sir Alexander gestures toward the literal "galleries" of the playhouse. Instead of being the artist that created these images, Sir Alexander is the collector, the possessor of art who can

use it to entertain his friends and demonstrate his wealth. Because he owns these paintings, he sees it as his prerogative to invent and express their personalities and backgrounds; this may be why he is so drawn to this activity in the first place, since it gives him a sense of absolute control. He looks at the crowd depicted in the painting, pointing out a pickpocket meandering through them, just as one might do among the groundlings in a playhouse. He continues to describe this crowd, this time in metaphorical terms:

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. (1.2.29-32)

Sir Alexander compares the groundlings to a roiling sea, likening their movements to the instability that one might feel on a sea vessel on choppy waters. In this way, the crowd in the painting represents chaos and unpredictability, and this is the antithesis of the stability that Sir Alexander wants for himself and his family. He establishes his place in relation to the crowd: he is the wealthy proprietor standing before the painting whose prerogative it is to be listened to and to be seen, just as the actor playing him is seen and heard onstage. This speech encapsulates Sir Alexander's ideal world: a place where a man knows his place and knows his relationship to those around him—and thus, a place he can exert some measure of control.

Sir Alexander's desire to exert control over his surroundings also influences his dealings with his fellow aristocrats, who form a kind of entourage around him. Often this group acts as little more than a mirror, providing support for Sir Alexander's prejudicial opinions and providing him opportunity to solidify his status and alliances. A central mode of communication among these men is posturing, putting on a performance in order to secure and build

relationships. Sir Alexander, concerned primarily with both his status and the future of his family, occupies the role of the dilettante, dabbling in art, verse, and design in order to exude gentility—but it is for show. He knows that schmoozing with these gentlemen is part of maintaining his social alliances and thus not only his status but also his son's future status. However, this is not altogether productive. Through his fascination with social status and its maintenance, Sir Alexander seems to cast aside concerns of his son's happiness. Early on in the play, playgoers learn that Sir Alexander is holding out for a better dowry from his son's marriage, despite Sebastian's obvious feelings for his betrothed. Sir Alexander clearly chooses financial gain over emotional considerations.

Because his compassionless attitude is antithetical to the "Golden Rule" endorsed by Christian English society, Sir Alexander is often forced to verbally contradict himself in order to maintain appropriate appearances. For instance, in the second scene of the play, Sir Alexander tells one of his cohorts, Sir Greenwit, to stay and drink with the group, claiming, "A merry day / 'Mongst friends being spent is better than gold saved" (1.2.40-1). The irony here is that just a few lines earlier, playgoers just heard about Sir Alexander's decision to deny his son his inheritance unless he submits to a more favorable financial alliance. "Gold saved" is clearly his primary concern in his dealings with his son. Is a "merry day / 'Mongst friends" truly worth more to him than his son's happiness in marriage? Perhaps, but another explanation may be that Sir Alexander is in fact feigning this bon-vivant personality for his own gain (and by extension his son's). Even while entertaining his friends, Sir Alexander seems to be in control and motivated by what he sees as the best interests of his family. His ultimate mistake is allowing himself to be insulated by these yes-men, maintaining a perspective on the world primarily

influenced by his own pre-existing understanding rather than by empirical evidence. This single-mindedness becomes a pattern for Sir Alexander that only public shaming seems to undo.

While Sir Alexander's focus appears to be shaping and controlling his status and image, protecting and furthering his wealth is a complementary concern. As the patriarch of the Wengrave family, he has the law and custom on his side when he exerts his authority to call off Sebastian and Mary's marriage; moreover, he holds the purse strings. Sebastian explains his father's reactions to Mary in the play's opening scene:

He scorned thy dowry of five thousand marks.
 If such a sum of money could be found,
 And I would match with that, he'd not undo it,
 Provided his bags might add nothing to it,
 But vowed, if I took thee—nay, more, did swear it—
 Save birth from him I nothing would inherit. (1.1.89-94)

In effect, Sir Alexander holds the course of his son's life in his hands, and he invokes this patriarchal prerogative when he withholds his reason for disallowing the marriage. Although it is the business of a father to do what is best for his son, what is best for his son must not conflict with Sir Alexander's responsibilities as a wealthy member of society. This means any alliance he and his son enter into must be reflective of the Wengrave family's station. To settle for a substantial yet unimpressive dowry would be to miss out on an important opportunity to further solidify that standing, as Sebastian further explicates for Mary:

He reckoned what gold
 This marriage would draw from him, at which he swore,
 To lose so much blood could not grieve him more. (1.1.84-6)

To pass up a potential financial and social opportunity, even one that has yet manifest, would upset Sir Alexander greatly. He is more concerned with this potential loss than with any sentiment toward his son; quite literally, money has usurped love and affection for Sir Alexander, and this does not only affect the man himself but also his family. As the patriarch, any decisions, financial or otherwise, reflect on Sir Alexander, and he is supremely aware of this.

The intricacies of Sir Alexander's role as patriarch become salient early on in the play as he attempts to exert his power as a father to dictate his son's choice of bride. After all, in Sir Alexander's view and in the view of conventional Jacobean society, marriage is less an expression of love than a "deployment of alliance" and, with that alliance, a furthering of financial status (Foucault 105). As Michel Foucault explains in his *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, this "deployment" is characterized by "a system...of *fixation* and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and *possessions*," all in the name of maintaining the "*homeostasis* of the social body" (105-6, emphasis mine). Thus, while on the surface Sir Alexander's objection to Mary's dowry may seem absurd, his decisions are put into perspective when one considers his goal of fulfilling what he sees as his social role as aristocratic father and steering his family toward prosperity. Taken to its logical extreme, of course, Sir Alexander's obsession with his family's stability does threaten to push him over the edge into domestic tyranny.

In order to exert this influence, Sir Alexander insinuates himself into most of his son's dealings throughout the play, at turns eavesdropping on Sebastian, all but slandering Moll to his social circle, and even confronting Moll at a few key points. These actions introduce a great deal of disruption into the family, and yet Sir Alexander does not recognize his own responsibility for fueling these issues. In attempting to oversee and control all aspects of his social life, Sir Alexander in fact creates more problems for himself and his family. This is one major danger

underlying masculine identity in any patriarchal system: the possibility that, by attempting to manage and direct people and events, a man's anxious need to control becomes a destructive force rather than a productive one. As Mark Breitenberg has postulated, within a patriarchal system, masculinity is "inherently anxious," for both good and ill. He continues:

[M]asculine anxiety is a necessary and inevitable condition that operates on at least two significant levels: it reveals the fissures and contradictions of patriarchal systems and, at the same time, it paradoxically enables and drives patriarchy's reproduction and continuation of itself. (2)

Sir Alexander's desire to control is likely borne out of this kind of deep-rooted anxiety. Although this anxiety is often productive, on the whole Sir Alexander's anxiety reveals many of what Breitenberg calls the "fissures and contradictions" of patriarchal masculinity. Primary among these is that, by adhering too rigidly to the traditional notion of marriage as a vehicle for financial transaction and alliance, a patriarch like Sir Alexander actually draws attention to the tradition's pitfalls and drawbacks. For instance, by determining Sebastian's bride for him, from a certain point of view it could be said that Sir Alexander challenges his son's masculinity. Indeed, widely-known Christian doctrine asserts that a young man such as Sebastian has free will and cannot be coerced into marriage; yet, at the same time he must submit to Sir Alexander's preempting of his choice. Sebastian exploits this contradiction with his scheme to marry Moll Cutpurse. Sir Alexander's anxiety is rendered ridiculous, and his attempts to slander and entrap Moll ineffective. From there, it is a simple task to thwart Sir Alexander's objections to Mary Fitzallard, as his anxiety regarding Moll has reached such a height that any other woman seems an acceptable alternative. The fissure has been mended by an acknowledgement of the contradictory nature of masculinity, and the cycle of the patriarchal family has been renewed

with Sebastian at the head of his own nuclear family. With the Wengrave conflict, Middleton and Dekker present an example of two Jacobean men grappling with the fissure between social custom and theological precedent. Male anxiety is all but inevitable when such glaring contradictions are present.

In response to the domestic chaos that is in large part of his own making, Sir Alexander feels the need to remain in control throughout the play. This feeling overrides all other considerations, to the point where Sir Alexander cannot see his own culpability in the conflicts that have arisen in his family. In his view, Moll is the criminal, worthy of shame and blame, and her reputation as a popular underclass figure solidifies this judgment for him. Sir Alexander does not simply disregard Moll's reputation without consequence; ultimately, his enthusiasm for scheming gets the better of him over the course of this play. In perhaps his most hypocritical and shocking move of the play, he hires a lackey to get close to Moll and ultimately kill her when the opportunity arises. Trapdoor is his appropriate moniker, and he is the means through which Sir Alexander extends his tentacles of influence even beyond his physical presence—at least, in theory. Unfortunately for Sir Alexander, Trapdoor proves a wholly ineffective agent of his employer's will; in his haste to be rid of Moll, Sir Alexander enlists any help he can find, and this has consequences. Trapdoor, himself a member of the lower classes, becomes one of Moll's many admirers, and Sir Alexander's scheming gains no traction. Again, Sir Alexander's preconceived and deeply entrenched tendency to micromanage and exert his will on others is thwarted by easily foreseeable circumstances—Sir Alexander just does not see them in the haze of his own traditionalism and anxiety.

Sir Alexander's various roles—as father, patriarch, aristocrat, and as a man—are mutually reinforcing and work to perpetuate his misguided understanding of both Moll Cutpurse

and what is best for Sebastian. The cycle of misjudgment and slander that develops over the course of this play actually exacerbates Sir Alexander's resistance to change—as well as it reveals his profound need for that change. The conflicts in which Sir Alexander finds himself during this play are largely generational, as well as a product of the self-contradictory nature of patriarchy. The very fact that Sir Alexander finds himself in this trouble reveals that, at least in his family, questions of centralized patriarchal authority have yet to be decided; as Stephen Orgel explains, “the advantages of maleness in the [Early Modern English] culture as a whole were neither unqualified nor constant (they were considerably smaller for sons than for their fathers, and smaller still for younger sons than for the eldest); nor was patriarchy single and uninflected” (14). Indeed, Sir Alexander demonstrates but one positionality within the larger framework of patriarchal Jacobean culture.

Despite this necessarily limited scope, Middleton and Dekker's vivid rendering of Sir Alexander has significant implications nonetheless. Firstly, it is significant that, although Sir Alexander in many ways fits into the traditional role of the domestic tyrant, his actions and ways of rationalizing those actions seem to be well-intentioned and even understandable at times. Sir Alexander certainly sees himself as doing what is best for his son—especially when it comes to Sebastian's dealings with Moll. He tells his son, “Thou'rt sick at heart, yet feel'st it not. Of all these, / What gentleman but thou, knowing his disease / Mortal, would shun the cure?” (1.2.150-2). He believes his son to be blind to the danger that such a match would entail, and he attempts to persuade him using such metaphors and practical logic. One perspective might be that Sir Alexander is simply a miser who loves money more than his son and will say anything to steer his son in a more profitable direction; taken in another light, however, Sir Alexander's actions appear more loving than letting Sebastian have his way. Sir Alexander is not an outright monster

who lords his power over his son simply to buttress his own ego; he has solid reasoning behind his actions, although his methods may be flawed. In his eyes, his son has no concept of the danger he faces in the marriage market, and he attempts to curtail the problem invoking his privilege as father. This results in the anger, frustration, and scheming seen on both sides of the conflict. Even so, the seed of goodness that remains in Sir Alexander throughout makes the eventual resolution of the play possible.

Ultimately, the most intriguing part of Sir Alexander's role in the play is his eventual change of heart toward Moll Cutpurse and Mary Fitzallard. Throughout much of the play, distracted as he is by the defiance of his son, Sir Alexander cannot see Moll in particular through any lens except that of the traditionalist patriarchal viewpoints with which he has been inculcated. These viewpoints change only through a gradual wearing-down of his will, through some clever scheming that tricks him into accepting Mary's dowry and thus sealing their betrothal pact. His sense of patriarchal control, which has been working against his best interests for most of the play, is manipulated and ultimately broken by Sebastian's marriage scheme. Moll reveals her true identity and nature (that of an unreformed, unashamed bachelorette), and Mary Fitzallard is revealed to be Sebastian's true love, and Sir Alexander finally realizes the unfairness of his attitude toward both her—and, miraculously, his unfairness to Moll as well. She, after all, was indispensable in the scheme to help him see the error of his ways, and therefore cannot be irredeemable. Sir Alexander leaves the stage with a promise to reform his intolerant and prejudicial attitudes:

Forgive me now! I cast the world's eyes from me,
 And look upon thee [Moll] freely with mine own.
 I see the most of many wrongs before thee

Cast from the jaws of Envy and her people,
 And nothing foul but that. I'll nevermore
 Condemn by common voice, for that's the whore
 That deceives man's opinion, mocks his trust,
 Cozens his love, and makes his heart unjust. (5.2.252-9)

Although Sir Alexander is obsessed with remaining in control of every part of his life, he fails to realize until this final moment that, instead of maintaining his agency and relying on his own observation to form his opinions about these women, he had relinquished control over to general opinion. His main flaw—needing to be in control—becomes his redemption as he regains his authority over his own judgment and sees the two women with new clarity.

In comparison with Sir Alexander's focal role in the play, Sebastian Wengrave plays a significantly smaller—or at least less wordy—part; by Taylor and Lavagnino's count, he speaks roughly half the number of lines as his father (778). This is not to say that his character is less important; it simply shows that the audience gains less exposure to Sebastian. This is partially because Sebastian often works behind the scenes, setting up his schemes in secret, but it also may be because the audience needs little embellishment on the type of character that Middleton and Dekker are attempting to present. He quite nicely fills the conventional role of the hero, even without a bevy of lines. He is charismatic and likeable, and there is no doubt that playgoers generally want he and Mary to be together. Among the first characters to be seen on stage, Sebastian is instantly appealing. His poised and shrewd disposition immediately becomes apparent as he speaks conspiratorially with his lover about their current situation and the need for action. Throughout the play, Sebastian's personality, intelligence, and sense of justice are his major features.

Even so, Sebastian cannot be dismissed as simply a conventional comic hero. In addition to his attractive heroic qualities, Sebastian demonstrates complexity with some significant flaws. In some ways this endears him to the audience even more, but overall Sebastian needs nearly as much reform and development in order to fulfill his ultimate role as husband to Mary Fitzallard. Indeed, the way that Sebastian relates to Mary undergoes significant changes over the course of the play. He seems sure of his love and perceives her love as similarly earnest. He moves forward with his plan to win her immediately. Doing so indicates two of his more attractive qualities: 1) his courage in being willing to defy his father and 2) his cleverness in conceiving of such a plan on his own. However, if we consider the eager manner in which Sebastian goes about the task of fooling his father, the bravery he shows in defying Sir Alexander could read as self-indulgent rashness, and his cleverness being put to less than noble uses.

In the first scene of the play, when playgoers overhear Sebastian and Mary's discussion of Sebastian's scheme to manipulate his father, what Mary does not say—or, perhaps, what Sebastian does not give her room to say—speaks louder than what she actually says. In this first scene of the play, Sebastian speaks 62 lines. In comparison, his potential life partner Mary speaks only 29 lines—and 15 of those before Sebastian enters the scene. He comes in with each part of his scheme predetermined and considered, and he merely announces it aloud in this scene for Mary's benefit. She has no input on the matter, nor does he show her much in the way of affection; in fact, he all but hurries her out the door without so much as apologizing to her for her trouble. Sebastian is so absorbed in his scheming that he has put on blinders to all else, including the woman for whom the plan is meant. Perhaps the apple has not fallen far from the tree; perhaps there is a bit of the controlling schemer in Sebastian as well, and he cannot pass up the chance to be the one in control of the situation for once. Whether teenage rebellion or righteous

crusade, Sebastian's plan reveals his own anxiety and his not entirely rational desire to maintain control.

Sebastian's anxiousness to control is not the only indication of trouble in paradise. Sebastian shares his father's preoccupation with money, and this motivates his disregard for his betrothed. Considering his unwillingness to forgo his inheritance for Mary's love, one might even begin to question the depth of his love for Mary. Indeed, he is willing to go to great lengths to ensure that that does not happen, when it might be easier and even more satisfying to cut ties with his father and wed Mary on his own terms. Instead, Sebastian's treatment of Mary mirrors his father's treatment of him; he makes unilateral decisions and expects those decisions to be respected. His strategy for dealing with the situation is the only right one, and he follows through tenaciously.

Sebastian plans to assert himself by developing a complex scheme to wear his father down. For Sebastian, this scheming seems to come naturally, and he even seems to revel in it. While Sir Alexander also engages in a similar kind of scheming, Sebastian has much more success because he recognizes and anticipates his father's obsession with control and uses it against him. In other words, Sebastian embodies the old adage that one must know one's enemy as well as oneself. For instance, when he notices his father is listening in on one of his conversations with Moll, Sebastian acts as if he can't wait to marry her, hoping to provoke and frustrate Sir Alexander. His entire plan is predicated on his ability to continually heighten Alexander's frustration to its breaking point, and this instance certainly contributes. Here, Sebastian tells Moll, "I would be nearer to thee, and in that fashion that makes the best part of all creatures honest," perhaps driving home to his eavesdropping father that, in getting "nearer" to Moll through marriage, he moves farther away from his father's control (2.2.34-5). And, because

Sebastian is living a life he has chosen for himself, this move would make them both more “honest.” The irony, of course, is that the love he professes for Moll is not at all honest. Perhaps sensing this, Moll firmly yet respectfully refuses Sebastian’s proposal: “But sleep upon this once more, sir. You may chance a shift a mind tomorrow. Be not too hasty to wrong yourself. Never, while you live, sir, take a wife running; many have run out at heels that have done’t,” (2.2.55-8) cheekily adding that he should “never choose a wife as if [he] were going to Virginia” (69-70). At first, Sir Alexander is pleased with her practicality and caution, and it seems that he may have been convinced of Moll’s better qualities: “How do I wrong this girl! She puts him off still” (65-6). The moment is fleeting, however, since Sir Alexander ultimately concludes that Moll is simply playing hard-to-get in order to stoke Sebastian’s interest even further: “She is but cunning, gives him longer time in’t” (72-3). In reality, of course, Sebastian is the more cunning one who has made this exchange possible, surpassing his father in his propensity to deceive and scheme. Not only that, but the outcome of Sebastian’s scheming is much more beneficial to him because of his increasingly tolerant attitude and his ability to more accurately judge others; these qualities allow him to understand both his father and Moll. Sebastian is the one giving Moll “longer time in’t,” all but harassing her although he knows she is completely unreceptive to his proposal. At this point, she is the tool through which he puts his plan in motion.

Sebastian sees Moll as someone he can use with impunity to fulfill his plan. She is, at this point, a beneficial resource, a pawn in his game against his father. Sebastian reveals himself to be, like his father, quite conventional in his opinions of Moll. He makes it clear to Mary when he tells her of his plans that he sees Moll as a “creature / So strange in quality, a whole city takes / Note of her name and person” (1.1.100-1) and as a “strange idol” to which he must bow to upset his father (1.1.118). Even so, he takes a strange sort of joy in playing this game of wits against

his father, and Moll will be both a useful tool and something to look back on and laugh at: he tells Mary upon leaving her in the first scene, “I’ll guide thee forth. When next we meet, / A story of Moll shall make our mirth more sweet” (1.1. 120-1). He may simply be trying to reassure his lover, but more likely he truly does anticipate the pleasure he will take in thwarting his overbearing father using the influence of Moll Cutpurse. For Sebastian, her unconventionality and “strange” qualities will make this even more satisfying. Later on, he comes to respect Moll, but at this point he remains self-centered, with a clear idea of how his scheme will play out and where they will end up. He assumes that everything will work out for the best, and in the end they will laugh at the fact that they used this bizarre woman to infuriate the conservative Sir Alexander.

Instead of laughing at Moll’s antics and gullibility, Sebastian comes to laugh with her as a companion and friend. One of his great strokes of genius in the play is his urge to make Moll aware of his plans—and to heed her advice for tweaking said plans. As Nancy Mohrlock Bunker has observed, the friendship that develops between Sebastian and Moll is one of the few examples of genuine male-female platonic friendship in Renaissance theatre (128). This, too, demonstrates the complexity and originality of Middleton and Dekker’s characterization of Sebastian: he is not simply condescending and self-important, although these qualities are prominent in several early scenes. He becomes accepting and grateful, recognizing an affinity between himself (the frustrated son being denied his marriage choice) and Moll (the unconventional woman being alternately slandered and fetishized by members of her society). Sebastian defends Moll against those who would look down on her: “Pish, let ‘em prate abroad. Thou’rt here where thou art known and loved” (4.1.96-7). And, of course, he consistently

contradicts his father's slander of her, especially in his comments during their antagonistic exchange midway through the play:

He hates unworthily that by rote contemns,
For the name neither saves nor yet condemns.

...

Here's her worst:

Sh' has a bold spirit that mingles with mankind,
But nothing else comes near it, and oftentimes
Through her apparel somewhat shames her birth
But she is loose in nothing but mirth.

Would all Molls were no worse! (2.2.172-3; 177-82)

Sebastian first criticizes his father for crediting secondhand accounts of Moll's character. Throughout much of the play, Sir Alexander uses public opinion to come to conclusions about Moll; in Sebastian's view, therefore, any of those opinions are invalid. Moreover, Sir Alexander's criticism of Moll as a "loose" woman because of her apparel and behavior is invalid because it is not based in reality as Sebastian has experienced it. He ultimately recognizes that, despite her reputation to the contrary, Moll is not particularly promiscuous and her boldness is ultimately benign and unthreatening.

Moll and Sebastian's mutual affinity becomes even stronger once Sebastian reveals to Moll his plan to dupe his father. She willingly participates in the scheme from there, even encouraging and becoming Mary's friend as well. One could not ask for a better conspirator than the good-natured Moll, who wants nothing more than for the lovers to be together. As Sebastian tells Mary in the first scene of the play, he would have to worship Moll as a kind of "strange

idol” (1.1.118) in order for his plan to succeed; in a way, he truly does end up idolizing her, attributing the success of his marriage scheme to her: “to thy wit and help we’re chief in debt, / And must live still beholding” (4.1.73-4). Like supplicants beholden to a religious idol, Sebastian and Mary are beholden to Moll as a kind of savior that has salvaged their betrothal. That their idol once appeared “strange” to them is of no consequence by the end of the play.

Sebastian demonstrates real development over the course of *The Roaring Girl*, and his transformation is compelling in its balanced portrayal of Sebastian as the play’s hero. Even as the play explores the effects of social norms on the play’s women, it also complicates the idea that privilege and station can automatically provide insight and morality for these upper-class men of the play. The ability to assert one’s chosen place in society is just as hard-won for Sebastian as it is for Moll. In many ways, the play traces Sebastian’s movement from oppressed schemer to a tolerant, reasonable patriarch in his own right. Taken in this light, it seems the apple has not fallen far from the tree: Sebastian is quite the controlling schemer, and he rarely passes up the chance to be the one in control of his life, presumably for the first time in his life. Sebastian’s plan to overcome his father’s rule once and for all not only demonstrates his tenacity; it also reveals his own anxiety and desire to maintain control. The difference is just that he does not let these aspects of his personality completely rule his good sense and judgment.

Ironically, despite the obvious differences and antagonism between Sir Alexander and Sebastian at the start of the play, they are in fact quite similar. Both Sebastian and Sir Alexander experience significant strife and change over the course of the play, but what does not change is their shared desire for control and stability. In fact, the conflict that arises between them would not be nearly as significant if not for this underlying struggle for control. The control they desire takes the form of financial matters, marriage alliances, and even their personal associations. As

discussed earlier in this chapter, both Sir Alexander and Sebastian respond to any challenge to their control by developing complex machinations, displaying little regard for the people between them. They view individuals such as Moll Cutpurse and Trapdoor (the man Sir Alexander hires to entrap and eventually kill Moll) as pawns in their game of chess.

Sebastian hatches the play's primary secretive scheme, yet Sir Alexander further fuels Sebastian's scheming by continually intruding on his (and Moll's) space—and doing so conspicuously enough that Sebastian rarely is fooled into thinking that he is not present. Sebastian realizes that Sir Alexander is present and further accentuates his desire to marry Moll Cutpurse at several points. As the play goes on, they each enter into a kind of father-son arms race, as they raise the stakes time and again. The destructive, tempestuous force⁴ that Sir Alexander ascribes to Moll is actually fueled by the Wengraves themselves—the most able schemers in the play.

These controlling tendencies in the Wengraves becomes the central problems the two characters must face, despite the fact that they both displace these issues on to Moll. She is but the means to their end of achieving their own desires: Sebastian by attempting to possess her to anger his father, Sir Alexander by rejecting her as a symbol of the unacceptable, the deviant. Sebastian's plotting is ultimately more effective because of his eventual decision to treat Moll on more equal terms—not as a tool to meet his own ends, but an autonomous ally who helps him and Mary out of her own volition. Alexander, too, undergoes a similar dual-edged transformation: he accepts Moll in the same moment that he accepts his own inability to control his surroundings and loved ones. In relinquishing his control of his son's choice of both romantic

⁴ Coppélia Kahn examines the Renaissance narrative trope of the “providential tempest,” which often destabilizes family dynamics as it does here, in her book *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*, especially page 194.

and platonic relationships, Alexander in fact gains further contentment and stability—and greater control over his own opinions and judgments.

Chapter 3: Mary Fitzallard's Subtly Subversive Influence

Women in Renaissance comedy often employ methods of disguise, deception, and manipulation in service of the romantic plot. For instance, Shakespeare's late comedy *Measure for Measure* reveals the success of such deception when well-executed. Two female characters, Isabella and Mariana, are both wronged by the magistrate Angelo. He breaks his betrothal to Mariana when her dowry is lost at sea along with her brother, and he later places Isabella in a problematic situation when he suggests that she should trade her sexual purity for her imprisoned brother's life. Both women attempt to wrest back the power that Angelo holds over them, first by attempting to perform a bed switch to entrap Angelo, and later by coming before him in disguise to expose his wrongdoing to his duke and fellow civil servants. Other examples occur in Shakespeare's earlier plays; consider Viola in *Twelfth Night* or Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, for example. The trope of women's deception suggests a general concern—even an anxiety—regarding the intentions and motivations of women involved in romantic relationships. When women mount resistance and assert their desires, they are often condemned by male characters who see themselves as cheated in some way. The maligned woman can assume a self-defensive posture, as Queen Gertrude does during the closet scene in *Hamlet*; alternatively, however, they can initiate their own schemes in order to manipulate the situation. In the case of *Measure for Measure*, Angelo has the power to destroy both Isabella and Mariana's reputation were he simply to reveal the inappropriate sexual negotiations between Isabella and himself or Mariana's attempt to entrap him sexually. Indeed, each of the women could be ruined for attempting to use their sexuality for their personal gain rather than maintain their purity for marriage. In presenting such situations, Shakespeare and other playwrights of the era suggest that one mere utterance from a man can often mean a woman's undoing, and so it should not be surprising that such

maligned and misunderstood individuals so often turn to extreme measures like disguise and deception to regain some power over their situation. Such self-assertion often has profound implications for the community of which these women are a part; paradoxically, their strategies of deceit and manipulation can actually work to mend the rifts within communities. In *As You Like It*, for instance, Rosalind dresses as a man and steers those around her toward reconciliation; moreover, she succeeds in building a bridge between her (formerly estranged) father and uncle. Disguise and manipulation can actually be seen as beneficial when viewed in this light, and the female characters who engage in it can likewise be seen as noble and courageous for their undertaking.

In *The Roaring Girl*, Moll Cutpurse is not the only woman who engages in this honorable manipulation. Mary Fitzallard presents a version of womanhood that is uniquely her own. Because of the relative scarcity of her lines, however, critics often treat her as a negligible character. To date, most critics who have addressed Mary directly have interpreted her as representative of the stereotypical Early Modern woman (Howard), although some do suggest that she is influenced somewhat by Moll's "emancipatory strategies" (Garber 221). Few critics recognize that Mary takes an active part in the accomplishment of her goals, even when to do so reveals another aspect of gender relations in the play.

To be sure, Sir Guy Fitzallard's daughter is in a precarious position at the start of the play. Mary's father has negotiated a betrothal that will tie them to the Wengraves, a family of similar prestige, and he has apportioned her a dowry that befits their social station. Unfortunately for Mary, however, the Wengrave patriarch is ambitious and proud, taking any slight undervaluing as an affront to his family and refusing to accept anything less than he feels they deserve. Sebastian relays to Mary his father's opinion of her: "He then dissuades me from thee,

called thee not fair, / And asked, ‘What is she but a beggar’s heir?’” (1.1.87-8) Rather than settling for this “beggar’s heir,” Alexander wants an advantageous marriage for his son, one that puts them both on an upward trajectory, socially speaking. Marriage is a business proposition for him, and he is nothing if not an entrepreneur. Alexander views Mary as a pawn, a commodity to support his family’s standing within what critic Valerie Forman discusses as the increasingly abstracted and “dematerialized” social relations of seventeenth-century English life (1532). A disadvantageous marriage could have abstract and intangible consequences as well as material; this development may be exactly has caused Alexander’s view of Mary Fitzallard and her dowry: they are abstract symbols of one’s station, and their influence is potent. Wealth, alliance, and reputation are no longer separate spheres of influence, if they ever were, and suffice it to say, Alexander’s motivations encompass all three. To Alexander, Mary Fitzallard represents settlement and stasis, and this is what causes him to disqualify her as a potential mate for his son.

Mary, however, knows her own material and reputational worth. She expresses it briefly yet potently in the very first scene of the play in which she is disguised as a seamstress. Sebastian’s servant, Neatfoot, permits her entry—but not before implying through innuendo that Mary is seeking entry to Sebastian’s rooms in order to engage in illicit sexual relations (1.1.1-26). In dealing with Sebastian’s servant, Mary maintains her dignity in spite of the servant’s implications about her sexual promiscuity. Mary, for her part, ignores these thinly-veiled affronts to her honor; instead of expressing any frustration at his antics, she maintains her composure with the servant and remains single-minded in her mission to visit her erstwhile fiancé. Mary soliloquizes while she is waiting on Neatfoot’s return that even if she were there under normal circumstances she would still not allow these innuendoes to bother her, such is her confidence in her honor. She explains her reaction in a soliloquy:

But that my bosom
 Is full of bitter sorrows, I could smile
 To see this formal ape play antic tricks;
 But in my breast a poisoned arrow sticks,
 And smiles may not become me. (1.1.28-30)

She is secure in her honor and sees no need to protest Neatfoot's suggestions. Such subtle moments of poise and restraint on Mary's part speak volumes about her character, despite her inconspicuous presence during the majority of the play. Indeed, these few lines reveal a character exerting her power behind the scenes of the play, thus avoiding some of the direct dangers of openly scheming.

After Sebastian enters, Mary's speeches continue to demonstrate her confidence in her material—as well as spiritual—worth. The pretense by which she chooses to meet with Sebastian is likely not his idea, but hers: believing her to be a seamstress, he asks her, “Bands? You're mistaken, sweetheart, I bespake none. / When, where, I prithee, what bands? Let me see them” (1.1.55). The pretense is a symbolic gesture, the meaning of which she unpacks for her lover explicitly. To explain which “bands” she means, Mary responds to Sebastian:

Yes, sir, a bond fast sealed with solemn oaths,
 Subscribed unto (as I thought) with your soul,
 Delivered as your deed in sight of heaven.
 Is this bond canceled? Have you forgot me? (1.1.56-9)

As she speaks, Sebastian finally realizes—or at least acknowledges—her true identity, and goes on to assure her of his dedication. In the above passage, Mary uses the bands to symbolize the “bond” or contract of betrothal and, moreover, a different kind of bands that would traditionally

tie them together physically during the hand-fasting portion of the wedding ceremony. Mary reminds Sebastian of his promise to her through clever wordplay, choosing a formal piece of clothing (a “band” in this sense would refer to an ornate decorative collar) to represent the seriousness of their betrothal. It is also possible that she is attempting to test his dedication by implying that his oath may have been just for show, like the collars she has brought him. The passage also registers on a spiritual level: Mary reminds Sebastian of the solemnity of their betrothal and the spiritual connection between them when she reminds him that his vow to her was “delivered as your deed in sight of heaven” (1.1.58). She implies that she is not a pawn to be used in marriage plots and deals of alliance that can be easily revoked; in her view, she is possessed of a mortal soul just like any person, man or woman, and she believes that she deserves to have any oaths sworn to her in the sight of God honored.

During this first scene of the play, Middleton and Dekker establish Mary as an interesting character in her own right. In fact, this scene gives playgoers the impression that she will be a major focus of the play; this impression would be based on two features of the scene: first, because they are not told otherwise, it is possible that playgoers could assume that she is not Mary Fitzallard but Mary Frith—alias Moll Cutpurse, the Roaring Girl and the title character. There is no indication of her identity until Sebastian recognizes and names her sixty lines into the play, and playgoers are told in the Prologue that it is Moll’s life that “these acts proclaim” (30). Secondly, her appearance on stage in disguise also gives the impression that she will become a major focus of attention elsewhere in the play, since female disguise is a well-known trope that usually is employed by heroines. Indeed, even beyond her use of disguise, she resembles several of Shakespeare’s assertive women in her personality; she boldly uses disguise to fulfill her own ends (like Portia, Rosalind, and Viola), and she displays feistiness and self-assurance (like

Beatrice). These attractive qualities and her association with a well-known dramatic convention invites the audience to sympathize with Mary and, later, to consider how unfairly her character is treated by detractors like Sir Alexander Wengrave. Even though Mary makes few appearances and has few lines throughout the rest of the play, she leaves a lasting impression from the very first scene.

After her initial appearance at the beginning of the play, Mary appears onstage in only two additional scenes: in Act 4, Scene 1 (lines 46, 84-5, and 148-9) and in the final scene of the play, Act 5, Scene 2 (lines 201-2). Her influence, though, is undeniable. For comparison, consider role of one of Shakespeare's most famous female roles: Cordelia from *King Lear*. Like Cordelia, Mary spends the entire first scene on stage, where she speaks extensively and puts the action of the play in motion. Then, she spends several scenes offstage while events transpire and develop (Cordelia does not appear again in *Lear* until Act 4, Scene 4). Mary Fitzallard is a precipitating force in the play, rather than a directly active one, but worthy of attention nonetheless.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Mary's appearances in the play is her interaction with Moll. Mary's relationship to Moll is facilitated early on by her agreeable disposition toward Sebastian's involvement of Moll in their plan to gain Alexander's approval of their marriage. In Act 1 Scene 1, Sebastian shares with Mary his plan to woo Moll to manipulate his father, and she responds with sincere consent:

SEBASTIAN: All that affection
 I owe to thee, on her, in counterfeit passion,
 I spend to mad my father;
 ...

[Y]et I'll go on

This crooked way, sigh still for her, feign dreams

In which I'll talk only for her, feign dreams

In which I'll talk only of her: these streams

Shall, I hope, force my father to consent

That here I anchor, rather than be rent

Upon a rock so dangerous. Art thou pleased,

Because thou seest we are waylaid, that I take

A path that's safe, though it be far about?

MARY: My prayers with heaven guide thee! (101-14)

Although she displays a level of disquiet with this invocation of heaven's guidance, Mary does not object to Sebastian's association with Moll as Alexander does. In fact, Mary eventually befriends Moll later in the play, following Sebastian's lead. After she exits the first scene, Mary is not seen onstage again for two full acts. Playgoers later discover that during that interim Moll sends Mary to see her personal tailor, who measures and fits her for men's attire. Mary's new attire grants her re-admittance to the Wengrave residence in Act 4 Scene 1. Mary's masculine disguise serves the same function as her feminine one—so why does she choose this particular disguise mid-way through the play?

Some critics have cited Mary's disguise as having symbolic significance as well as practical utility. Jean Howard reads her choice of masculine attire as stemming from the playwrights' desire to draw attention to the "strangeness" of a same-sex couple (two male actors, both playing two characters dressed in masculine attire) engaged in an "erotic embrace" onstage (174). Others take this as an indication of Mary's developing sense of autonomy, her emulation

of Moll's assertiveness as symbolized through the outward appearance of her clothing; indeed, for critics like Maurizio Calbi, masculine bodies within this patriarchal culture are "bodies that matter," and in adopting the trappings of these bodies, female characters gain a fraction of that "matter" which is "exceedingly powerful and intimately threatened" (73). Stephen Orgel also reads the masculine behavior and dress adopted by the women in *The Roaring Girl* as a means to access the freedom available to men; in particular, Orgel connects Mary's masculine disguise to her virtue and suggests that it prefigures the tenor of her eventual union with Sebastian: "In this world, acting like a man is clearly better than acting like a woman, both more attractive and—the point is worth stressing—more likely to lead to an honorable and happy marriage" (153). In all, Mary's attire allows her access to restricted places, protects her honor, instigates her friendship with Moll, and improves her relationship with Sebastian—and she never complains once about any loss of femininity. Mary seems to have learned a great deal from her interactions with Moll.

The familiar relationship formed between Mary and Moll (along with Sebastian) may also account for the inclination by some critics to see an overlap or melding occurring between the two characters: when Moll tells Sebastian that she decided to help Mary "for name's sake, that a Moll / Should be so crossed in love" (4.1.68-9), Marjorie Garber sees this as yet another example of the multiple opportunities the playwrights have taken to conflate Moll & Mary and draw attention to how similar their full names are: Mary Frith and Mary Fitzallard (227). Garber further suggests that the similarity of Mary and Moll's names is in fact grounded in a desire to *separate* the two women, to substitute the socially marginalized one (Moll) for the socially acceptable one (Mary), and to again exchange one for the other in the final scene of the play (227-228). The trouble with this type of doubling and exchanging, for Garber, is that when Sebastian finally possesses the Mary he desires, "what he gets may be a Mary who is no longer

separable—if she ever was—from Moll” (228). Sebastian’s initial plan does not anticipate this shift, but, luckily for him, Mary acting more like Moll may actually be what he wanted—or perhaps needed—all along.

At the end of the play, Mary and Sebastian enter into their union changed individuals. Just as contact with one another has altered them irrevocably, Mary and Sebastian’s relationship with Moll Cutpurse has allowed both of them to appreciate one another more deeply and to see their roles within the marriage as more malleable. Mary, for one, reaffirms her self-assurance and honor in the final scene in her exchange with her future father-in-law:

SIR ALEXANDER: Forgive me, worthy gentlewoman, ‘twas my blindness.

When I rejected thee, I saw thee not;

Sorrow and willful rashness grew like films

Over the eyes of judgment, now so clear

I see the brightness of thy worth appear.

MARY: Duty and love may I deserve in those

And all my wishes have a perfect close. (5.2.196-202)

Here and throughout the play, not only has Mary maintained her “worth,” as Alexander terms it, but she has also shown herself to be open-minded and tolerant of people from different walks of life and social classes through her friendship with Moll and, earlier, her interactions with minor characters like Neatfoot. The spirit of renewal characteristic of many Renaissance comedies is certainly present in *The Roaring Girl*, but, as the character Mary Fitzallard demonstrates, the most convincing aspect of the play’s renewal is the younger generation’s commitment to tolerance and their subtle undermining of class and gender restrictions.

Chapter 4: Economic & Sexual Exploitation Among the City Characters

As a prototypical city comedy, *The Roaring Girl* presents a diverse assemblage of minor characters whose interactions draw attention to the sexual and economic dynamics of city life in Jacobean London. Depicting licentious gentleman-rakes, deceptive personal servants, and turbulent shop-keeping couples, Middleton and Dekker's portrayal of London exhibits various social norms that regulated life in the city. Such conventions affect the play's characters in intriguing and often surprising ways; the exploits of *The Roaring Girl*'s characters—especially those of the scheming gentlemen, Laxton and Goshawk, and of the tumultuous married couples, the Openworks and the Gallipots—reveal the playwrights' shared interest in the sexual and economic relationships among people of the lower and middle classes. The city characters Middleton and Dekker present in *The Roaring Girl* must come to terms with the various intersections between their public and their private identities, the resulting tensions which require them to grapple with their prejudices, their desire to conform to social norms, and their personal motives.

Nearly all of the Londoners in the play exhibit a preoccupation with economic status: both presenting one's own status and appraising that of others. As noted by several critics, this preoccupation is most conspicuous in the characters' frequent and repetitive focus on clothing and fashion.⁵ As Coppélia Kahn explains in her recent introduction to the play, "*The Roaring Girl* dramatizes the interdependency of fashion, money, gender, and rank that is a major preoccupation of city comedy" (723). The intersection of this material, economic preoccupation with sex and courtship should not be surprising, especially given the bodily and usually gender-specific nature of clothing. Furthermore, outward physical transgression of social constraints

⁵ See especially Rose, Howard, and Kahn.

through one's clothing could potentially blur the lines between both genders and classes, and this could be a means for altering one's social rank, as well as a threat to those in positions of power, who often interpret such gender and class transgressions as inherent indicators of sexual transgressions. These transgressions, be they real or presumed, prompted various forms of complications and outright backlash, and such reactions are dramatized in *The Roaring Girl*. Indeed, as Christian Billing discusses in his work *Masculinity, Corporality, and the English Stage 1580-1635*, such strong reactions were typical in the face of both the social transgressions associated with cross-dressing and the blurring of class distinctions associated with the rise of consumerism. Within Jacobean comedies like *The Roaring Girl*, the intersection of these three issues—the issue of gendered fashion, sexuality, and class—demonstrates how challenges to social norms were regulated through sexual as well as social, legal, and economic means. Each of these forms of social regulation are at work among *The Roaring Girl*'s city characters, and the present chapter will examine various character-to-character exchanges that illustrate this blending of sexuality and economics.

Perhaps the most telling example of the interplay between sex and economics in *The Roaring Girl* is the infidelity plot featuring Laxton, Goshawk, Mrs. Openwork, and Mrs. Gallipot. Laxton and Goshawk's motivations for engaging in illicit relations with the women are fairly commonplace: they hope to divest the women of their money and property in exchange for affection—and likely sex. Frequently referred to in the criticism as gentlemen-rakes,⁶ Laxton and Goshawk attempt to take advantage of the intersection of sex and economics in order to support their upper-middle class lifestyles. For their part, the Openworks and the Gallipots are introduced as consummate middle-class tradespeople; both couples seem to be relatively successful and

⁶ For instance, see Howard, "Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle," 437.

skillful in their commercial endeavors. In fact, in the third scene of the play, set in a well-known shopping district in Jacobean London, the first lines are spoken by Mrs. Openwork:

Gentlemen, what is't you lack? What is't you buy?

See fine bands and ruffs, fine lawns, fine cambrics.

What is't you lack, gentlemen, what is't you buy? (2.1.1-3)

Mrs. Openwork's street calling exemplifies a trend that was often depicted in city comedies of the Jacobean period.⁷ Laura Gowing explains that street selling was particularly associated with women and that "like prostitutes, the sellers were seen as enticers" (141-2). According to Gowing, women performing such roles prompted a significant amount of cultural ambivalence and anxiety regarding the influence of such enterprising women as Mrs. Openwork. Her words set the stage for the both the economic and sexual themes presented in the secondary plot.

The passersby to whom Mrs. Openwork calls out are two young men introduced in the previous scene: Laxton and Goshawk. Mrs. Openwork employs the double-meaning of "lack" in order to inquire not only what the gentleman are shopping for but also what they want from her personally. Furthermore, Laxton's name is a play on words implying that he lacks so-called stones or male virility. Jonathan Gil Harris also interprets Laxton's name as metonymic; he asserts that the "corporeal dimension" of Mrs. Openwork's street call brings together the economic and the sexual, and this calls attention not only to Laxton's "anatomical lack" but especially his "widespread insufficiency...for which material goods provide the fetishistic stopgap" (177). By questioning his sexual virility and masculinity while she tries to sell him fine clothing, Mrs. Openwork unwittingly highlights the market economy that dominates both

⁷ See especially Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*.

economic and sexual relations—as well as the realities of the personal relationships between this particular wife and this particular gentleman-rake.

Laxton and Goshawk's schemes are superficially quite similar; both men seek to better their own fortunes by exploiting the industriousness of their chosen mistresses. But it is worth noting the differences in their approaches. The most significant distinction between them is their level of subtlety. Laxton's scheme features direct flattery of the object of his desire, Mrs. Gallipot; keeping it secret from no one but her husband, Laxton uses coy promises to keep the lady interested as he defrauds her of her money. In a soliloquy guarded in an aside, he describes his *modus operandi*:

I put her off with opportunity still. By this light, I hate her, but for means to keep me in fashion with gallants; for what I take from her I spend upon other wenches, bear her in hand still. She has wit enough to rob her husband, and I ways enough to consume the money. (2.1.80-4)

Laxton's main goal is to sustain the appearance of a worldly libertine, and, according to him, his relationship with Mrs. Gallipot is not only about conquest for its own sake but also about exploiting her financially in order to maintain a certain reputation. The two concerns, sexual conquest and economic exploitation, are intermingled in Laxton's approach throughout the entire secondary plot.

As his name implies, Laxton is easily read as what Marjorie Garber has called a “figure of ‘lack’” (225). He lacks money, first and foremost, but he also lacks the strong will, sexual prowess, and self-assurance conventionally associated with masculinity. As Garber goes on to explain, “the recognition of this lack permits or requires his entry into the socio-economic world of patriarchy and commerce” (225). The playwrights fully distinguish Laxton from womankind,

however. According to the misogynist view, unlike women—who they see as biologically lacking from birth—Laxton as a man has the potential to overcome his lack, and he is expected to do so. In an attempt to fill the lack that his personality and circumstances have caused, Laxton engages in chauvinistic exploitation of women and commercial exploitation of the classes beneath him. Moreover, Laxton has been figuratively castrated in three ways: 1) by the playwrights through their naming of him, 2) by the fact that he is beholden to a tradeswoman for his living, and, 3) as I will discuss below, by the inferiority of his cuckolding scheme when compared to Goshawk's. In a sense, Laxton is just as transgressive a character as Moll; he is a man dependent on a woman for his living, seemingly unable to control his base desires (a quality often associated with unruly women), and he is quite concerned with his personal appearance and clothing. If men are supposed to represent a virile, fulfilling force, Laxton lives up to his name in his *lack* of conventional masculinity.

Goshawk, on the other hand, is more cunning in his scheming—although, ironically, he is less successful in reaching his desires because the Openworks see through his schemes all along. At first, though, he seems the more self-aware and self-assured of the two men. In an aside, he compares his own strategies to Laxton's amateurism and explains how he hopes to get away with his plans:

Life, I think he commits venery foot deep; no man's aware on't. I like a palpable smockster go to work so openly with the tricks of art that I'm as apparently seen as a naked boy in a vial, and were it not for a gift of treachery that I have in me to betray my friend when he puts most trust in me...and by his injury to make good my access to her, I should appear as defective in courting as a farmer's son the first day of his feather that doth nothing at court but woo the

hangings and glass windows for a month together, and some broken waiting-woman forever after. I find those imperfections in my ventry that were 't not for flattery and falsehood, I should want discourse and impudence, and he that wants impudence among women is worthy to be kick'd out at beds' feet. (2.1.22-36)

Goshawk apparently recognizes that he would not be appealing enough to woo or even to exploit her without establishing his superiority to another suitor. He has learned to use his intellect and willingness to undermine his friend to further his plans.

Furthermore, Goshawk can be confident in his plans because, even if he failed to place the blame on Laxton, he could manipulate the situation to implicate Mrs. Openwork as a seductress. Mrs. Openwork is a woman in a time when many saw women as pernicious as well as promiscuous—especially so when compared to men, who benefitted from the patriarchal view of gender distinctions. Goshawk can easily fall back on blaming Mrs. Openwork for their illicit contact, and he wagers that her husband would be more likely to believe him than to trust his wife. This belief has its basis in cultural beliefs, and critic Laura Gowing's explanation of Jacobean views of women sheds some light on this tendency to blame women—especially urban women—more harshly than men:

Women proved a focus of specifically urban anxieties about public and private space, sexual honesty and economic activity...Persistently, urban women were envisaged as predators in a predatory city. Popular ballads warned men of city women: their sexual looseness, their expensive tastes, their cunning. Rarely did they warn women of city men. (132)

Although she overgeneralizes about people of the period and their view of women, Gowing reveals an important double standard affecting women in *The Roaring Girl*. Even according to

their own reports, Laxton and Goshawk exemplify those qualities women were supposed to possess: “sexual looseness,” “expensive tastes,” and “cunning.” However, city men—especially men of a certain class—face few real consequences for their actions, and the Openworks must rely on social rather than legal retribution for Goshawk’s misconduct. When Goshawk’s plan to have Mrs. Openwork catch her husband Openwork in the act of whoring, the couple turns the tables on Goshawk, seeing through his schemes easily due to their experience with his type of man. Mrs. Openwork upbraids him as follows:

Thou spider, that hast woven thy cunning web
 In mine own house t’ensnare me, hast not thou
 Sucked nourishment even underneath this roof
 And turned it all to poison, spitting it
 On thy friend’s face, my husband—he, as ‘twere, sleeping—
 Only to leave him ugly to mine eyes,
 That they might glance on thee? (4.2.216-22)

Here, Mrs. Openwork rightfully accuses Goshawk of attempting to plant the seed of misjudgment in her mind in order to manipulate and exploit her. Obviously, he does not succeed in this endeavor. With her response, Mrs. Openwork echoes sentiments about judgment spoken by Sebastian Wengrave as part of the main plot; Sebastian explains to his father the danger of allowing other people’s opinion of someone color one’s own opinion of him or her. Goshawk attempts to prejudice Mrs. Openwork against her husband, but she avoids being taken advantage of from the very beginning because she understands the insidious nature of rumor and secondhand opinion.

Mrs. Openwork's final lambasting of Goshawk is triumphant, and it aptly summarizes one of the major themes of the play, the danger of not thinking critically and independently when evaluating the worth of another person:

Who'd think that in one body there could dwell
Deformity and beauty, heaven and hell?
Goodness, I see, is but outside; we all set,
In rings of gold, stones that be counterfeit. (4.2.224-7)

It is worth noting the reference to "stones" in the final line of this speech, as the dramatists invite playgoers to recognize a similarity between Goshawk and Laxton: in the end, they both lack stones, and Mrs. Openwork brings this to light in an apt metaphor. This is a moment of confirmation for Mrs. Openwork; from the beginning, she knew that Goshawk was not what he seemed, but this final scene of the secondary plot solidifies her understanding of herself and Goshawk, as well as shaming the latter into admitting his wrongdoing.

Furthermore, Mrs. Openwork provides a general insight as much as she lectures Goshawk. The theme of misjudgment that is introduced in the main plot is complemented and amplified by this resolution in the secondary plot; in fact, in some instances the secondary plot provides the clearest verbal expression of the theme. After Goshawk asks Openwork to pardon his misdeeds, Openwork responds with a great deal of insight on the issue at hand:

What's this whole world but a gilt rotten pill?
For at the heart lies the old core still.
I'll tell you, Master Goshawk, ay, in your eye
I have seen wanton fire; and then to try
The soundness of my judgment, I told you

I kept a whore, made you believe 'twas true

Only to feel how your pulse beat, but find

The world can hardly yield a perfect friend. (4.2.233-40)

Despite their silent deception, both Openworks seem to become voices of reason in the play.

They understood the nature of the misunderstandings occurring in their midst from the beginning. While they realized they couldn't be sure of Goshawk's motives, they tested and observed him thoroughly to reach their final conclusions. Their seemingly pessimistic view of the world—Openwork calls it a "gilt rotten pill," while Mrs. Openwork asserts that heaven and hell mingle within all of us—actually leads to one of the most productive outcomes of the play. Goshawk seems to be on the path to reform, and the gracious support of the Openworks means that this promise to change does not, in fact, feel empty. Where Goshawk may have started out self-servingly, seeking pleasure and money, he now comes out of the situation edified by the experience of having the tables turned on him.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Roaring Girl is much more than T.S. Eliot's assessment of it as "a mass of cheap conventional intrigue" (89). Middleton and Dekker's characters, while they may resemble certain conventional types from the period, interact and develop in ways that complement and augment the substantive themes at the heart of the play: the destructiveness of misjudgment, prejudice, and slander; the stability that ironically eludes domineering individuals; the importance of asserting one's own worth in spite of popular opinion; the probable failure of ill-advised exploitative schemes—each character's role in the play emphasizes one or more of these issues. The playwrights' deft characterizing creates non-archetypal, multifaceted individuals who elicit both sympathy and frustration, in turn. Taken in this light, Eliot's disparagement of every aspect of the play that does not center on Moll Cutpurse is not only unfair but also obscures the play's several merits.

To date, a thorough examination of all components of the play has yet to be achieved, but this thesis has attempted to indicate and begin to explicate key areas that still need critical attention. The familial dynamics of the play, for instance, have often been dismissed as purely conventional and derivative, despite the fact that they underlie significant and distinctive plot threads throughout the play. In order to begin to analyze these dynamics, I have examined the father-son relationship between the Wengraves, but much more could be said about the relations between the Fitzallards and between Sir Davy Dapper and his son Jack Dapper. A similarly fruitful area of inquiry is the unassuming character of Mary Fitzallard: her ostensible conventionality provides an interesting foil to Moll's flagrant transgressions. Comparisons between Mary and Moll should be revisited as critical understanding of gender and other social norms evolves. The play also offers some insights into the socioeconomic undercurrents of

Jacobean London, especially those involving the subculture of lower and middle class merchants and tradespeople. I have explored a few of these issues in regard to a central set of minor characters—each is involved in his or her own particular scheme for personal gain, and they simultaneously indicate a great deal about the intersections between business and sexuality.

What ultimately ties these threads together is a concern with social norms and customs. As in many English plays of the Renaissance era, human interaction and its pitfalls play extensive roles, and—although much of the play has obvious connections to works by William Shakespeare and other contemporaries—Middleton and Dekker build a realistic and coherent world around Moll and her fellow characters. The plotting and scheming in which these characters engage culminate in important insights regarding how easy it is to misjudge someone based on a misconception, which in turn has its roots in societal values. Literary invectives against custom's hegemony are commonly found throughout English literature, and *The Roaring Girl* could certainly be considered such a work, albeit in a figurative sense. Examples of such invectives during Middleton and Dekker's time often took the form of pamphlets, and that medium offered a more explicit stance on the nature of custom. For instance, the anonymous author of the pamphlet titled *Haec Vir, or The Womanish Man* rails against the follies of slavishly following socially-prescribed norms:

Are we then bound to be the Flatterers of Time or the dependents on Custom? Oh miserable servitude, chained only to Baseness and Folly, for than custom, nothing is more absurd, nothing more foolish...Custom is an Idiot, and whosoever dependeth wholly upon him without the discourse of Reason will take from him his pied coat and become a slave indeed to contempt and censure. (140-1)

The Roaring Girl includes prominent examples of individuals who “dependeth wholly upon [custom],” and the resemblance between them and *Haec Vir*’s descriptions is uncanny. Sir Alexander Wengrave, for one, certainly seems dependent on custom, at least in terms of his judgment of Moll Cutpurse. He fails to apply the “discourse of Reason” to his understanding of Moll and her involvement in his son’s love life, and this leads him to hatch an ultimately doomed plan to undermine and harm Moll and bring his son to heel. Along the way, he does become “a slave indeed to contempt and censure,” as the author of *Haec Vir* puts it. His hatred of Moll blinds him to the truth of her character, and this ironically subjugates him to society’s influence, taking away his ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil. Laxton, too, pursues first Mrs. Openwork and then Moll in order to keep up with his society of young gallants, and he disregards the welfare of other people in the process. Time and again, Custom turns Middleton and Dekker’s characters against one another as well as themselves, and a large part of the play’s task is to censure such behavior.

The Roaring Girl dramatizes the dynamic interplay—and quite often conflict—between individuals and the social norms promoted within their culture. Middleton and Dekker depict various characters’ attempts to reconcile their own interests with the demands of their society; some are able to balance these two concerns, while others choose, or are forced by circumstance, to conform to society’s standards rather than maintaining their autonomy. A central lesson of *The Roaring Girl*, however, is that such conformity is not inherently binding: defying restrictive customs and establishing one’s independence is very often within reach.

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