

## Cross Dressing with a Difference: *The Roaring Girl* and *Epicoene*

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Though its primary function is usually plot driven--as a source of humor and a means to effect changes in characters through disguise and deception—cross dressing is also a sociological motif involving gendered play. My earlier essay on the use of the motif in Shakespeare's plays pointed out that cross dressing has been discussed as a symptom of "a radical discontinuity in the meaning of the family" (Belsey 178), as cultural anxiety over the destabilization of the social hierarchy (Baker, Howard, Garber), as the means for a woman to be assertive without arousing hostility (Claiborne Park), and as homoerotic arousal (Jardine). This variety of interpretations suggests the multivoiced character of the motif, but before approaching the subject of this essay, three clarifications are necessary at the outset.

First, no matter what is *represented* on stage, the fact that boys are actually playing cross dressing men and women is insistently metaphorical; the literal fact of transvestism (that is, the boy actor impersonating either a woman, a woman cross dressed as a man, or a man cross dressed as a woman, not the *represented* character) is divided between the homoerotic and the blurring of gender. On the other hand, the *represented* female character who cross dresses functions literally to relieve the boy actor, at least for a time, from impersonating a woman. Represented characters who cross dress may present a variety of poses, from the misogynist mockery of the feminine to the adroitly and openly homoerotic. In the case of the title character of Jonson's *Epicoene*, the motif is utilized as disguise intended to effect a surprise ending for Morose and his heterosexual audience, for whom the poet also provides the mockery of gender-blurred characters in

the personae of the Collegiate Ladies. Thus the motif may reify either the heterosexual or homosexual as a representation, the interpretation of which depends entirely upon context. That the disguise is dropped in most renaissance plays as part of reassuring a conventional audience or as part of the enactment of a process of gender individuation (Greenblatt 92) does not invalidate the insistent metaphor which is the ground of the representation; nor does this kind of claim account for other uses to which poets put the motif during this period.

Second, the transvestism of the English renaissance theatre creates a "space of possibility" for "structuring and confounding culture" as well as enacting a "category crisis" which reflects a potential destabilization of the dominant hierarchy (Garber 16, 17). Greenblatt points out that the enactment of such difference is an instrument to increase audience anxiety before reifying the normative and conventional in the play's resolution, a pattern played out in *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night*; yet this cannot account for the defiant and yet compassionate resolution of Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, where the mannishly clad Moll blesses the marriage of Sebastian and Mary Fitz-Allard and their reconciliation with their fathers, at the same time refusing the conventional solution for herself.

Third, Vern and Bonnie Bullough claim that cross dressing has signified both homosexual and heterosexual patterns at various times in history (viii), but as I have already noted, homoerotic content is always present on the literal level, even if submerged and/or divided with the blurring of gender. Further, plays of the same era may make drastically different uses of the motif. The homoerotic overtones in the relationship of

Orsino and Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, for example, are quite different from the "most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority" of the Collegiate Ladies and from the cross dressing of Morose's bride-to-be, the function of which has already been noted. Shakespeare's use of cross dressing as a device for the process of gender individuation in the empowerment of romance is sufficiently discussed in Greenblatt and others, but the complexity of the motif and the variety of dramatic uses that it has served are perhaps most clearly displayed in Thomas Dekker's *Moll* and in the various gender representations of Jonson's *Epicoene*.

### *The Roaring Girl*

Any account of *The Roaring Girl* must center on the title character, an "astonishing creation" that "provides one of the period's only clear-sighted comments on the economic pressures being exerted on contemporary women," especially those of the poor and middle class (Woodbridge 254-55). But Moll is more--as a Venus who "passes through the play in doublet and breeches" (Prologue 14-15), she is both a participant in the stages of the plot and, with Lord Nolan, its justice figure in the final comic arraignment, performing the unmasking of villains, blessing the marriage of the lovers, and reconciling senex and son. Most important for the purposes of this essay, she is openly defiant of dressing regulations and proscribed "feminine" behavior; her cross dressing is a badge of identity. Unlike the cross dressing of Shakespeare's and other renaissance comedies, hers is not disguise for the sake of romance; her clothing is nominally the attire of her trade as a cutpurse, and though nowhere might one find references to her as a woman whose seeming masculinity derives from bodily form rather than attire, she is physically strong,

able to beat both the fellow in the seamster's shop and Laxton with the rapier. Nevertheless, her identity as a woman is never in doubt, though she refuses the attentions of men attracted to her. She is far more concerned with justice in gendered relationships and in relationships involving social class than with her own personal affairs, though she is caring and loyal to those she considers friends. Most significantly, she never drops the cross-dressed stance, and unlike other cross-dressed women of the period, she is not reconciled to the typical fate of women in comedy, that is, acceptance of a patriarchal marriage. She transcends both the confinements of marriage and the role of the gull played by so many women, as seen in her relationships with Sebastian and with the courtling, Laxton.

Moll dallies with Sebastian, yet clearly states at the outset of their represented relationship that she will have nothing to do with marriage; her interest is in helping the young man and his true love find their way, but Sebastian "must looke for nothing but thanks of me" (3.1.34-35).. She loves "to lye aboth sides ath bed my selfe; and againe ath'other side" (2.2.35-36), a speech suggesting either that she prefers to sleep alone or at least that her role in bed not be circumscribed by the traditional *place* to which women are assigned. Also, while she accepts the patriarchal character of marriage, she is "too headstrong to obey" in any relationship where "a wife . . . ought to be obedient" (36- 37). She loves her friendship with Sebastian too much to make him miserable. Besides, "marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden looses one head, and has a worse ith place" (2.2.41-43)

Moll also pretends to dally with Laxton, who beguiles Mistress Gallipot into thinking she is having an affair with a gallant even as he milks her purse, and who

privately dismisses women as "apple eaters all, deceivers still" (3.2.249). When Moll meets him in assignation, she roundly castigates him as one "that thinkes each woman thy fond flexible whore, if she but cast a liberall eye on thee" (3.1. 69-70), damning him as one that has blasted the reputations of countless women:

How many of our sex, by such as thou  
Have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name  
That never deserved loosly or did trip  
In path of whooredom, beyond cup and lip. (3.1.77-80)

Further, she upbraids him for those women who have fallen as a result of the temptation offered in the name of social class and influence:

In thee I defye all men, their worst hates,  
And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts,  
With which they intangle the poore spirits of fooles,  
Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallne wives.  
Fish that must needs bite, or themselves be bitten,  
Such hungry things as these may soone be tooke  
With a worme fastned on a golden hooke. (3.1.88-94)

Moll transcends gender and class expectations in other ways as well. As interpreter of Trap Dore's and Teare Cat's gutter language for Lord Nolan, she moves among the various social classes with ease, knitting differences together in a way that surprises and delights her hearers, but the occasion also displays old conflicts at the heart of her identity. When Nolan asks how she knows the likes and language of Trapdore and Teare Cat, she confesses that when she was younger, she learned their tricks and paid for that knowledge with her own loss of reputation. Because of that loss, her interest now is in righting things: "how many are whores, in small ruffes and still lookes" and "how many chast, whose names fill slanders bookes?" (5.1.314-15). Her experience has further taught her to "please myself, and care not else who love mee" (319), and thus her cloth-

ing represents an identity earned through the pain of social and sexual injustice. At the same time, she is not programmatic in her choice of dress; if dressing as a bride will advance Sebastian's hope of converting his father, she will do it. Through all of this, her humor is evident: when Old Wengrave finally says he's sorry he ever condemned her, Moll laughs that the old man "was in feare his sonne would marry mee, but never dreamt that I would nere agree" (5.2.223-24).

Moll's cross dressing thus represents a defiance of convention in which the homoerotic content is ambiguously reified. She is attractive to men *because* of her unconventionality, but she is not attracted to any person in the play and thus, though her role is somewhat eroticized, she cannot be confined within the limits of the erotic. As an empowerer, her Venerian characteristics are evident; and though she refuses both the change of attire and the behaviors that would signify her acceptance of the traditional feminine role, she empowers the normative solution for others and thus only minimally threatens the patriarchal hierarchy of values. Nevertheless, she is a liberator of women who works not as a goddess (though she generally sees through the deceptions and traps laid in her way with an almost omniscient prescience) but as one who cleverly outwits the unjust with their own deceptions, practicing deceptions of her own to advance the justice she intends (see Appendix A). Laxton's deceptions, for example, are utilized to expose the cruelty of using women for sexual purposes. Moll is, in a word, a being liberated far beyond even a Rosalind or Viola, one who despite her erotic attractiveness refuses gender categorization altogether, because she pursues a higher justice regarding the relationships of the sexes and of social class.

*Epicoene*

Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* utilizes cross dressing in a way that differs dramatically from both the Shakespearean model of disguise and Dekker's model of liberation. Here, the poet develops a burlesque scenario: Morose, a character obsessed with silence and with marrying a silent woman to provide himself with heirs as a means to disinherit his nephew, falls into his nephew's trap by marrying such a woman, who proves first to be stereotypically talkative and is later revealed to be a man. Cross dressing here functions as a homoerotic motif only in exposure—and even then it is turned, as a surprise ending, to signify relief from female chatter and the empowerment of Dauphine. Up to that point, *Epicoene*, whose name means "androgynous" (Woodbridge 181), functions primarily to comically reify the stereotypes men have traditionally believed concerning women: that they are neither obedient nor quiet, that the whole purpose of the talkative woman is to dominate males. Despite its dominant pattern of the clever youth outwitting a villainous senex in a plot involving male empowerment, the play is essentially a valorization of misogyny<sup>1</sup> in which *Epicoene*'s cross dressing merely affirms the opinions more completely reified in *Mistress Otter*, a dominatrix who must be brought to heel with Morose's sword. Misogyny is also implicit in the "masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority" of the Collegiate Ladies (1.1.74-76), and in Truewit's declamations on and advice to women.

It should be noted that, though the secret of *Epicoene*'s identity is a textual necessity at least until the moment of exposure, a director might influence the audience's perceptions either through partial exposure (supposing an unusually robust *Epicoene*, whose wig occasionally slips off) for the sake of increased laughter, as well as through com-

plete concealment. The character herself implies at least a partial exposure through the meaning of her name and through Dauphine's admission to Clerimont that all is not what it seems: "this gentlewoman was lodg'd here by me o' purpose, and to be put upon my uncle, hath profess'd this obstinate silence for my sake" (2.4.35-38).

This guessing game is complicated when the "silent woman" becomes talkative, the point at which Morose accuses her of being "Penthesilea, a Semiramis" (3.4.51-52)—Amazonian (lesbian) or masculine and perverse (n. 51-52). She is castigated for "Amazonian impudence" when she later crosses him, a point that highlights Morose's misogyny and the peculiarity that a secretly cross dressed man should as a woman embody either the lesbian or the masculine woman.

The truly mannish women of the play, the Collegiate Ladies, are immediately seen as repulsive to the men, yet they also serve the function of a female chorus, first as ogglers of Dauphine, backstabbing each other in their pursuit of him. Their aggressiveness is dismissed by Clerimont when he says that he "would not give a fly's leg . . . against all the women's reputations here" (5.2.68-69). Later, they appear as the choral mockers of Morose's impotence, adding to his chagrin when Mistress Otter suggests that the women might search him to prove that he is impotent. As women, their assertive qualities are connected to sexual desire in a way that reduces the openness Moll had spoken of to the claim that "all their actions are governed by crude opinion, without reason or cause" (4.6.56-57).

Finally, in the scene of exposure and recognition, the device of transvestism is also clearly exposed for the first time. After exposure, Epicoene is now himself, "a gen-

tleman's son" that Dauphine has raised "this half year at my great charges" (5.4.183-84), yet one who again has no voice, no clear identity as the play ends. The device has been used to put money into the hands of Dauphine, utilizing behaviors repugnant to the misogynist to reify male stereotypes concerning women as a means to drive Morose insane. In this play, then, cross dressing functions on the representative level to engage a presumably male heterosexual and yet misogynistic audience, deflating their presumptions when the woman is in fact revealed to be a man and simultaneously fulfilling their desire to be freed of the chattering dominatrix. Represented homerotic content is briefly revealed and contextually turned to other purposes when Dauphine lifts Epicoene's periwig, but the use of cross dressing does not, as in *The Roaring Girl*, represent a deliberate (if somewhat mitigated) challenge to traditional categories. Nor does it, as in Shakespeare's plays, serve the function of advancing either individuation or a romantic resolution.

### *Conclusion*

*The Roaring Girl* and *Epicoene* reveal two uses of the cross dressing motif which are dramatically different from the sexual sub-text and process of individuation enacted in Shakespeare's comedies utilizing the motif. Dekker's Moll is represented as a woman whose cross dressing is the clear signifier that she will not be assimilated in the normative hierarchy either as wife or female gull; nor may she be fixed as representative only of one social class, for she moves freely and familiarly among lords, shop keepers, and street people. Though somewhat eroticized as a woman in terms of male sexual fascination for her and in the tenderness of her affections for Sebastian (even as she refuses him), she also affirms the masculine both in her dress and her ability to beat men with a

rapier; yet she neither clearly negates the type of the lesbian nor affirms the heterosexual. Rather, she is a firm spokeswoman for women's rights while at the same time affirming the goodness of heterosexual love.

*Epicoene*, on the other hand, utilizes cross dressing and the representation of mannish women to present an essentially misogynist drama in which the stereotypical faults of women are excoriated as a source of humor. As a represented character, Epicoene serves as the means to empower Dauphine in the pursuit of his inheritance: Morose is first lured to her by her silence and, after the wedding, frustrated to the point of madness by her talkativeness and domination of his household. Morose's madness allows Dauphine to propose a solution involving his own empowerment: once the documents reinheriting him are signed, he exposes the bride's cross dressing as the way that Morose might be delivered from the marriage. In this context, homoerotic content is present only in the exposure of Epicoene, and here serves to surprise and instantly fulfill the hopes of Morose (even as he gives in to his nephew) and the misogynist audience, whose arousal has been accomplished by reifying male stereotypes about women not only through Epicoene's behavior, but through the actions of the dominatrix, Mistress Otter, and the repulsiveness of the Collegiate Ladies.

*Appendix A: Traps and Deceptions in The Roaring Girl*

1. Mary Fitz-Allard in disguise as a seamstress.
2. Sebastian plans to use Moll to force his father to let him marry Mary Fitz-Allard.
3. Old Wengrave hires Trapdore to snare Moll and foil his son's apparent intention to marry her.
4. Openwork deceives Goshawk by claiming to be cozening his wife and engaging in "forraine wenching" (2.1.274-75)
5. Laxton dallies with Mistress Gallipot to soak her for money.
6. Mrs. Gallipot tries to deceive her husband in order to get money for Laxton.
7. Sebastian, knowing his father is overhearing him, uses this to plant further deceptions in Old Wengrave's mind.
8. Moll deceives Laxton into thinking she'll be his whore in order to humiliate him later.
9. Knowing Trapdore to be a spy, Moll tests him and uses him for her own purposes.
10. Old Wengrave tries to trap Moll with watch and chain and ruff band with diamond.
11. Sebastian and Moll deceive the overhearing Old Wengrave into thinking she is a musician demanding payment.
12. Moll impersonates the musician to Old Wengrave.
13. After the exposure of Goshawke and Openwork, Laxton sends Greenwit, disguised as a summoner, to deceive Gallipot and Mistress Gallipot.
14. Trapdore and Teare-cat, disguised as soldiers, try to hit up Lord Nolan for money; Moll exposes them.
15. Moll appears as a masked bride to drive Old Wengrave to agree with Sebastian's demands.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The attentive reader coming to Ben Jonson's comedies for the first time is immediately struck by the absence of that festive and sincere love that enlivens most of his great rival's comedies. His women characters, far from being the clever Rosalinds and Violas of Shakespeare's festive period, present us with a *very* different description of the woman's part. Among the court ladies, Saviolina of *EMO* is a shallow and heartless hind, as are the women of *Cynthia's Revels* or the famous Lady Would-be of *Volpone*. Commoners fare no better: Dol Common, albeit clever, is a prostitute whose alliances are all based squarely on material self-interest, and the women of *Bartholomew Fair* vary from Ursula, the uproarious pig-woman, to similar spirits like Punk Alice and Joan Trash, to the scheming Dame Purecraft and the mindless and easily cozened London housewives, Win Littlewit and Dame Overdoo.

In the comedies of his early and middle periods, only *EMI's* Mistress Bridget, *Volpone's* Celia and *Bartholomew Fair's* Grace Welborn retain any purity. The first of these is uncharacterized; she is merely the object of a gull's poetry and the young hero's love. The second is a victim, first of her husband's jealousy, then of Volpone's attempted rape (from which she is rescued by Bonario), and finally of the court, where via the machinations of Volpone and Mosca she is accused of adultery by Voltore, her husband, and Lady Would-be. Eventually, of course, she is vindicated, though not through any will or actions of her own; like the heroine of *The Perils of Pauline*, she is paralyzed by threats, swoons in response, and must be rescued by a male or through dumb luck. Grace Wellborn, though shallowly mirroring her name, is a bit more active than Celia, winning

a husband by proposing a test in which a madman determines which of two suitors will win her.

Last among the early and major comedies, *Epicoene* presents an unusual set of women characters: the Collegiate Ladies, a trio who "cry down or up what they like or dislike . . . with most masculine or rather hermaphroditical authority" (1.1.74-76); Mistress Otter, a dominatrix whose clamoring might only be quieted with a sword; and Epicoene herself, a man posing as a "silent woman" as part of Dauphine's plot to force his misanthropic uncle to give him his inheritance. The play trades on the stereotypical notion that wives are duplicitous, disobedient, and that they talk too much, but its turning of these conventions is complex in a plot whose dominant motifs are the vindication of the young man's right and the corresponding exposure and repentance of the aging misanthrope.

Thus, one may claim that in these plays Jonson's attitude toward women and toward love itself varies between tepid and cold. When love is presented sincerely, as in the cases of Edward Knowell and Bridget, it is not developed enough to give us a sense of its growth and passion. Generally, however, marriage is seen as a confining institution in which women deceive or are deceived by their husbands. What is most interesting is that in the plays, Jonson effectively closes us off from any deeper meditation on the subject; there, he is like the one who adopts countless disguises to keep others from discovering his true persona.

Many of the poems, however, display the genuine and the heartfelt. Among these are the elegies for his son and daughter (*Epigrammes* XXII and XLV), the epigrammes

and epistles to Mary Wroth and to other individual ladies, the paean *To Penshurst* with its praise for the pure and chaste marriage of its lord and lady, and in the erotic vein, the various songs to Celia (*The Forrest* V, VI, IX). Also notable is the *Epode* (*Forrest* XI) defining virtue in love as "a golden chaine let downe from heaven" and "a calme, and god-like unitie" (lines 47, 53) unlike that kind of love which is "blinde Desire, arm'd with how, shaftes, and fire" (37-38)—in which reason sleeps and the emotions swell "like a storme" (40).

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