

Two Shadows To One Shape': Jokes and the Sex/Gender Debate in
Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*

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Jokes in textual form have traditionally been approached in one of two ways: either they are the focus of analysis to discover the essence of humor, or they are taken as transparent textual elements which operate as accoutrements to the main plot. In the first case, jokes are extracted from their context and examined as a social/cultural phenomenon. Freud is perhaps the most famous practitioner of this approach. In his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) he seeks to explain the root of human laughter through an analysis of joke structure and how they operate within his construct of the ego, super-ego, and id. This construction builds on a similar project by Henri Bergson a few years earlier. In 1900, Bergson took up the problem of laughter and attempted to explain its existence through an examination of oral and physical comedic instances. Attempts to distill the joke and discover its still persists today and is investigated today by people like Simon Critchley and John Moreall.¹ What binds these efforts together is the notion that at the base of every comedic action is an essential core which induces mirth in those who are party to it. Through analysis and theorization these thinkers hope to unravel and expose that mysterious something which explains any and all laughter.

On the other side of the coin are those who take as humorous objects their subject and end up working with jokes. This practice is wide spread among many disciplines. Cultural theorists like John Limon² analyze stand-up performances as a sites where our culture manages the abject. Cultural historians like Stephanie Coontz³ examine old sit-

¹ Critchly, Simon. *On Humor*. Routledge: New York. 2002; Moreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. State University of New York Press: Albany. 1983

² Limon, John. *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2000

³ Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Basic Books: New York. 2002

comes to make an argument about America's relationship to its imagined past. Linguists like Anke Reichenbach and Fatema Hashem look at jokes in candid, social situations and make judgments about in-group/out-group identifications or social hierarchies.⁴ What is significant is that in most of these analyses the individual joke is taken as an unproblematic piece of text which is used in the construction of a narrative about the purpose or larger meaning of the work being examined. Neither of these approaches explore the significance of the *individual* joke as interacting with the larger world of its context.

The re-singularization of the joke as a source of information and a consideration of the methodological problems and possibilities involved is my focus here. This requires that my work here include three interrelated considerations: 1. a theoretical discussion of the function of jokes to clarify how I see a joke functioning within the larger context of its host text; 2. an explanation of methodology in order to emphasize the differences in my proposed approach from more traditional history/historical literary analysis and justify the need for the change at all; 3. a working through of a textual site to illustrate how different thoughts become thinkable when jokes become the focus. I will execute these three interrelated tasks within the context of an examination of Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, an early modern London comedy.⁵ The play is very obviously concerned with examining issues of sexual identity⁶ in

⁴ Reichenbach, Anke and Fatema Hashem. "'Only a Third of a Banana': Dirty Joking as an Attempt to Maintain Dignity". *Anthropos* (2005): 73-89.

⁵ "London Comedy" is a genre defined by Jean Howard in her 2007 *Theater of a City*. She introduces it as a corrective to the earlier category of city comedy which, she argues, deemphasizes the significance of the London setting they share. Since I also see this play as negotiating a series of social relations specific to London rather than more generally urban, I will also adopt her terminology.

⁶ I use the term "sexual identity" here to distinguish it from "gender identity" in the post-Butlerian sense. Medical and legal discourses in early modern England were primarily concerned with physiology in distinguishing men from women (See Gilbert 2002) and issues of gendered behavior are relevant in how

seventeenth century London which offers fertile analytical ground. I take this play in particular because it has an analytical history against which I can compare my own, joke-oriented reading. It is also a play that makes very obvious its central theme, although I argue this theme is more complexly explored through its jokes than its plot.

Understanding the implications of joke-focused analysis, and in turn what Moll Cutpurse adds to an understanding of early modern gender/sexual identity, requires an initial exploration of how a joke functions differently than another selection of text positioned as historical evidence. It is not an uncommon practice to present a joke as textual evidence in support of an historical claim. Typically this is accomplished by suggesting a common purpose or meaning for the larger text and using jokes to bolster this larger claim. Conversely much has been made by Moreall and others about the joke's autonomy. Drawing on Freud for inspiration, these analysts often position the joke as a reflection of hidden desires.⁷ Socio-linguistic approaches tend to see jokes as social correctives.⁸ Cultural studies scholars have been working on developing a "theory of humor" by analyzing families of jokes since Bergson's *Laughter* (1900).⁹ And while these disciplines certainly have different goals and stakes, what is common among them is recognition of the joke as an utterance governed by rules different from those of less marked speech.

Taking this implicit recognition of the joke as somehow different, I propose a framework of how to make sense of this problematic textual element within the textual

they work with or against this initial categorization. While gender-as-performed identity certainly has a place my argument, classification begins with, and is often negotiated through, discussions of the presence or absence of certain genitalia.

⁷ Moreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*. State University of New York Press: Albany. 1983

⁸ Hashem, Fatema and Anke Reichenbach. "'Only a Third of a Banana': Dirty Joking as an Attempt to Maintain Dignity". *Anthropos* (2005): 73-89.

⁹ Bergson, Henri. "Laughter". Sypher, Wylie. *Comedy* Doubleday Anchor Books: New York. 1956. 61-90.

context. It is useful, I believe, to approach the joke as a *gestural statement*. I come to this phrase by combining “statement” as it is presented by Foucault *Order of Things* (1970) and “gesture” as it is defined by Giorgio Agamben’s *Infancy and History* (1993). In combination I believe these two notions can provide a new framework for dealing with jokes which address the joke on its own terms rather than bullying it into the service of a broader interpretation or essentialist theory.

Statement

I will begin here with Foucault’s definition of a *statement* since it is a more fundamental qualification than gesture and one that will help clarify my use of *gesture*.¹⁰ Foucault’s *statement*, as opposed to the *sentence* or the *exclamation*, is not knowable through grammatical description or even objective analysis of its content. Instead, the statement is only knowable in the moment of its emergence. It only has meaning when seen through the conditions that demanded its production. This quality links the statement inextricably to the time and space of its construction. This relationship has numerous implications that Foucault details, but the most salient for this short discussion is the idea that the statement bears the impress of the conditions from which it emerged. The same could be argued for the text as a whole if it weren’t for the process of ‘monumentalization’ in which a text (typically bound or published in some way), by virtue of its preservability, becomes not a product but an emblem of a moment past. The text begins to stand in for the entirety of an historical era. Again, the scholarship

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. Sheridan A. M Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1972. 79-131.

surrounding *The Roaring Girl* bears this out. The play is commonly used by contemporary analysts (especially those with a feminist bent) as a cipher for the entirety of gender negotiation in early modern England. The statement, on the other hand, is necessarily fleeting. It is a product of a unique set of circumstances and is un-reproducible outside of that complex. What is retrievable after the instant of the statement is only a husk, the orthographic or phonetic shell that encompassed the statement proper. The benefit to approaching a joke as a statement rather than part of a text, to my mind, is that it allows for gaps and rifts by pointing toward the fact that it is an imperfect reflection of an un-retrievable thought. This may sound overly relativistic, but liberating jokes from the burden of encompassing the entirety, in this case, of the negotiation of gender in the early modern era allows them to be approached as individual contributions to a larger debate. They become *a* thought in context rather than a transparent reflection of the context itself. From this vantage *The Roaring Girl* ceases to have a “meaning” or “message” about gendered behavior and instead becomes a complex of unresolved positions reflected in the humor of the text.

Foucault’s construction of the statement is very minute and precise. The conditions that produce the statement are instantaneous. For this project I am knowingly committing violence to this ideal by expanding the moment. The impression that exists on the joke-statements I approach as a much broader time, a matter of years or decades rather than seconds. I do this in order to make the joke speak to a past period to which we have some (however corrupted) access. I cannot speak to the instant these jokes were said on stage, but I may be able to find a way to speak to broader social trends. I take some comfort in my theft and brutal beating of Foucault’s ideas because on one level this

project tries to support one of the primary goals of his discussion of the statement. My analysis here depends on rupturing the implicit unity of the text. Only by naming the surface of the joke heavy play-text as fragmentary does the joke begin to speak outside the constraints of textual analysis. Joke-laden play texts from the early modern (although not ONLY from the early modern) suffer from a particularly debilitating handicap when it comes to trying to think otherwise about the history they may point toward. While it is true that, potentially, one could take any section out of a play, call it a statement then construct some narrative around it, I contend that jokes and humor, seen as statements, enjoy a particularly strong bond to the time and space of their creation. That is to say that they enjoy a stronger claim to identification as “statements” when separated from a larger text than other utterances. I am supported in this conceit by an oddly pervasive thread in humor theory that takes great pains to connect jokes to the idea of the “now” as opposed to a “past present future” conception of time.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* is the example par excellence¹¹. In his introduction Bakhtin explores how the carnival disrupts authoritative constructions of time. Time’s passage from one year to the next, ordained and regulated by civic and ecclesiastical authorities is disrupted during carnival resulting in “carnival time”, which blurs the lines between the beginning and the end, birth and death, fresh and rotten. This shift from a progressive, cause and effect representation of time is due in large part, Bakhtin argues, to the “comic spirit” that pervades carnivalesque moments. For him humor is in large part responsible for the temporary eradication of time and as a result

¹¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1984. 1-58.

history. Carnival is not an inversion of the normal order as theorists like Peter Burke¹² would have it (otherwise time would move backward) but a complete rejection of any order whatsoever. Yesterday and tomorrow disappear and take their concerns with them leaving only a “now” which dominates and directs all activity. In this context people eat, drink and spend for the moment and without thought of future scarcity.

Giorgio Agamben¹³ touches on a similar perception of the “now” in his essay “In Playland” which tests the relationship between ritual and play. According to Agamben’s construction ritual is an activity dedicated to the preservation of an order and representation of time and marked by solemnity and respect. Play is a contestation of that order and concept of time marked by laughter and mockery. In each case (carnival and play), a movement through time marked by what has already happened (past) and what will happen (future) is rejected in favor of dedication to a “now” where the most significant considerations are the immediate conditions with little attention paid to their origins or repercussions. Taken as a statement in the Foucauldian sense, the joke can be seen as an immediate and necessary response to its environment. This may disqualify them as quality historical evidence in a traditional sense since, after delivery the joke is devoid of significance. Jokes are not statements meant to endure the passage of time and reflect the attitude of an age. They are, rather, supremely temporal. They respond to an immediate and passing need, potentially a need that does not last past the moment of utterance. But in this ephemerality lies their potential, not as historical evidence in the sense of a verifiable fact, but rather flitting gestures which describe the contours of a

¹² Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1978. 178-202.

¹³ Agamben, Giorgio. "In Playland." Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History*. New York: Verso Books, 1978. 65-87. I invoke Agamben here not to transition to the idea of gesture just yet, but to support and nuance my interpretation of statement and its implications when examining historical texts.

debate far from settled. Their value is not in their ability to verify a conceit about the past, but to encourage the perception that in the “now” of an historical moment, the outcome commonly called “history” was hardly a foregone conclusion.

Michel de Certeau considers the value of this form of evidence in *The Writing of History* when he discusses how various fragments refuse to bow to the historiographic operation of constructing a history of past vs. present, “But whatever this new understanding of the past holds to be irrelevant—shards created the selection of materials, remainders left aside by an explication—comes back, despite everything, on the edges of discourse or in its rifts and crannies: “resistances”, “survivals”, or delays discreetly perturb the pretty order of a line of “progress” or a system of interpretation.” (4) From the vantage that I have been trying to illustrate, jokes, even those embedded in texts which have been press-ganged into the service of just such a “line of ‘progress’”, are shards which may just be sharp enough to sever that “pretty order”.

In this way, the joke has the potential to shift thinking both historically and historiographically. Historically in that joke focused analysis emphasizes debates and tensions rather than evidence, and historiographically in that they demand historical texts, usually treated as cohesive units, be shattered in order to see where they may speak to concerns which are unthinkable when they remain intact. This latter point demands that analysis be conducted on two levels simultaneously. The implications of a joke as a product of an historical “now” need to be balanced against a critical examination of how they exist and are used in this contemporary “now”. The past “now” requires a consideration of the play as a performance text. Conventions of presentation and the unstable nature of what was actually said on stage must be addressed in order to forward

any useful suppositions about how *The Roaring Girl* functioned and circulated in the moment of its emergence. This host of issues becomes exceptionally interesting when one considers gender representation on the part of the boy actor(s) who played the role of the contradictorily costumed Moll. Looking at the play in the contemporary “now” acknowledges that this text still circulates, albeit primarily in academic circles. It is, contemporarily, a text which performs rather than a performance text. In its artificially fixed state the play performs the role of a vessel into which the concerns of a modern analyst are placed and given a history. This latter characterization sounds negative, but that is not my intent. Indeed I am doing the exact same thing by filling this play with a personal agenda of legitimizing jokes. It is my intention that this serves as an intervention which could add to the broader conversation rather than delegitimize an analytical practice.

Gesture

While discussing Aby Warburg’s attempt in the 1920s to produce an atlas of artistic expression throughout the ages, Agamben posits that the 1000 plus plates Warburg collected are more correctly seen as snapshots of a dynamic, on-going process that is the development of western art. “Inside each section, the single images should be considered more as film stills than as autonomous realities...”¹⁴ He sees the movement and development of various art styles as one, comprehensive gesture. Each painting is a frozen instant of a huge and still ongoing motion. This perspective, he

¹⁴ Agamben, Giorgio. *Means Without End*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

claims, changes what is important in each image. Considerations like technique, composition, or inherent meaning fade into the background and the artwork's relationships to the time and place of its production become paramount. As a captured moment of a larger process, what sets each image apart is how it relates to those that came before, those that come after and every pressure that shaped it at the moment of its creation without suggesting a causal relationship. This historicizes these works of art and immediately brings them into a new set of conversations. Emphasizing the relationship of the object to its position in an historical process means things like contemporary economics and politics become vital to understanding that painting and its relationship to time. For Agamben, this shift forces the artworks into a new analytical category, one which shies away from autonomous and inherent meaning and leans toward seeing the object as intimately intertwined with a position in time. Understanding why Giorgio Agamben's gesture is an important addition to joke focused analysis requires an understanding of the material in question as part of an established genre since his formulation of the concept relies on understanding various examples as pieces of a larger process. However the larger process I am examining here is not how *The Roaring Girl* functions as a snapshot of a historical evolution of comedies, but rather that the jokes within the play itself are snapshots of an internal process of gender negotiation itself tied to a host of early modern sociopolitical and economic issues.

First published somewhere between 1607 and 1610 *The Roaring Girl* is an exemplar of "the comedy" in early modern English theater. The plot follows young, in-love protagonists as they travel through London seeking to overcome the obstructions between them and a happy marriage. Along the way a multitude of subplots, disguises

and chance meetings set up situations where the characters can abuse, taunt, seduce, befriend, and betray one another. It is, in short, a comedy in the generic sense,¹⁵ as opposed to a more common modern usage which situates the desire to produce humor as comedy's governing attribute. However that seemingly innocuous classification is not without implicit stakes. *The Roaring Girl* is made intelligible to the contemporary moment as a play which shares certain structural features with other plays that have been dubbed comedy. The most commonly cited qualities are the play's population (fictitious characters built on recognizable tropes), scope (interpersonal conflict, rarely concerned with great personage's affairs of state), and conclusion (a happy ending where sympathetic characters get married.)¹⁶ Of course this classification of "comedy" is not apolitical. The genre both describes and prescribes what constitutes a comedy. A corpus of academic work reaching as far back as Aristotle (as so many things do)¹⁷ has reinscribed this convention. The surface from which an early modern comedy emerges is conditioned by the demands of form as much as the social and cultural milieu. Taking this into consideration provides further support for the legitimacy of a joke focused analysis. Since the form dictates the outcome of the genre, drawing conclusions from plays' conclusions is as much a claim about genre as it is about the purpose of the individual piece.

¹⁵ Corrigan, Robert W., ed. *Comedy: A Critical Anthology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.; Meredith, George. "An Essay on Comedy." Sypher, Wylie. *Comedy*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956. 3-59

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ I am referring to Aristotle's brief mention of the tenants of a comedy in his *Poetics*. He promises to address comedy more fully in a second volume of the *Poetics* but that is either lost to time or he never wrote it and has played a joke on later centuries by making them make more of his minor mention than is really deserved.

What distinguishes *The Roaring Girl* from others of its ilk are the specific situations and characters which adorn the framework dictated by the genre of comedy. This contention is largely in line with the temporal propositions made by Foucault around the statement. What Agamben adds that is vital to investigating the behavior of a joke is his argument that a gesture contributes nothing to the dialogue of production. Agamben's position is not that each picture in the atlas (or in my case joke in a play) logically leads to or predicts the next, or at least that that is not the most productive way of seeing them. They certainly exist in relation to other gestures, but the line is not progressive or linear. For him gestures are above all "means without ends." The goal of an investigation of a gesture is not to identify its meaning, output, or even describe its affective response, but to highlight the way a thing moves through its own time and space. "What characterizes a gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported." (57) And later, "*The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.*" (58, emphasis in the original) Gestures bring to the fore the method of a thing by divorcing it from the conversations of production and purpose. Through a gesture the "why" of a thing becomes unimportant and all that is left is what is being done. Gestures expose mechanics and systems in a language not preoccupied with justification through what the action makes or accomplishes. This shift in focus allows the gesture to become relevant to issues outside the explicit purpose as defined by the dialogue of production. In my particular case, this means that the joke is divorced from a need to justify its meaning or purpose within or in support of the meaning of a larger text and instead focus on its network of relationships, both inter- and extra-textual.

Handling jokes as gestures allows them to speak more fully to their moment and the network of pressures that produced them. They are brought into a dialectical relationship with their own moment rather than being isolated from it. This method, while very promising, does carry with it some serious implications and problems, not the least of which is the need to consider what effect this tactic has on how joke laden texts are read. I believe that, in order to make jokes relevant shards for analysis as gestures, the texts in which jokes are preserved need to be approached in a way similar to what Agamben proposes for Warburg's atlas. Specifically, I see potential in rejecting analytical systems dedicated to discovering the meaning or purpose of a text by approaching it as a unitary whole in the same way Agamben rejected the art work as an "autonomous reality". If jokes are freed from their traditional role of providing support to a reading whose purpose is to make texts intelligible via some structuralist or even post-structuralist interpretation, they gain the ability to speak to social and political influences which conditioned their telling, but which have little or no bearing on an interpretation of a text being analyzed through a totalizing critical frame. In other words, individual jokes may speak at cross purposes to the "meaning" of the text as a whole or indeed to the idea that a given text has any single, discernible meaning at all.

Combining these interpretations of *statement* and *gesture* into a *gestural statement* focuses how I understand the joke as providing a unique entre into historical textual analysis. As a *gestural statement*, the joke adopts a relationship to the social and temporal matrix which gave it birth and takes on an expository function which does not aim at the production of an obvious and transparent meaning. The *gestural statement* points to and demands recognition of the host of anxieties, prejudices, constructs, and

expectations which thread their way in and out of a comedic text, regardless of the work's plot or purpose. This perception of the way a joke operates within its host text stands in contradiction to a tradition of textual analysis, a tradition which has already had its say where *The Roaring Girl* is concerned. This is certainly true for the analysts who take on *The Roaring Girl* like Ruth Gilbert, Gustav Ungerer and Jane Baston, among others.

The Roaring Girl and Its Jokes

By far the dominant tradition of writing around *The Roaring Girl* is in the gender or women's studies realms. Here a great deal is made of the titular character's blatant disregard for the dress code formalized and legislated through a series of sumptuary laws. The roaring girl herself, Moll Cutpurse, was based on a living, breathing person: Mary Firth. One of the few facts all the existing evidence agree upon is Firth's and therefore Moll's habit of dressing in clothes and behaving in ways commonly regarded as masculine. Moll is an outsized personality. She drinks, smokes, swears and fights. Just how much of this she shares with Mary Firth is questionable, but Firth's appearance several times in court¹⁸ suggest that perhaps the two share more than a predilection for pants. Where Moll differs from what we know of Mary Firth is that Moll, as a fictional character, is not subject to the same social categorization to which Firth was subject. Moll can and does shift easily between self-identification as man and woman through her clothes, actions, jests, and the jokes that are made about her within the text of the play. Her shifting, contradictory identity does little to influence the central plot, beyond the male ingénue threatening to marry her if he does not get his way, but it *does* provide a backbone for many of the play's jokes, especially sexual jokes. For feminist or gender analysts *The Roaring Girl* is a commentary on the plight of women in the early modern

¹⁸ The juridical, punitive court, not the royal court.

era. These approaches focus on narrative construction in order to paint Moll as either an exemplar of feminine liberation from sartorial dictates or as a victim of the early modern patriarchy who is made complicit in the perpetuation of a marriage system dedicated to the subject of women. Furthermore, some of these analyses make little effort to highlight the difference between Mary Firth and Moll Cutpurse using Moll's actions in the play as evidence for Firth's designation as a proto-feminist or citing Firth as evidence that *The Roaring Girl* should be read as a play about gendered resistance.

In *Early Modern Hermaphrodites* Ruth Gilbert explores early modern conceptions of ambiguously sexed individuals in medical, legal, and cultural discourses. It is the cultural element which interests me most here because in her fourth chapter she draws on *The Roaring Girl* in order to glean information about a real figure in London in the early 1600s¹⁹. Throughout her analysis she refers to "Mary/Moll" as a composite figure, one part Mary Firth (an actual, documented person) and one part Moll Cutpurse (a character fabricated by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton in *The Roaring Girl*). Gilbert deftly uses fragments of "autobiographies" (themselves most likely fictions) and court documents in conjunction with the play to construct a compelling case about how Mary Firth acts in defiance of gender norms and the significance of her rebellion. At times she cites jokes from the play text to back up her argument. What is lost is any consideration of what it means that Mary/Moll comes down to us, in significant part, through humor and the inevitable distortion that entails. In my joke oriented analysis I hope to show that, if someone pays attention to how Moll Cutpurse is constructed through jokes, a conflation between Mary Firth as a person and Moll Cutpurse as a character is impossible since the former is a woman who dresses as a man and the latter a

¹⁹ Gilbert, Ruth. *Early Modern Hermaphrodites*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 77-96.

humorous, fictional creature who intentionally confuses codes and possesses a malleable sex.²⁰

Gustav Ungerer posits that because Moll is portrayed as a positive character that doles out rather than receives punishment in the play, her masculine clothing and bombastic attitude represent a laudable break from patriarchal hegemony²¹. Margo Hendricks and Jane Baston suggest that Moll's role in the final union between the young lovers demonstrates how a system by, of, and for men can press gang even the most exuberant woman into its service²². In order for these arguments to carry any weight, it must be taken as given that Moll functions on some level as a woman. To support this, Ungerer, Baston, and Hendricks all refer back to the historical evidence that supports the idea that Mary Firth was biologically a woman who cross-dressed and adopted some mannerisms associated with men. Only with this understanding of who Moll actually is do claims about women's containment and liberation in the text make sense. Following the jokes of the play tells a different, if related, story. When investigators like Ungerer or Baston hold up the marriages at the end of the play as either an example of the unconquerable power of hegemonic, paternalism or a radical subversion of gender norms

²⁰ Here again I use the term "sex" rather than gender because in the confines of this play Moll's identity is most frequently identified through accusations and hints about the configuration of her genitalia rather than gender-as-performed-behaviors. Although her behavior is similarly flexible, most of the jokes made about her stem from insecurity about what is between her legs than how she behaves in the world.

²¹ Ungerer, Gustav. "Mary Frith, Alias Moll Cutpurse, in Life and Literature." *Shakespeare Studies* (2000).

²² Hendricks, Margo. "A Painter's Eye: Gender and Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*." *Women's Studies* (1990).; Baston, Jane. "Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*." *Studies in English Literature* (1997): 317-335.

(respectively) they necessarily address a convention of early modern playwriting as much if not more than the particular situations present in *The Roaring Girl*.

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Furthermore and more significantly, the flexible, multivalent quality of the fictional Moll Cutpurse serves to highlight the ways in which the ongoing negotiation of gender roles in early modern London is inextricably linked to other concerns. The way these various elements become related to one another though jokes hints at a complex constellation of related concerns and tensions. However jokes are not a method of resolution. Rather they are a map that outlines and identifies the existence and contours of an intricate, contested, and often contradictory social system. In the case of *The Roaring Girl*, Moll Cutpurse is the nucleus of jokes that center on genitalia and the behaviors, rights, and expectations that accompany the various possible permutations thereof.

The most obvious outlier in the world of *Roaring Girl* analysis is Jean Howard's treatment of the play in her aforementioned *Theater of a City*. For Howard the play's most significant element is how it deals with debt, credit and imprisonment. In the second chapter of her book Howard isolates a subplot in which a father sets constables on his spendthrift son in order to teach him a lesson about prudent fiscal behavior. In this example Moll Cutpurse is a central figure not because she violates gendered sartorial codes, but because she comes to the rescue of the young gull and provides him an escape route from the doom of debtor's prison. In each instance jokes are marshaled as evidence of a claim in support of a reading of the play as being in service of a particular agenda in the early modern moment. However, examinations of the jokes which occupy the scenes

from which dialogue is lifted suggest a complex relationship between the issues of debt and gender. Is that to say that analyses dedicated to a particular focus are wrong? Of course not. I mention it only to highlight the potential provided by an examination which takes as its subject jokes. Namely that, from this perspective, analyses dedicated to a specific political agenda are impossible. The play becomes a multi-faceted commentary best suited to outlining the parameters of a debate, exposing contradictions in rhetoric or perception, and drawing connections between seemingly unrelated concerns. Taken as such, joke laden texts lose the ability to effectively support a mono-lateral claim, but in return offer the possibility of approaching an historical moment as a complex of tensions and compromises rather than a foregone conclusion. In short, *jokes-as-gestural statements* allow plays like *The Roaring Girl* to function within and around its own contradictions rather than elide those gaps as one must when the joke is taken as either fact or evidence. In terms of this play, that means one must approach issues like gender as unresolved and internally negotiated.

Sex in the Text: Moll's Shifting Identity

The Roaring Girl's central plot follows a boy (Sebastian Wengrave) who is in love with a girl (Mary Fitzallard). They can't be together because Sebastian's father (Sir Alexander Wengrave) wants more of a dowry than the Fitzallards have offered. Over the course of eleven scenes Sebastian and Mary pine for each other, trios of caricatures bumble about the stage misreading everything, disguises are employed, and naturally the young lovers get married in the end and everyone is happier for it. This general plot can be found in the comedies of most of Dekker and Middleton's contemporaries. Johnson, Chapman, and Marston play on similar themes in their *Eastward Ho*, Dekker frames his

solo works like *The Shoemakers Holiday* on the same conventions, and Shakespeare gets mileage out of the tropes in comedies like *Twelfth Night* and “romances” like *The Tempest*. Comedy coming out of England during this time puts the “genre” in “generic”. What really differentiates the plays, in my opinion, is what happens outside of this prescribed convention. Side characters and sub plots are the points of greatest difference, and not coincidentally, are the havens for most of the comedy (in the “that’s funny” sense) in the comedy (in the genre sense). The conclusion is far less interesting to me than the hints and feints towards issues other than true love and marriage which crop up in one ancillary scene or inconsequential exchange then fade from the limelight. In the comedy genre, and in *The Roaring Girl* in particular, these hiccups are very often tied to moments of humor. It is for this reason that I intend here to focus not on what happens in this play, but rather what circulates within it.

A half page of banter in Dekker and Middleton’s play may contain half a dozen jokes in the form of quips, puns, references to common knowledge, or double entendres. However, these jokes expire and are often never referenced again after their initial airing. So what’s the point? Why is this in the play at all if it has no relationship to the action of the play? The answer that I would like to propose is that there is no point. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is its own point, a one off commentary on this or that issue not intended to be particularly significant where the play’s guiding action is concerned. Focusing on these humorous asides, however, changes the shape of a comedy. It becomes impossible, or at least redundant, to try and glean the ultimate meaning of a comedy from the core plot it shares with all its siblings. The trajectory of the central line diminishes in interest and the smaller points couched in jokes and humor expand.

.....

Dekker and Middleton themselves give a hint that this is what they see as important in the play when they say, in the epilogue, “A roaring girl, whose notes till now never were,/ Shall fill with laughter our vast theater:/ That’s all which I dare promise—tragic passion/ And such grave stuff, is this day out of fashion.” (Prologue, 9-12). They propose that the real core of the play is the character of Moll and the real purpose of its existence is to generate laughter. With this as emphasis the play quickly shifts from being understandable as a linear plot with a beginning, middle, and end but becomes something more amorphous with no discernible beginning and a lot of spines reaching out and touching as much as possible.

Reading the *Roaring Girl* from the vantage point of jokes places Moll Cutpurse in the center of the conceptual, if not narrative, action. Even though I have narrowed my field of intervention to be just about jokes and even mostly about Moll, the play is so rife with potentially humorous material that even this limited picture must be culled. Since I have already mentioned how Moll is constructed by gender theorists, I will focus on jokes that deal directly with her sexual identity. I do this to draw a stark comparison between what can be thought when jokes are the focus and what can be thought when the broader plot is paramount. These jokes, read closely and with a sensitivity to the possibility of them operating as *gestural statements*, make apparent how *The Roaring Girl* participated in cultural dialogues that are unintelligible when analytical focus is on an “autonomous reality”²³ of the play where plot and its climax are given the lion’s share of analytical attention. Addressing individual jokes as “snapshots” of larger cultural and

²³ An analytical method championed by Elinor Fuchs in her “Visit to a Small Planet”, it is only one among many lenses Fuchs addresses and it is geared toward teaching undergraduate students how to read a text. However, its presentation as a pedagogical model does point toward how we are trained to read for cohesive narrative from an early age.

historical motions makes apparent their relationships to the world that produced them, even when the play as a whole has little to say on this point. The joking banter between Moll, these other characters, and the jokes made by secondary characters which introduce Moll before she is even seen on stage all point toward a complex and occasionally contradictory system of behavior, sex trade economics, and clothing signifiers which itself points to a larger cultural debate about the gender roles and the negotiation of sexual exchange. From this severely limited frame Moll's actions and interactions with two characters spring to the fore: her flirtation with Laxton and her employment of a ne'er-do-well named Trapdoor.

Moll is, at many points, a vehicle for jokes either as the joke's teller or its butt. I want to suggest that her prominence in these ancillary scenes is what allows the play to humorously engage in a broader cultural debate about the relationships between sex, gender, and behavior (although my use of these terms is very modern and would not apply to the debate itself) and not solely as a direct challenge or re-inscription of dominant perceptions of appropriate, gendered behavior. Rather than solidify Moll's identity as woman-dressed-as-man, the jokes construct a completely different image. Many times throughout the play characters make comments on Moll's status as something other than the intelligible genders. Indeed before she is even seen on stage Sir Alexander paints a vivid picture of her as something beyond the ken of the typical early modern citizen.

“A scurvy woman,
On whom the passionate old man swore he doted
A creature, saith he, nature hath brought forth
To mock the sex of woman. It is a thing
One knows not how to name, her birth began
Ere she was all made. Tis woman more than man,

Man more than woman and, (which none can hap)
The sun gives her two shadows to one shape;
Nay more, let this strange thing walk, stand, or sit
No blazing star draws more eyes after it.

(2.125-133)²⁴

This passage is a sort of a bawdy riddle. The reference here to being born “Ere she was all made” calls upon an early modern English perception of human formation in the womb. Two constructions of fetus formation were circulating and interacting in the early seventeenth century, a Hippocratic “one sex” model and an Aristotelian, oppositional “two-sex” model. I discuss these two models more fully below since they both have an effect how we can see Moll Cutpurse, but in this section of the text it seems as though it is the Hippocratic model that is being referenced. In this perception of formation all children were supposedly male from conception and most of the way through pregnancy. Girls were the result of a change in utero that caused the penis to invert into the body and become a vagina. Often this shift was seen as the result of cold humors affecting the fetus. There are even stories of women who, when growing too hot through manly physical exertion, would regain their “manhood” (both literally and figuratively).²⁵ The “monster” of Sir Alexander’s description here is something caught between the identifiable and knowable sexes. She is not merely a woman who dresses like a man, that is a fairly easy concept. Sir Alexander’s Moll is a nameless horror that “mocks” nature and may not be worthy of life much less marriage to his son. Her monstrosity is also firmly linked to her genitalia, another trope drawn from the medical

²⁴ The traditional parenthetical citation for play text is (Act.scene.lines). However, this edition of *The Roaring Girl* is broken down by scene without reference to acts. As such, I will only cite the scene and relevant lines.

²⁵ Laqueur, Thomas Walter. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

logic of the day. Gilbert points out that even in the documented hermaphroditic births of the time, sex was assigned by what set of genitals was most prominent. From that day forward the child was deemed to be rigidly “man” or “woman” and was subject to all sex sensitive laws and social mores. What Sir Alexander describes is something else, a being equal parts man and woman which defies categorization. This specter of monstrous Moll haunts the stage until she is finally seen two scenes later.

Shortly after this diatribe against whatever Moll is, Sir Alexander reveals a subplot that will involve Moll closely. He hires a henchman, Trapdoor, to put himself in her service so that he might either kill her or find sufficient evidence for Alexander to force the constabulary to arrest her thereby nullifying his son’s marriage threat. At the end of the play’s third scene Trapdoor weasels his way into her service by being obsequious and flattering. Tellingly, Trapdoor does not praise her beauty or courage but instead her “...heroic spirit and masculine womanhood” (3.322-3). From this point on Trapdoor repeatedly addresses Moll or refers to him/her as neither definitively male or female: “What says my brave captain male and female?” (7.170, 273); “...Yonder comes Moll, my whorish master and mistress” (10. 60-1). Trapdoor even goes so far as to suggest that not only is Moll a sex unknowable, but that her double coding is a danger to Sebastian’s libido. “...your son and her moon will be in conjunction, if all almanacs lie not. Her black safeguard is turned into a deep slop, the holes of her upper body to button-holes, her waistcoat to a doublet, her placket to the ancient seat of a codpiece; and you shall take ‘em both with standing collars” (7.22-26). Here Trapdoor paints a metaphorical picture that draws on celestial parallels between man and woman (sun and moon) and then describes Moll as having changed garb into something even more

masculine (placket to codpiece, a garment designed to accentuate the male genitals) and intimates that this masculinity is sexually exciting for them both (“take ‘em both with standing collars” where the collar is simultaneously clothing and the state of their penises.)²⁶ The jokes that surround her construct her very explicitly as hermaphroditic. Where identifying as hermaphrodite in this day and age might constitute a fixing of biological identity, in the early modern era the hermaphroditic body was an ambiguous anomaly which needed to be normalized at the moment of birth. In the examination of the phenomenon represented by this play, Moll’s ambiguity is figured as a surfeit of genitalia. The balance of maleness and femaleness in Moll is such that she stubbornly refuses to be easily categorized by the medical and legal logics of early modern England. The need for this kind of fixity points toward an anxiety about the presentation of the self.

Early modern English culture has a reputation for being a moment of severe disruption in the sign systems which organized life in earlier centuries. A proliferation of goods flowing into and out of the city played havoc with a set of sartorial codes intended to restrict the consumption of various fabrics and materials so as to maintain a system of class identification. While the price of such luxury goods partially determined what classes could buy what things, a new class of wealthy citizens was emerging. Merchants, craftsmen, and others found financial success despite no blood ties to the gentry or nobility and in the position to purchase costly fabrics,²⁷ ornaments, and other signifiers of the titled classes. Jean Baudrillard famously identifies this era as the first shot across the

²⁶ This also builds on a recurring theme of linking garb to states of sexual identity. I discuss this in more detail below.

²⁷ For an excellent and detailed exploration of this economic expansion see *Earthly Necessities* by Keith Wrightson (2000); *The History of Money* by Jack Weatherford (1997); and *Rise of Merchant Empires* ed. James D. Tracy (1990)

bow of a shift which will eventually lead to a society of simulacra. He bases this assessment on the power of a nascent capitalist system to make available to the broader public those outward signs which previously identified royalty and the host of feudal offices which support them. If a low-born but wealthy merchant can buy purple velvet and gold ornaments, how is he to be identified for what he is?²⁸ This theoretical exploration of the disruption of signs and its implication is upheld by a goodly number of historians who study the period.²⁹ Fashion, self-representation, and identity were intertwined concerns to the population of early modern England. To dress in a certain way was to *be* what you presented. A violation of that was a serious challenge to an entire worldview, not just a harmless incongruity. This helps explain, I think, the significance of Moll's ambiguous identity and an explanation of the violence with which other characters react. She is a walking violation of the rules which hold the whole social order together.

Dekker and Middleton were not the only people exploring and testing the limits of the codes which ordered English social life. Let's never forget that Moll Cutpurse was based on a flesh and blood person who knowingly violated the sartorial/cultural codes. Mary Firth was not alone in this challenge either. In 1620 a pair of pamphlets were published titled "Hic Mulier" (mannish woman) and its counterpoint "Hace Vir" (womanish man). The first condemns women who dressed as men, a known if not popular or accepted practice at the time. The rebuttal accuses men of behaving like women forcing women to take on the role of men. This back and forth illustrates just

²⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. "Symbolic Exchange and Death." Poster, Mark. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected writings*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 123-51.

²⁹ Howard (2007); Wrightson (2000); Weatherford (1997); Dekker and van de Pol (1989); Gowing (1996); Meek (2000); Brown (2003)

how closely linked ideas of dress and behavior were linked. The newly tenuous relationship between how one presents one's self and who or what one *is* was obviously in circulation. However, these two commentaries focus on rigid categories: Man and Woman; Men's dress and Women's dress. Dekker and Middleton's contribution to the debate is to reject the categories through the character of Moll, rather than just challenge who deserves to occupy what set social position.

Obviously in a world where feudal systems of inheritance and rights still functioned determining whether or not a child was a boy or a girl had very serious implications. However, some sense of a sex in between the poles was not wholly unthinkable or *The Roaring Girl* could not have been written. It would be easy to divide the idea of biological sex from gender here, ala Butlerian constructions, and make the case that the early modern moment demanded fixed sexes but made room for variable gender, but to do so would impose too directly a product of the contemporary imagination onto the imaginations of a past population. Throughout this paper, I have and will continue to make use of the terms "gender" and "sex" because that is how I know to think and the terms and the concepts to which they are attached are useful in describing things to a contemporary audience. However, I want to resist the notion that the interplay between "sex" and "gender" explains the difficult positions of Moll Cutpurse.

It is entirely possible that the early modern English imagination made room for the possibility of perceiving what is now called "gender" as a system of signs which is not wholly reliant on biological distinction to determine identity. The obsession over which clothes could be worn by whom and the formalization of these attitudes in

sumptuary laws points toward knowledge of a sign system that does not require a medical examination to establish woman- or man-hood. The theater in particular, where boys in women's clothing stood in for women, signals how femininity could be read onto a non-female body. However, against this evidence is arrayed a host of counter examples which indicate that a clear distinction between a series of signs which indicate "gender" and a biological reality (or in the case of hermaphroditic birth, a medical decision) which determines sex are not truly separable. Gilbert explores this in the early modern medical world. She details how two systems of thought were in contradictory operation at the time. The Aristotelian ideal of man and woman operating as oppositional states of being worked alongside a Hippocratic perception of sex was understandable as a continuum. This latter system is one which makes legible gendered qualities like speech pitch and performed behavior as indicative of identity. The Aristotelian tradition, however, exerted itself as well allowing only limited adherence to the spectrum model of gender/sex identity. Gilbert points toward a handful of scholars who have pushed back against the idea of fluidity in gendered/sexed identity formation made popular by Thomas Laqueur in *Making Sex* (40-43). The Aristotelian model, they argue, troubles the appealing idea that gender and sex were fluid and performative and as Gilbert concludes her chapter: "To completely ignore the Aristotelian model is perilous. It is...far less appealing to most of our own contemporary predilections than the Hippocratic model but the point is that these traditions intersected and overlapped (41)."

Indeed, taking a closer look at the examples above of what might indicate a fluid, gendered construction of identity (sumptuary laws which tried to codify identity in clothing and boys playing women which point toward codes beyond genitals which

indicate gender) there is apparent an Aristotelian undertone which relies on a determinate sex to fix identity. Sumptuary laws, for their part, focused on fixing class as much, if not more, than fixing gender. Most references in the law were directed toward the categories of men and women as preexisting and fixed, detailing what was allowable in terms of fabric, embellishments, and accessories to each sex of a various rank. Cut and style were usually less expressly addressed indicating less a concern about what coded people as men or women than what coded them as knight, noble, freeman, etc. The function of the law, then, was more concerned with rank than sex taking sex to be already present and not a subject of negotiation through clothing signs. This, of course, did not stop people from taking it upon themselves to re-code. It does, however, indicate a perception at the legal level that sex was an immutable preexisting condition in establishing identity.

Boys playing women in the theater is similarly built on an Aristotelian oppositional two-sex model. Boys played women because women were not allowed to perform (although this was in flux at the time). While clothing indicators on young, masculine bodies may signal “woman” and expose how “woman” was indicated through clothing and behavior, the established boundaries of acceptable behavior and profession were similarly at play in precluding the possibility of a woman playing a woman. Biological sex is the limiting factor, after which variation and indication through non-biological codes can be explored. Taking my cue from Gilbert, I maintain the position that, while what is now understood as gender-through-performance was an active system, attempting to separate the model of a Hippocratic gender/sex spectrum from the absolutist Aristotelian two-sex model is a dangerous stance, and one which too easily explains a contradictory and complex system of identity formation which does not allow

the wholesale separation of biological and gendered identity through a post-Butlerian construction. Indeed it is the inability to separate what is between the legs from the performance of a self that produces the contradictory and complicated character of Moll in the first place.

Moll appears on stage fairly late for a character identified by the authors as the most significant. Her first entrance isn't until late in the third scene. In the edition from which I take my quotes she is described as "wearing a frieze jerkin and black safeguard" (3. 158). This costume constitutes a kind of visual joke. A frieze jerkin is a jacket worn by men, a safeguard is a skirt worn to protect women's clothing while riding. What is presented then, if these stage directions are accurate, is a contradictory costume. Given the convention of boys taking on the roles of women, a harsh juxtaposition of identifiers is potentially more effective in communicating difference than seeing a boy playing a woman dressed up as a man. A boy walking on to stage is sexed based on his costume. Here, however, the costume disrupts the convention by not allowing the audience to easily slot the boy's body into representing a male or female. The other implication is that this is a confused and contradictory character. Moll is not so easy to pin down as "woman dressing as man" because she rejects the complete switching of codes and instead exists with a foot in both pigeon holes. This visual juxtaposition sets up a series of jokes later in the scene which center on the inability of ancillary characters to settle her sex and the anxiety that produces:

.....
Laxton: She slips from one company to another like a fat eel between a Dutchman's fingers...

Mistress Gallipot: Some will not stich to say she's a man, and some say both man and woman.

Laxton: That were excellent: she might first cuckold the husband the make him do the same for the wife (3.187-92)
.....

In addition to being an excellent example of how humor constructs the multiply coded character of Moll, this exchange also provides an excellent example of joke construction on a textual level. Two characters interact where the first exchange is a set up for the final bon mot. This dialogue drives toward the witty cuckold joke, and after it is spoken the topic of conversation diverges. In this case after this joke Moll speaks, drawing attention away from Laxton and Mrs. Gallipot and even focusing on a different part of the stage (Laxton and Gallipot stand in front of whatever represents the tobacconist while Moll has moved on to a feather stand). The purpose here is not to make some grand or even particularly insightful commentary on how gender is constructed or the problems that accompany promiscuity in a feudal system of inheritance. What it does do is briefly expose the idea of a feudal system of inheritance to the crisis of unidentifiable sex and/or gender. Cuckoldry is a common theme in early modern comedies and female characters are notoriously (and exaggeratedly) unfaithful. The prospect of infidelity producing an heir which then gained control of a man's property was a source of anxiety and shame. Moll is doubly threatening because, with her double genitals, she contains the threat of not only getting someone's wife with an illegitimate child, but also bearing a bastard which proves the husband's own unfaithfulness. The exposure is brief but jarring; not a message but a theoretical quandary. It demands an acknowledgement of social norms and how heavily they demand fixity in biological identity while simultaneously revealing the fragility of that same system.³⁰ A woman/man is clearly a thinkable thought or this Moll Cutpurse would not ever be on stage. However, the law, science, and language of

³⁰ There is also a smaller joke embedded here, the reference to the Dutch and their perceived love of eels. There is much to be said here about xenophobic humor in early modern comedy, and I hope to someday, but since that element of the joke is only tangential to Moll and her disruption of how it is possible to think about sex I will leave it at an acknowledgement of its presence.

early modern England do not make provision for such a being.³¹ But that thinkable thought is in direct contradiction to what is thinkable about the act of sex and its product.

The issue of Moll's identity is tied to other concerns in this scene as well. What comes before her entrance is significant in that it establishes the locale as a London street where clothiers and tobacconists ply their trade. The clothing shop of Mr. and Mrs. Openwork sits next to the feather shop belonging to the Tiltyards and apothecary run by the Gallipots. Presumably the names of these characters are some play on their profession ("gallipot" being a term for an earthen vessel likely to be found in an apothecaries and openwork being a kind of fabric with openings or slashes. Tiltyard is a jousting arena so the connection there is more obscure and maybe lost as a joke). This setting brings into proximity various objects closely associated with the fashion of the time: tobacco, clothing, and accessories. The street that houses all these trades is not named, although Dekker and Middleton do make liberal use of their knowledge of London urban geography throughout the text, and often in the service of a joke of reference. The need to set these shops up right next to each other seems to be to allow for discussions and jokes that circulate around the need for fashionability and to bring two different classes into contact.

A cadre of gentlemen (or perhaps "gulls" is more appropriate since they are very poor but with pretensions to courtliness) descend on the Gallipots, Tiltyards, and Openworks and proceed to talk them up and beg tobacco samples without actually purchasing anything. Far from being annoyed by this loitering, however, the merchants cater to the gull's whims. In particular Mrs. Gallipot is very interested in Laxton who

³¹ "hermaphrodite" at this moment in English was a contested term that, as often as not, was used to suggest a violation of norms. Moll could be a hermaphrodite if she was biologically female and wearing men's clothes. The term could also be used to describe abnormal births like conjoined twins. (Gilbert)

ends up asking her for money. He brags to his companions about her crush on him and exploits that affection to get her to agree to 'loan' him ten angels (a gold coin worth half a pound). He later tries to tempt Moll with this money in order to get her to sleep with him. This ploy positions Moll to bring her biological ambiguity to bear on a series of interrelated issues that was becoming much more salient to the early modern English public, namely that point where sex and the ability to purchase that which was heretofore un-purchasable. Obviously one could buy sex well before this, but there is no indication in the play that Moll has ever made herself sexually available for money. Indeed there is more than a hint that even Laxton knows what he is planning on proposing to Moll is untoward. "...money is that aquafortis that eats into many a maiden head. Where the walls are flesh and blood I'll ever pierce through with a golden auger" (3.177-8). In this particularly graphic joke Laxton acknowledges that he does not see Moll as a prostitute but rather that money has the power to acquire anything, including someone's virginity and reputation given sufficient quantities. This faith in the power of gold seems almost anachronistic in its allusion to the late-capitalist notion that "everything has its price". It certainly brings emerging trends in trade into direct conversation with ongoing debates about sexual conduct.

When Moll does finally enter, she sidesteps the gulls and their offers of tobacco to visit the clothiers Mr. and Mrs. Openwork. Her stated goal is to buy a "shag ruff". A shag ruff is an odd and quite suggestive article of clothing here. A ruff is, of course, the iconic round-the-neck collar which was quite popular in the early 1600's. Shag, on the other hand, refers to cloth of silk or wool with a velour-like backing. It could also mean coarse or tangled hair. Here her desire to buy a shag ruff could also be read as a thinly

veiled allusion to a vagina given a ruff's shape and the double meaning of "shag". So here again Moll is associated with unmoored and ambiguous genitals. She is on her way to buy a vagina in an act oddly similar to what Laxton proposes earlier that same scene. The difference being that Moll intends to possess it and Laxton to use it. Either way, there is an incursion of commodification into the realm of sex and sexual identity.

While conversing with Mrs. Openwork Moll muddies the waters of her own identity beyond her garb. She accuses Mrs. Openwork of sexual double-dealing and threatens her. "You, goody Openwork, you that prick out a poor living/ And sews many a bawdy skin coat together, / Thou private pandress between shirt and smock/ I wish thee for a minute but a man..." (3.216-19, 244). Here it is behavioral rather than sartorial norms that Moll challenges. She wishes to deal with Mrs. Openwork violently, but is prevented from doing so because she seems only willing to physically confront men. This places her in the masculine sphere of behavior and social appropriateness. She confirms this later when she does challenge a passing gentleman for no observable reason except to fight a man (3.246). And when she challenges Laxton's construction of her as a primarily female sexual oddity by suggesting that she is perfectly capable of matching him in displays of masculinity: "Why do you speak this then? Do you think I cannot ride a stone-horse³² unless one lead him by the snaffle?" (3.244-5). In the end, however, she agrees to meet Laxton later in the day for what he expects will be a sexual encounter but ends up being quite different. Moll foreshadows Laxton's rude awakening while simultaneously criticizing the behavior of London women thusly: "... 'tis impossible to know what woman is thoroughly honest because she's ne're thoroughly tried. I am of the

³² A "stone horse" is an ungelded stallion. Riding one was a signal of masculinity in early modern England. Furthermore her use of the phrase "stone horse" echos the pun of Laxton's (lack-stone) name which signals that he is less than wholly male. (Notes, 397)

certain belief there are more queans in this town of their own making than of any man's provoking" (3.291-294). These jokes, taken as a series of gestural statements, challenge the notion that Moll is a crusader for any particular gendered cause. Rather she functions as a constantly shifting filter through which the assumptions and behaviors of men and women both can be exposed, observed, and critiqued.

Moll's resistance to easy gender definitions returns to the issue of clothing and self-representation in scene four. Here she is not resisting any untoward advances by gulls or picking fights with merchants or passersby. Rather, she is conducting her own business when she is approached by a tailor who, presumably, she had had dealings with. Unbeknownst to her, Sir Alexander is hiding in the scene and overhears the conversation. I quote this section at some length because it is rife with jokes about Moll's sexual identity and because it is an excellent example of a moment which has little to no bearing on the overall plot, but which nevertheless challenges any reading of Moll Cutpurse which ascribes to her a definite sex or gender.

.....
Tailor: Mistress Moll, Mistress Moll, So ho ho, so ho!

Moll: There boy, there boy. What, dost thou go a-hawking after me with a read clout on thy finger?

T: I forgot to take measure on you for your new breeches

Sir Alexander (aside): Hoyda, breeches! What, will he marry a monster with two trinkets? What age is this? If the wife go in breeches the man must wear long coats like a fool.

M: What fiddling's here? Would not the old pattern have served your turn?

T: You change the fashion—you say you'll have the great Dutch slop, Mistress Mary?

M: Why, sir, I say so still.

T: your breeches then will take up a yard more.

M: Well, pray look it be put in then.

T: It shall stand round and full, I warrant you.

M: Pray make 'em easy enough

T: I know my fault now, t'other was somewhat stiff between the legs, I'll make these open enough, I warrant you.

SA: Here's good gear towards! I have brought up my son to marry a Dutch slop, and a French doublet, a codpiece daughter.

(4.67-87)

The jokes here are fairly obvious. Trinkets are simultaneously sexual organs and accessories. "Standing round and full" and "stiff between the legs" hint at the presence of a penis. What is intriguing for me in this exchange is the willingness of the tailor to aid Moll in her violation of clothing code. He addresses her as 'mistress' yet speaks openly about making her breeches. Obviously Sir Alexander's concerns about dissimulation and monstrosity are not shared. Furthermore, money is here directly tied to Moll's ability to challenge an easy reading of her identity. The extra yard of fabric needed carries additional cost, one which Moll is willing to pay. Money, garb, and physiology are bound together by a series of jests which, rather than constructing a narrative of appropriateness, unmoors all three from expectation. Money becomes the ability to self-identify outside the prescribed norms, clothes lose any attachment to the truth of the being that wears them, and the makeup of the body becomes as mutable as a change of pants. This tripartite destabilization and examination of just how fragile are the signs of gender, however, are only accessible through the humor.

The climax of the conflict between Laxton and Moll comes in the fifth scene as a lengthy monologue delivered by Moll. In it she unequivocally identifies herself as a woman and champions women's position by calling Laxton out for his assumptions that women, or more accurately sex with women, is most readily and universally acquirable through fiscal transaction. This moment makes it difficult to read Moll as anything but a woman in men's clothing. That is, unless, one takes into consideration performance conventions of the 1600s. Moll would be presented through the body of a boy who here dresses in men's clothing and there in women's or mixed garb. In the moment of

performance, the gender of the character of Moll is necessarily multiply coded. Moments of Moll-character dressed as a man are the most politically dangerous for Moll within the plot of the play, but the least questionable for the actor. Conversely the actor is the most complex when dressed as a woman, but the character is in her most stable state. This results in a cognitive dissonance. The conventionally accepted contradiction of accepting a boy as a woman is queered as the audience is presented with a boy dressed as a boy claiming a, sometimes, feminine identity. It could be argued, in fact, that this monologue itself is a kind of meta-joke which operates on the paradox of seeing a male body dressed in male garb proclaiming a female sex identity in a venue where a man dressed as a woman supposedly reads as “woman”. However making this argument demands a more thorough investigation of theater going practice and performance convention than I have time to detail here. It will suffice to say that analyses of the text alone miss this potential humor and, instead, read this monologue as a defense of women and a condemnation of the practice of commodifying women as sexual objects. Instead, analyses must focus on the words printed on the page in which Moll indeed does claim a sex identity as woman which in turn makes a reading of this play as proto-feminist legitimate. Notably, this diatribe, when separated from the materiality of its performance, is free of obvious jokes. Perhaps this is another reason scholars like Ungerer and Baston make it the centerpiece of their analyses. It is, as text, transparent and free of the distortion and ambiguity that comes along with gestural statement jokes.

Although I have tried to be thorough in my examination of the genitalia jokes that surround Moll Cutpurse in this play, I have had to leave many issues out of my consideration. Jokes which explore the nature of changes in trade and economics, for

example, abound as Howard's treatment of the same text proves. Their intersections with issues of gender I have attempted to acknowledge, but a deeper exploration would undoubtedly help to nuance my own position. I only briefly brushed up against the implications of the bodies on stage and the materiality of the performance itself. Obviously the culturally accepted cross-dressing of young boys on stage to represent women adds a whole new dimension to thinking about gendered modes of self-representation and invites the body of scholarship which deals with objections to this very practice from puritans and their ilk to weigh in on the issue.

In the same vein, I have not even mentioned that this play was very ill received when it was first performed. This brings into question the efficacy of jokes. If this play was rejected as unfunny, does that preclude the possibility of seeing the jokes therein as gauges for a larger social debate? If people do not laugh because they do not recognize the position of the playwright, can any claims be made as to how they reflect the contradictions and conflicts of a society? The fact that this play found more success later as a published text rather than a performance only complicates the issue.³³ Without having access to audience response to particular jokes I have tried to work more with the joke's presence than its efficacy in order to draw attention to the importance of the joke as a marker of past thought which deserves the same attention as more transparent, serious statements of perception.

Conclusion

The prejudice of assuming "seriousness" is inextricably linked with "significance" to the exclusion of all other discursive registers, apart from being

³³ Marotti, Arthur F, Michael D. Bristol, ed. *Print, Manuscript, Performance*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000

ingrained in our daily speech, is academically documented³⁴. The selection of a passage from a comedy which is, at first textual glance, devoid of humor as the crux of an argument for identifying a “meaning” for that comedy only shows how poorly equipped we are to truly grapple with jokes from outside our own time. I have attempted to show here how particular attention paid to jokes with a sensitivity to their unique qualities of both the gesture and the statement demands a reexamination of both joke-heavy texts and the contemporary analysis that surround them. Jokes and joking practices have the potential to open up new ways of seeing how the past thought about itself. The relationship of a joke to its moment in time and its ability to condense and expose the complex of implicit pressures, anxieties, and considerations which colored its emergence is unique and worthy of more exploration. I chose jokes within the *Roaring Girl* which focused on sex/gender identity in order to highlight the vastly different results a joke-oriented analysis can yield. In so doing, I worry that this paper has taken a tone of dismissal toward analyses which focus purely on text and heavily on plot structure. If so, that was not my intent. Rather, it was my goal to offer an alternative method of tackling joke-heavy texts that come from past imaginations.

This effort is not helped by the fact that the joke resists attempts at isolation or definitive explanation. The *gestural statement* is my response to this methodological problem. By trying to acknowledge the joke’s adamant attachment to the moment of its own production and suggesting that its function may be expository and jokes themselves poly-vocal I move the joke away from its traditional use as a transparent modicum of evidence in the construction of a narrative of meaning. From this position, the joke is

³⁴ It is, perhaps, most concisely and neatly explored by Allon White in “The Dismal Sacred Word: Academic Language and the Social Reproduction of Seriousness.”

granted a voice which is not inherently in line with what can be taken from the text as a whole. As a *gestural statement* the joke is examined for its particularity with sensitivity to other jokes which share themes and content. Each one describes a particular position or conceit and needs close and direct attention to identify what that position is.

Understanding the specifics allows jokes in a series to operate in tandem (but not in concert) to describe a more complex picture of how humor makes sense of a complex debate which itself is rife with contradiction and paradox. In this particular case, it means that jokes made about or around the genital configuration of Moll Cutpurse can shift her character between being a woman dressed as a man, a being of indeterminate sex, or a perfect hermaphrodite with equal male and female genitals. This shifting biological identity allows her character to operate according to and against the proscribed, gendered expectations. As a creature of ever shifting biology and gender, Moll becomes a device through which still unresolved questions around gendered notions of propriety, economics, politics, etc. can be probed and stretched. Jokes are what make Moll's various sex and gender positions legible. Approaching the joke as a *gestural statement* is what allows it to be understandable as something other than a textual element which only adds frivolity to a coherent, mono-vocal plot. Jokes as *gestural statements* allow a joke heavy comedy to be a space of negotiation, contradiction, paradox, and exploration. A play full of jokes does not have to take a stand or project a meaning. It can be seen instead as a place where ideas and anxieties are played with, examined, stretched, and tested. The result is a text which takes no single position but explores a variety of them. Reading jokes as *gestural statements* shows the parameters of a cultural debate which, in the moment, is far from resolved.

The joke is notoriously slippery. Play texts which come down to us from that time are unreliable reflections of what was actually said on stage.³⁵ Who knows if the jokes that made it into the reprints and translations we work with now were ever uttered? But when a series of jokes around a particular topic or theme crop up in one place, it is worth looking into. Here the various ways Moll's gender identity is constructed through humor suggests that there was enough awareness and concern around the issue that it was recognizable, and therefore potentially funny, to a broad population. The way that these jokes get bound to other anxieties, like the rise of a nascent capitalist system of exchange and representation, also suggests that playwrights and their audiences perceived of these things as not wholly discrete concerns. Joke focused analysis allows for the text to do the work of making apparent the interrelatedness of known social/political/economic/etc trends rather than binding the text to a particular, unidirectional interpretation.

³⁵ Stranznicky, Marta. *The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England. From Play House to Printing House*. Ed. Douglas A. Brooks. 2000.

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