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‘I have no humour to marry’¹: Representation of Conjugal Life in *The Roaring Girl* and its Reflections on Our Present Society

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In literary criticism, early modern English drama is extensively examined for its treatment of gender roles. Often involving powerful female characters, the plays written in this period contributed to the redefinition of social norms concerning gender in contemporary society. According to Susan Zimmerman, a prominent scholar in the field of early modern culture, ‘as a primary locus for the interrogation of subjectivity, the English Renaissance theatre would also have served as a medium for the release of transgressive erotic impulses’ (Zimmerman, 2005: 34). Although this aspect of Renaissance writing has been the subject matter of many critical texts, most of these were concerned with the plays of a single author: William Shakespeare. As Zimmerman notes in the introduction to her analysis,

Studies of the English Renaissance theatre, including many postmodern ones, have traditionally foregrounded the dramatic canon of Shakespeare. Notwithstanding the importance of Shakespeare to his time and ours, such a skew, particularly in cultural criticism, is badly in need of correction. Neither the social function of the theatre nor the production of eroticism within it can be anatomized in terms of the oeuvre and practices of a single playwright. (*idem*, 5)

In support of Zimmerman’s claim, this paper considers one of the other plays written in this period, worth noticing especially for its focus on gender roles.

Written between 1607 and 1610, *The Roaring Girl* by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker contributes to the discussion concerning gender in several different ways. Dealing with the position of women in English society, the play has been argued to both reaffirm and transgress established social norms. Moll Cutpurse, the play’s protagonist, is based on a real historical person, Mary Frith, an eccentric figure of a disreputable character. While a lot of critical attention has been given to the theme of female cross-dressing in the play², there seems to be a proportional lack of interest in its treatment of the role of women in marital life. Although the protagonist’s preference for male attire has been perceived as the main source of

the play's transgressive character, the representation of conjugal life provides an essential comment on gender roles, which contributes to the overall message of the play. Rather than a relationship based on love and mutual respect, marriage is depicted as an economic transaction governed by the exchange of money and personal interest. In her steady refusal to marry, Moll is expressing the need for independence but also, and most importantly, her resistance to the corrupted values associated with marital life in the society around her. Worth noting is the fact that a lot of the principles concerning marriage in Middleton and Dekker's piece are still perceived as valid today. It is the aim of the present study to examine the representation of conjugal life within the play and to consider its reflections on our present society. Consequently, in dealing with plays such as *The Roaring Girl*, we might not only learn about the role of women in the early modern period, but also trace the development of this role until the present day, and in this way to learn about ourselves. For a society like ours, facing various kinds of crises, one way of constructing a positive future is by understanding and re-establishing the essential unit of humankind: the couple.

In seventeenth-century England, marriage was considered of central importance, especially for women. As Phyllis Rackin asserts, it was 'the paradigm that governed the lives and defined the identities of Renaissance women' (Rackin, 1987: 30). In this sense, marriage was seen as the ultimate goal of every woman's life. According to *The Lawe's Resolution of Women's Rights*, published in 1632 and designed to help the female population accept their role in society, 'all [women] are understood either married or to be married' (Edgar, 1632: sig. B3^v). While women were thus pressed into wedlock, the significance of marriage in Renaissance society is also testified by the presence of numerous advice manuals and conduct books dealing with marital obligations and proper household management. Such advice books were then very popular and widely read, especially among the middle classes. Mostly written

by men, they propagated patriarchal ideals of conjugal life as the norm and reaffirmed patriarchal values at the same time.

One notable advice book, *A Godly Form of Household Government* [...] (1621) written by John Dod and Robert Cleaver, promotes the notion of marriage as a patriarchal type of government, with the husband as its sovereign ruler and the wife as an obedient subject. According to this manual, the husband is to ‘love his wife as his own flesh’, ‘to govern her in all duties that properly concern the state of marriage’, and ‘to use her in all due benevolence, honestly, soberly, and chastely’ (Dod and Cleaver, 1621: sig. H2^v). The wife, on the other hand, was exposed to a necessary subjection in all the duties concerning marriage and household care. The institution of marriage was thus compared to that of a realm, with the male part being the government and the female its subject.

It bears keeping in mind, however, that while conduct books such as this *A Godly Form* were one thing, reality was another. In fact, society was much more heterogeneous already at that time, and that is precisely what Middleton and Dekker’s play reflects. While the publication of *The Roaring Girl* roughly coincides with that of Dod and Cleaver’s manual, the notion of the sacred union between a man and a woman in the play is represented in vastly different terms. As mentioned above, the meaning of marriage within the play is presented in favour of a more economic understanding of the relationship, where women often take the leading position instead of their male counterparts. The pressure for women to marry was in any case thriving, both in society as well as within the play. Within certain contexts, it can be felt even today.

Although the main protagonist of *The Roaring Girl* avoids marriage in any way possible, this kind of union nevertheless plays an important role in the play, both in Moll’s surroundings and in her own life. As Stephen Orgel argues, ‘the historical Mary Frith, but as Middleton and Dekker present her in *The Roaring Girl*, [...] is powerfully concerned with

matrimony, both as the object of wooing and as the enabling figure for other marriages' (Orgel, 2005: 15). In this sense, there seems to be a certain discrepancy between Moll's attitude to the institution of marriage in relation to herself, and with respect to other women around her, especially one of the maidens, Mary Fitz-Allard. Critics, including Jean Howard, note that 'seeing marriage as a straitjacket for herself, she [Moll] none the less promotes it for Mary Fitz-Allard and other women' (Howard, 2005: 37). In the course of the play, Moll becomes willingly involved in a strategic plan, the aim of which is to achieve the consent of a gentleman called Sir Alexander Wengrave for the marriage of his son Sebastian and Mary. The question of Moll's readiness in promoting marriage for others while rejecting it for herself has been the subject matter of several critical studies dealing with this play.

In her essay examining the role of women in the marketplace in *The Roaring Girl*, Jo E. Miller claims that 'one of the most troubling things about this play is that Moll does not at first glance seem overtly to reject her society's vision of marriage as a male-dominated hierarchy, but rather opts out of it only for herself' (Miller, 1990: 12). For Miller, rather than being a transgressive figure, Moll is used as an instrument to reaffirm precisely those values that she appears to refuse. In spite of her dismissal of Moll as a conventional character, Miller nevertheless perceives the play as transgressive in that it makes its audience aware of the objectionable conventions concerning marital life that Moll is helping to re-establish. Along the same lines, Jane Baston argues that 'Moll is fitting into the traditional requirements of marriage rather than seeking to change them' (Baston, 1997: 328). Indeed, in several places throughout the play, Moll does appear to be reinforcing social conventions regarding the role of women in conjugal life rather than trying to do away with them. An example of such an attitude can be found in her conversation with Sebastian in Scene 4, where she claims that 'a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey' (4.36-7). However, while such a statement seems to be in accordance with the patriarchal notion of

marriage, it does not yet mean that Moll identifies with it. Neither does it necessarily imply that she is pursuing the same kind of union for Sebastian and Mary.

Moll's seeming inconsistency in her approach to marriage might be resolved by the claim that there are, in fact, two kinds of marriages within the play: the ideal one and the actual one. While most of the married couples represent the debased, profit-driven, and ultimately unfaithful kind of union, what Moll seeks to achieve for Sebastian and Mary is precisely the opposite, uncorrupted, and ideal relationship, based on love and mutual respect. As Jennifer Higginbotham asserts,

Moll's objection to marriage is not to marriage *per se*, but the social reality of marital power relations in her world. Her speeches recognize the material constraints within which women function in her society, and Moll seeks to open up, rather than close down, options for other female characters (Higginbotham, 2013: 91).

Instead of reaffirming the convention that perceives marriage as a patriarchal union involving female subjugation, Moll promotes for her friends the kind of union in which both participants would be allowed to retain an equal share of power and independence. The wedlock of Sebastian and Mary is thus set into direct opposition to the already established marriages of the middle-classes couples within the play. According to Viviana Comensoli, 'the idealistic conclusion of the Sebastian-Mary action must be considered in relation to the dramatists' cynical treatment of marriage in the citizen-plot and its realistic treatment of conjugal malaise' (Comensoli, 1987: 251).

Therefore, if the play 'offers a biting critique of the institution of marriage', as Higginbotham insists (Higginbotham, 2013: 90), it is not to be searched for in the final union promoted by Moll, but rather within the lives of the couples already settled, whose affairs generate the play's subplot. It is precisely this deviation from the main marriage plot that distinguishes this particular play from other comedies of the early modern period. While *The Roaring Girl* departs from a similar situation to that in Shakespearian festive comedies – a young couple's pursuit of a happy marriage – in its moral implications it goes far beyond. It is

an exceptional play, precisely because it attempts to answer the question of what happens after the happy endings in Shakespeare's comedies. As Howard argues, 'Shakespearean comedy, of course, rarely moved beyond the portrayal of courtship to engage the actuality of marriage' (Howard, 2005a: 136). In this sense, *The Roaring Girl* starts where the conventional comedy ends: in the life after the wedding, which might not always be the exact image of happiness.

As a typical city comedy, *The Roaring Girl* is thus much more realistic than most Shakespearean plays. In contrast to them, this play portrays a broad range of characters encompassing the whole social spectrum. In its focus on the lives of the ordinary citizens and their daily activities, the play employs what Ben Jonson has termed the 'deeds and language such as men do use',³ as opposed to the dramatic adventures and elevated language of Shakespeare's characters. Its highly satirical tone, characteristic of city comedies, also contributes to the gender debate. In their portrayal of the lives of the merchant families, Middleton and Dekker depict the dissatisfactions of conjugal life that were considered taboo in most Elizabethan drama.

The subplot dealing with the merchant-class families commences in the 'marketplace scene' (scene 3), where the corrupted nature of conjugal life becomes exposed through the couples' moral failings in their behavior outside of marriage. While marital life is pushed into the background in this scene, new relations are uncovered between the married women and the single gallants, which reflect on the marital relations themselves. It is precisely in the economic environment of the market, that the commercial nature of human relationships among the characters is revealed. As Valerie Forman observes, 'at the same time that the marriage plot recedes, the merchant/gallant plots come into the foreground and the play negotiates social relations, and especially relations of desire, through the circulation of money and commodities' (Forman, 2001: 1531–2). In this sense, the market becomes a space of both

economic and sexual transactions. While the citizens' wives offer their goods to the passing gallants, their own bodies are on display for potential exchange. In her essay investigating the importance of space in the play, Kelly Stage observes, 'the play's intertwined dynamic of commercial practices and private practices', arguing that 'early Stuart popular literature often conflated the shopwoman's crying of her goods with the advertisement of her own body' (Stage, 2009: 420).

The marketplace run by the merchants' wives is thus far from neutral ground. The appearance of the wives in the public space of the market reflects the changing role of women in society. While women were historically confined to the domestic space of the household, the early modern period witnesses a general release of this stereotype. Within the play, the public and private spaces become intertwined. When their own house is turned into a shop, the wives find themselves somewhere in between the domestic and the public zone. Not only does the play observe these married women in public, it also assigns them a role in the business sphere that was often perceived as an exclusively male space. The merchant's wife thus becomes a potential threat to patriarchy precisely for her ability to move in the economic sphere and to be even more successful there than her husband. The fact that the wife can operate to some extent independently of her husband's income creates tension in the married couple.

This tension is further enhanced by the sexual implications of the woman's exposure to the public gaze. According to Mario DiGangi, the marketplace is 'an arena, much like the public theatre itself, in which female visibility could easily translate as sexual availability' (DiGangi, 2003: 147). This assumption is confirmed when the crooked relationships between the gallants and the wives become exposed. The marketplace within the play thus becomes the stage for marital infidelity and corruption.

Public visibility and sexuality in the marketplace go hand in hand with the economic status this setting offers. Just as the wife becomes economically independent from her husband, her erotic desire starts to develop on parallel lines. For a self-sufficient woman, marriage, as represented in the merchant subplot of *The Roaring Girl*, becomes highly frustrating and as a result she starts to search for other sources of fulfilment. Female economic independence was thus perceived as troublesome. Howard accurately describes this implication when she argues that the marriages in the play ‘are not depicted as erotically fulfilling. There is the unmistakable implication that, like female play-goers, the publicly visible, economically useful urban wives were experienced by men as threatening figures’ (Howard, 2005a: 137–8).

Already from the very beginning of the marketplace scene, economic metaphors are used for the expression of social relations. In this way, sexual innuendo in the dialogue becomes intertwined with business-related language, and the exchange of goods soon turns into a potential transaction of human bodies. While marriage has the function of a mere economic partnership, the citizens’ wives feel the need to pursue their sexual fulfilment outside of wedlock. This is precisely where the play offers its critique of the contemporary conditions of conjugal life. A union that is supposed to be based on loyalty and chastity will not, in this case, prevent the married women from committing adultery. This is obvious already from Mistress Openwork’s opening line: ‘Gentlemen, what is’t you lack? What is’t you buy? See fine bands and ruffs, fine lawns, fine cambrics. What is’t you lack, gentlemen, what is’t you buy?’ (3.1–3). Always ready to provide anything the gallants might need, Mistress Openwork would not hesitate to offer her own body if it was in the gentlemen’s demand, something they might be lacking. According to DiGangi, ‘when she introduces the market metaphor of “opening shop” to describe her attempts to “take” her husband sexually, Mistress Openwork blurs the distinction between the “chaste wife” and the “whore”’

(DiGangi, 2003: 150). What follows her initial cry for attention is a conversation held between the two men she was addressing, full of double entendre, the function of which is to reveal the erotic subtext of the social relations operative in the market, as well as to make the audience laugh.

Another example of what Higginbotham calls an ‘unruly woman’ is Mistress Gallipot. In her attempt to seduce one of the gentlemen, she herself becomes an object of the economic transaction, the purpose of which is the acquisition of money rather than erotic fulfilment. Naively believing herself to be an object of Laxton’s sexual desire, Mistress Gallipot is in fact turned into a mere tool in his strategic plan to obtain her husband’s money. Laxton’s manipulation of Mistress Gallipot is disclosed in one of his confessional asides: ‘I put her off with opportunity still: by this light I hate her, but for means to keep me in fashion with gallants: for what I take from her, I spend upon other wenches, bear her in hand still; she has wit enough to rob her husband, and I ways enough to consume the money’ (3.77–81).

In order to preserve Mistress Gallipot in her role of one who obtains money, Laxton constantly delays the sexual satisfaction that is promised in their economic exchange. Instead of expressing his gratitude for Mistress Gallipot’s service, the gallant uses her husband’s money in order to draw the attention of other women. With his belief that ‘money is that aqua fortis that eats into many a maidenhead’ (3.176–7), Laxton hopes to use Master Gallipot’s money in order to buy Moll herself. However, in his presupposition that every woman can be bought with enough money, Laxton critically underestimates Moll’s moral principles, which only results in driving her further away from himself. Moll’s refusal to participate in the economic transaction of bodies testifies to her chastity and moral purity, but also results in her avoidance of marriage. As Miller asserts, Moll’s ‘unwillingness to enter the market of exchange must effectively exclude her from the celebration of exchange that constitutes marriage as her society knows it’ (Miller, 1990: 22).

In the market scene, as well as in the rest of the play, the character of Moll is constantly contrasted with the married women. Since marriage is considered a social norm, Moll's deviation from this norm – or rather, her refusal of this norm – is perceived as one of the sources of her presumed madness. In this sense, marriage serves as a standard for women to be judged against. As *The Lawe's Resolution of Women's Rights* explains, a woman can either be already married or not yet so. According to Adrienne Eastwood, 'the social category of singleness has, until recently, been largely ignored by both literary critics and historians, who tended to group unmarried women with widows' (Eastwood, 2004: 10). It might be for this reason that Moll's refusal to be married is met with little or no understanding. Even if it were not for the practice of cross-dressing, society might still condemn her simply for the fact of her desired singleness. As Eastwood argues, 'her unmarried status allows her freedom, but not without the negative consequence of being considered a whore or a "monster" by some of the characters in the play' (*ibidem*).

Even though it is always Moll who is, because of her unconventional behaviour, dismissed by her surroundings as a whore, she is the one who steadily resists all kinds of temptation and corruption of character. Since the married women in the play could hardly aspire to become models of chastity, this position is instead taken up by Moll. Although she is not bound by any legal union as the others are, she nevertheless remains true to her moral principles. Whereas the middle-class women in the play are willing to sell their bodies for any amount of money, Moll will not be bought. In this way, Moll's unmarried status is always compared to the marital life considered the norm. As a result, there is a reversal of values between what is perceived as normal and what deviates from this norm. The presumably happy conjugal life therefore becomes associated with infidelity, immorality, and corruption, whereas the transgressive figure of Moll stands for righteousness, chastity, and virtue. The monstrous within the play is thus associated with the normative rather than with the queer.

Moll's independence is contrasted with the unhappy side of marriage, and her single status becomes the target for the married couples to express their anxieties stemming from the degraded nature of their own relationships.

More than four hundred years have gone by since the first publication of *The Roaring Girl*, and yet the figure of Moll Cutpurse might still serve as an example of a successful independent woman in social life. Although the position of women in society has advanced considerably since the English Renaissance, there are certain points in which the development appears to stagnate. It is especially the role of women in marital life that remains fairly conservative. The pressure for women to marry is prevalent in many cultures, and although female independence is acknowledged and accepted as a possibility, it is still often frowned upon, whereas marriage tends to be seen as the ultimate goal of every woman's life. Take, for example, a recent popular comedy movie conveniently entitled *Man Up* (2015)⁴, which tells the story of a single thirty-four-year-old woman, who is pressed by her surroundings to find herself a husband. While the movie never questions the desirability of marriage for that particular woman, the audience is manipulated into the belief that wedlock is the only possible solution for her (whereas the unmarried status of the man she eventually finds is seen as unproblematic).

Other aspects of *The Roaring Girl* also find reflection in today's world. Middleton and Dekker wisely chose to stage some of the most revealing scenes of the play in a marketplace – it is an environment where economic transactions took place, but also the kind of public sphere where women start to build their independence. Since then, the distribution of men and women in public spaces has changed considerably. Although complete equality in this area is still far in the future (sometimes even for understandable reasons), the presence of women in the public sphere is nowadays mostly unrestricted. If the marketplace and the public theatre were among the first spaces to open up to female visitors, the range of places to frequent is

incomparably wider today. And yet, one can hardly speak of complete freedom of movement for women. The threat of assault or violation is so powerful in some places that many women feel discouraged from venturing out. These conditions are, of course, vastly different from those in which Moll had to fight for her independence, and yet her free movement is something to be envied by women both then and now.

Another instance of the persistent quality of *The Roaring Girl's* portrayal of gender roles lies in the economic nature of the conjugal bond itself. It is no secret that marriage was, and continues to be, a way of obtaining economic security. Similarly, it was also often used as a means of social mobility and to the acquisition of property. The link between marriage and money is so firmly embedded in our thinking that we rarely deem the union successful if it does not involve material improvement for the woman. If the improvement is too substantial, on the other hand, the bride is easily dismissed as a gold-digger. In this sense, Laxton's hypothesis that 'money is that aqua fortis that eats into many a maidenhead' is not far from the general premise held about women entering marriage even today.

In *The Roaring Girl*, we see several marriages that could be described as unsuccessful from this point of view. As soon as the woman becomes economically self-sufficient, the authority of her male counterpart starts to disintegrate. Such marriage, as Howard points out, is no longer erotically fulfilling. There is the straightforward implication that only an economically successful man might have done for an attractive husband. To argue that such an approach is predominant today would be, of course, a serious overstatement. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to come across this perspective in certain contexts. Though it might not be appropriate to quote from an American rap song here, the environment surrounding this type of music would be precisely such a context, to name but one. The discrepancy in economic prosperity between men and women is thus still a hot topic when it comes to marriages.

This goes hand in hand with the way women are perceived in the economic sphere. Female independence and individual ambition are still considered a threat, especially in a conjugal bond. For the man, losing the status of breadwinner in the family is often felt to be a loss of masculinity itself, while ambitious women are perceived as overtly masculine. A suitable example is the case of Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, who is often caricatured in popular media as a man due to her self-confidence and powerful initiative. However, even worse than being an ambitious wife is to be a resourceful single woman. Therefore, to be Moll Cutpurse today would not necessarily mean to wear men's clothes, but to behave as an independent economic person, or in other words, as a man. And such behaviour might be considered just as transgressive as Moll's cross-dressing was.

When comparing the situation concerning gender roles in marital life between the early modern period and today, one needs to keep in mind the extent of this subject as well as the impossibility of encompassing it as a whole in a study of this scope. Also, relying on a text such as *The Roaring Girl* as a single primary source may potentially lead to serious misconceptions and overgeneralizations. Nevertheless, Europe is said to be in a state of crisis. In order for us to be able to face the present challenges, we need to make sure our society is transparent and can rely on its constituents. As a central unit of society, the married couple represents stability. For this reason, it needs to be a union in which both components feel comfortable, secure, and self-assured. To what extent this is the case today is debatable and highly individual. In any case, Moll's decision to avoid marriage as she saw it around her continues to be understandable and inspiring.

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¹ Middleton, Thomas and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl or Moll Cutpurse* (1611), in *The Roaring Girl and Other City Comedies*. Ed. James Knowles. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2001), p. 225–310: 4.35. All scene- and line-numbering come from this edition.

² Cross-dressing as an instrument of transgression was the subject matter of many critical studies dealing with *The Roaring Girl*, including the following texts: Cressy, 1996; Krantz, 1995; Mikalachki, 1994; and Bierman, 2013.

³ Jonson, Ben, *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), in Knowles, ed. *The Roaring Girl* [...], p. 141–224: 133.21.

⁴ The movie reaches its climax when the potential husband advises the main protagonist that if she wants to find someone to love her, she needs to 'man up' – a rather interesting phrase, which proves the fact that our everyday language is still to a large extent gendered.