

Gender Benders Take the Stage: Cross-Dressing in Early Modern Drama

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *I wrote this paper for Prof. Gina Bloom's break-neck English 150 class Fall quarter of my Junior year. After an intense quarter of early modern drama, I had a two-paragraph prompt for the final paper staring me down. "Consider gender transgression in two plays." While all Elizabethan-Jacobean drama had the potential to be gender transgressive (the idea of a boy playing Juliet just has never computed for me), this prompt asked for much more. I chose my two and, upon finding quotes, I really started to worry... "What in the world am I going to write about?" I looked again. And again. And then I realized—gender transgression, while present in both, was not used at all the same. And that is the beauty of it, I think. Not all the plays are the same just because they fall into that mysterious and all-encompassing word, "genre." In my essay, I hope to show that each play, indeed all works, is an individual and must be considered as such to truly appreciate all they have to say.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *This paper was written for my English 150 class on early modern drama, which focuses on how dramatic texts written by contemporaries of Shakespeare treat the topics of gender and sexuality. The plays are particularly worthy of study from a feminist perspective because their female roles were originally performed by boy actors, leading scholars to wonder whether these fairly unique performance conditions in any way shape the plays' treatment of gender. To what extent do these plays challenge the idea that women are inferior to men? What, if anything, makes women different from men? As one of the options for their final paper assignment, students explore questions of gender difference and hierarchy in two plays studied during the quarter. Sarah's paper is commendable for the way it takes the methodology of comparative analysis seriously. Her close readings move past the generic similarities between the plays under examination—both of which are comedies—to probe crucial differences between them.*

—Gina Bloom, English Department

“[T]is woman more than man, / Man more than woman” (Middleton and Dekker 1.2.130-131). Sir Alexander’s anxiety over appearance, and what it has to say about a person’s definable gender, is a palpable theme in many an early modern cross-dressing play. The ability to label a person a man or a woman was vital in early modern hierarchies, and to confuse or muddle such definitions necessarily led to societal anxiety. Jonson’s *Epicoene* and Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* both deal with cross-dressing and the apprehension it caused. The plays, through their cross-dressing titular characters, offer an interesting look at what Jean Howard would call “sites of resistance” to patriarchal authority. Yet while both use a similar motif of gender transgression, we cannot lump them together and call them the same—we must consider them as *individual* plays and *individual* “sites of resistance.” While both plays challenge patriarchy through cross-dressing, the extent to which they are truly transgressive differs in the handling and utilization of it: though *Epicoene*’s cross-dressing undermines one patriarch, Moll’s has the potential to challenge the entire institution.

Before discussing how these plays are different, we first must consider the main, if not obvious, ways they are similar: Without looking too deeply into *Epicoene* and *The Roaring Girl*, it is easy to see that both are concerned with cross-dressing, using the theme to facilitate the plot. In *Epicoene*, it is revealed only at the end with Dauphine pulling off *Epicoene*’s peruke and declaring to Morose “you have married a boy,” which grants wishes twofold: it enables Morose to wriggle out of a mishap marriage, and empowers Dauphine to extort his inheritance (Jonson 5.4.119). Dauphine uses *Epicoene*’s cross-dressing to undermine what we might term Morose’s patriarchy: his authority over his house and wealth. Thematically similar, the *Roaring Girl*, Moll, cross-dresses, though she does so throughout. Because she walks about in men’s clothing, “Some will not stick to say she’s a man/And some both man and woman” (Middleton and Dekker 2.1.222-223). Thanks to the uncertainty of what lies beneath her clothes, Moll moves between the two social constructs of man and woman, and this, though more subtly, also chips away at patriarchal authority. In donning men’s clothing for herself, Moll sidesteps men who would have her submit. Again, if we don’t look too closely, the plays seem very similar; however, lobbing them together would be a grievous thing for us to do. Cross-dressing and using it to counteract patriarchy, in a broad sense, link these two plays, but they

still maintain their individuality, being very different “sites” at their cores.

The plays begin to diverge from one another when we ask the important question of why the titular characters are cross-dressing. This seemingly simple question must, however, be broken down into two parts: first, who is in control of the cross-dressing, and, second, why is the character cross-dressing at all? Though the play’s namesake and main plot device, Epicoene, remains a very understated character, she is dominated by the mastermind, Dauphine. Early in the play, we learn that Dauphine is behind the miraculously quiet woman, having “lodged / [her]...o’ purpose...to be put upon my uncle” (2.4.43-44). He is the only one at this point who knows the true sex of Epicoene, and, not even trusting his fellow Wits with the truth, attempts to reinforce Epicoene’s identity as female through pregnancy imagery. In his speech revealing some of his ploy, Dauphine uses such key words as “maturing,” “ample,” and “miscarried” in describing his plan (2.4.41, 48-49). Dauphine has been nurturing this plan, letting it mature for “four months”; by now it is showing, “ample” with growing potential, but because of Truewit’s harassment of Morose, it might be “miscarried” (2.4.42). It isn’t enough that Epicoene looks like a woman—Dauphine must subliminally support her womanhood himself by alluding to the most important thing a woman could do. By doing this, he keeps himself, through language, in control of the ploy, by having the power to either reinforce or, as happens later, deconstruct Epicoene’s gender. Epicoene’s cross-dressing is a means to an end for *Dauphine*. The “gentleman’s son” cross-dresses as a woman for pay; Dauphine employs him to negate his uncle’s power and reclaim his inheritance (5.4.220). Who is benefitting from the cross-dressing is underscored by the lack of Epicoene’s presence after the reveal. Aside from two quick lines from Otter then Cutbeard, it is the Three Wits who dominate the scene. It is as if, now that Epicoene’s role is finished and there is no more need for him, he has simply disappeared. The only recognition of him is when Truewit, in the last lines, brings attention back to him, seemingly restoring his male-status by suggesting to the Collegiates he “will make a good visitant/within this twelvemonth” (5.4.268-269). Epicoene’s gender is decided by the Wits, and his cross-dressing was conceived by and solely benefits Dauphine. He assumes a passive role, his person a puppet, his cross-dressing a device.

Moll uses and controls her cross-dressing very differently. Opposite of the submissive Epicoene, Moll is her own woman, going where she

wants when she wants and doing whatsoever it pleases her to do. Whereas Epicoene's cross-dressing was used for trickery, Moll asserts she isn't trying to deceive anyone. No one is pulling the strings behind her; the only reason she engages in Sebastian's plot is because she "pitied [Mary] for name's sake, that a Moll/Should be so crossed in love" (4.1.68-69). Sebastian, in a way, mirrors Dauphine: he uses cross-dressing to play a trick on the patriarch of his family so as to get what was promised him before the events of the play. However, Sebastian is not nearly so much an omnipotent mastermind as Dauphine, and Moll is no servile pawn. She engages in the plot of her own free will, just as she cross-dresses because it suits her. As Sebastian claims to his father, Moll is honest:

...Here's her worst,
Sh'has a bold spirit that mingles with mankind,
But nothing else comes near it: and oftentimes
Through her apparel somewhat shames her birth;
But she is loose in nothing but in mirth:
Would all Molls were no worse. (2.2.182-187)

Moll's cross-dressing does not seem, in Sebastian's eyes, all that transgressive, and it certainly doesn't seem as if she's using it as a means to an end. Though her "apparel" allows her to mingle "with mankind," that does not mean she is a "worse" person for it. Indeed, "nothing else comes near" her in the way of men; she has male friends, such as the gallants, but not lovers. Her cross-dressing seems a non-issue to Sebastian, who claims that her doing so only "*somewhat* shames her birth." The rhyme of "birth" and "mirth" calls attention to Sebastian's point to his father: that Moll isn't "loose" because of her cross-dressing; in fact she is nearer a role model for "all Molls." As Sebastian insists, she is honest, and therefore her cross-dressing isn't a trick. He is playing a much more active role in the deception, feigning his emotions rather than Moll's cross-dressing. It is in this way that Moll most differs from Epicoene; while the latter is pliable, passive, Moll is firm, set in her ways—it is Sebastian who must do the work for his plot to succeed. It is in this different use of cross-dressing that we see the plays' transgressive natures; both "sites" are combating a form of patriarchy, but, when we look closely, they are going about it in markedly different ways.

Patriarchy stands as a formidable opponent to the characters of both plays, yet the ways in which cross-dressing is utilized to combat this

authority shows that the plays are not equally transgressive. In *Epicoene*, the cross-dressing is the hammer stroke in Dauphine's plot to unseat Morose from the position of power. In controlling the series of events in the play, Dauphine undermines Morose, literally making off with his uncle's "whole estate" on top of demoting the former patriarch to a "ward" (5.4.184-185). Yet, while the cross-dressing is undermining, it is not wholly transgressive. To illustrate this, we can look to the characters' preoccupation with the horrors of married life. Just as Truewit forewarned Morose, "sir, oh, how she'll torture you, and take pleasure / i' your torments," Epicoene, upon marriage, becomes what Morose most loathes: chatty (2.2.100-101). Epicoene's sudden transformation doesn't seem transgressive for two reasons: one, it was expected. As Truewit's long-winded speech explains, it is presumed all women will become "tyrants," "a parrot," and certainly won't be "chaste" (2.2.78, 82, 36). If she is transforming into what the men expect her to become, then she isn't transgressing upon a norm; she is becoming it. Second, her sudden change is all part of Dauphine's master plan. Epicoene, woman or boy, is below Dauphine and therefore taking orders from, what is for him/her, another superior in the gender hierarchy. Epicoene's cross-dressing does not have any large social connotation attached to it; its purpose towards patriarchy is only to uproot one and plant another. By the cross-dressing being overt and explicitly used in the unseating plot, its transgressive wings are clipped, becoming a device rather than a force.

The Roaring Girl's cross-dressing is almost opposite in these regards; Moll, as discussed previously, cross-dresses of her own accord and participates in Sebastian's plot because she feels like it. She is her own master, and this, immediately, is infinitely more transgressive than Epicoene. As Moll tells Sebastian, when asked about their marrying,

...I have no humour to marry, I love to lie o'both sides o'th'bed myself...a wife you know ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll ne'er go about it...I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head, and has a worse i'th'place. (2.2.38-48)

Marriage, in Moll's eyes, is much "worse" than staying as she is. Perhaps her most transgressive statement is that she is "man enough for a woman," in that she doesn't need a man to tell her what to do or to

protect her. She could even be implying that she's "man enough" to attract "a woman." She likes her independence, getting "both sides o'th'bed" to herself, not being beholden to the "worse" head: a husband. In a Puritan England, where marriage was paramount, being a single woman was flirting with transgression, especially when firmly wanting to "ne'er go about" getting married. Not only does Moll see it as undesirable, to her it seems violent. By equating decapitation, the "chopping" of a "head" from the body, with virgins losing their "maiden...head," she underscores the bloody work marriage first requires. This "changing" of heads is unsuitable and undesirable to Moll, and therefore she chooses to stay out of the most integral parts of gender hierarchy. Moll stays true to this ideal of the single life by refusing suitors and lovers, such as Laxton. "I scorn to prostitute myself to a man, / I that can prostitute a man to me," she says in response to Laxton's advances (3.1.114-115). Here she underscores another layer of her transgression: by staying chaste and not taking lovers, she makes her critics unable to solidly label her a "prostitute." She is then doubly transgressive; she wears men's clothing when truly being a woman, and though she does this, she is a good woman, not a "prostitute." By standing outside of definable labels, Moll is trying to put herself outside patriarchal reach. Subject to no man, she causes great anxiety in the lead patriarchal figure, Sir Alexander. He describes Moll as:

...a thing
One knows not how to name...
...'tis woman more than man,
Man more than woman, and...
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. (1.2.128-135)

For Sir Alexander, it's not just what Moll means for his son's future, but patriarchy's whole societal construct. He is very obviously threatened by her, calling her twice a "thing" since he does not know if she be "more" a man or a woman. Because he cannot "name" her by the comfortable hierarchal understanding of man or woman, he describes her as an ill omen, a "thing" with "two shadows" that bodes worse than a "blazing star." Were Moll not transgressing, Sir Alexander would most likely not see a reason to spend so much time on such a "thing" as her. That Moll wants to be taken seriously is threatening to the established social order;

Epicoene's transgression was a ruse, but Moll's is her identity. A woman who is good, honest, and true, yet is still transgressing, is markedly more threatening than a cross-dresser for hire. Moll wishes to remain as she is, to *continue* defying the patriarchal authority and be whoever she wants to be, not what they want to define her as. In this way, while Epicoene's cross-dressing did undermine one patriarch, Moll's bears the potential to undermine the structure itself.

In drawing apart these plays, we can come to see the benefit of regarding them as distinct "sites" rather than lobbing them together under the encompassing word *genre*. They are taking the common theme of cross-dressing and running with it down very different paths. Their main differences, their titular characters' reasons for cross-dressing, and their undermining of patriarchy make them unique "sites." To force them together into one cohesive entity would be a mistake; it would be to nullify the poignant arguments and devalue their social commentary. In the same way, cultural hegemony, tied very intimately to patriarchy, would very much like to lump threats together to make the opposition seem less dangerous; to stereotype it, to normalize it is to take away its fangs, and to let it do so is detrimental to our understanding of the plays' overall social criticism. They are individuals, they have their own things to say, and we must pay careful attention to each.

Works Cited

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