
Controversy and the Single Woman in *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Roaring Girl*

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The early reign of James I was marked by intensifying ideological conflicts over the nature and social role of women. For centuries, philosophers and theologians had debated whether women were innately good or evil; however, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, debates about women grew more vigorous.¹ This period is notable for a proliferation of cultural texts (e.g., pamphlets, plays, and conduct books) concerning women, as well as the increasing participation of women in both the production and consumption of such materials. Suzanne W. Hull has documented “a sudden and dramatic increase in the number of books directed to women” in the late sixteenth century, the corresponding popularization of plays as entertainment, and the growth of the genre of prose fiction (127-128). Among these books, several had to do with controversies over women,² and at least four titles were apparently written by women.³ Hull’s research indicates that the burgeoning print culture took female perspectives and concerns into account—perhaps more than some scholars have surmised. Indeed, patterns in the ways in which women are represented in pamphlets and plays indicate that during this period new ideologies about women were constructed and old beliefs challenged.

In 1615, Joseph Swetnam published a diatribe, *The arraignment of lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women*, that was contested by pamphleteers using female pseudonyms.⁴ Valerie Wayne has argued that regardless of the gender(s) of their authors, the pseudonymous works that challenge Swetnam “enabled alliances with and among women, and textual disruptions of gender offered some resistance to the polarizing effects of the controversy as a whole” (237). These texts had the effect of interrupting the sweep of misogynous discourse, and of complicating the controversy over gender roles and the proper conduct of women. One such pamphlet, *Ester hath Hang’d Haman* (1617), was written by one “Ester Sowernam,” whose name Wayne has suggested is a pseudonym: “a sour imitation of ‘Swetnam’” (222). The title page of this pamphlet describes its author as “neither Maide, Wife

nor Widdowe, yet really all, and therefore experienced to defend all.”⁵ This riddle positions the author outside of all of the accepted social roles available to women, indicating that she is a single woman.

In choosing to write from the perspective of an unmarried woman, the author of *Ester hath Hang'd Haman* is ironically invoking Swetnam's own characterization of “unmarried wantons” as “neither maidens, widows or wives” (E2), making the position of the single woman a central and contested site, and complicating the understanding of the status of single women in early modern culture. The preponderance of research on unmarried women in early modern England has shown that social categorization functioned to deny single women agency⁶—especially if they had never married; however, the representation of single women in literature remained a site of ideological contention. Diane Purkiss emphasizes the importance of “Sovernam's” claim of “experience,” arguing that the unmarried woman “is the voice of social and sexual experience, the voice of that knowingness which in Swetnam both provides and threatens male pleasures” (86). Within the context of Purkiss' larger argument, “Sovernam” is deployed performatively as the figure of a disorderly woman who provides a particular construction of femininity against which Swetnam's brand of masculinity (and by extension patriarchy) defines itself (82). Furthermore, knowledge, both sexual and otherwise, of alternatives to compulsory heteronormativity and male-dominated households gives the “unruly” single woman a unique license for social and political criticism (Purkiss 84). The single woman, then, holds a contradictory position in early modern society, at once threatening and enabling the expanding patriarchal ideologies that rely upon misogyny.⁷ By the term “patriarchal ideologies” I point to social systems, such as legal and religious institutions and their related discourses, that helped to establish and perpetuate male dominance over women, as well as the cultural ideologies of female inferiority that supported these institutions.⁸ It is, however, important to note, as Purkiss does, that the “notion of an established patriarchy” during this period has been challenged by recent scholarship (71). The institutions, therefore, that maintain patriarchy are by no means fixed, and it is this instability that the figure of the single woman exploits.

Considering representations of single women in the theater—particularly in works which would have been published or performed at the height of the Swetnam debates (1607-1620)—extends Purkiss' analysis. Cautioned by Purkiss' observation that “[w]e cannot locate the single and effective voice of female agency” in these figures, what we do find are representations that disrupt constructions of femininity in ways which would have resonated significantly with a growing and at least partially rebellious female audience.⁹ For some, the voice of the

single woman would have provided a scathing critique of emergent patriarchal structures; others would have been interested in the unruly woman's containment (either by marriage or by death) within the narrative. Playwrights were keenly aware of the contested position of the single woman in culture and within the gender debates, and their characterizations of unmarried women who transgress their social and political limitations exploit both sides of the controversy.¹⁰ In other words, ideological struggles concerning gender are reflected and enacted, but they are not decisively contained by the play. Like actual single women during the period, the single woman on the stage slides between social ranks and genders; she eludes containment (at least temporarily), expanding agency and redefining femininity through performances of social rank, gender, and sexuality. Yet at the same time, because of her marginal status, the figure of the single woman also functions to defuse the rebellious impulses she provokes. Since she exists primarily on the social fringes, the positions she voices and represents might also be dismissed. The ambiguity of the play leaves decisions up to the audience: some would resist and question an ideal of femininity that assisted the advancement of patriarchy, while others would see a negative model of femininity in the unruly single woman against which "true femininity," and by extension patriarchal masculinity, could be defined.

In his work on gender in early modern England, Anthony Fletcher discusses the social construction of femininity as a process involving a gradual shift from a negative view of femininity grounded in the misogynist tradition illustrated by Swetnam, to a more "positive ideology of womanhood" based on "a constructive view of femininity as a counterpart to... what they meant by masculinity" (377). This shift, which Fletcher illustrates using examples from conduct books intended for women, involves the internalization by women of the behavior prescriptions men sought to impose, and he argues, it was in full swing by the time Richard Allestree published *The Ladies Calling* in 1673 (384).¹¹ While systematic gender construction through literature of this kind was largely a post-Restoration development aided by Enlightenment epistemologies, Fletcher is careful to point out that "some men were moving in the direction of modern gender construction within the confines of a traditional pattern of patriarchal thinking" as early as the 1570s (378). Earlier efforts at gender construction, while not systematic, do appear in a variety of texts prior to 1640, and as Hull's work demonstrates, issues concerning the nature and social role of women were among the more popular topics. Fletcher notes that men learned "their gender role from watching plays, listening to ballads sung in the market place, besides watching and listening to their elders" (105); it stands to reason that women also learned about femininity

the same way. Women, I would add, learned their culture's ideals of femininity—chastity, obedience, and submissiveness—through their participation in a growing entertainment culture that included the theater. In the theater, they were presented with archetypes such as the unruly shrew or whore at one extreme, and the devout, obedient virgin on the other. A play like Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (1594) presents the audience with a transformation: an unruly woman becomes obedient as the result of marriage. The structure of this play would encourage spectators to agree with Katherine, who, by the play's conclusion, speaks for their culture's ideal of womanhood. Kate's authority comes from her understanding of her role as Petruchio's wife; only when she accepts this role does she become an able spokesperson for ideal womanhood. A woman who never married could not achieve her culture's standards of true femininity; therefore, the figure of the single woman on the stage would have evoked more conflicting responses. A single woman could be a virgin or a whore—a fact which undermines the separateness of these categories and which had the potential to disrupt the ways that the women in the audience understood femininity.

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. While scholars have begun to map the significant social and political differences between single women and other marital classifications, there is still some difficulty locating evidence about adult unmarried women: in general, this group of women left few traces.¹² One of the reasons for this difficulty stems from the lack of documentation: single women who never married were often poorer than married women, and they frequently lived on the social margins. They left behind very few diaries, letters, or other items that historians might study.¹³ Unlike widows, unmarried women rarely were permitted to head households;¹⁴ they therefore left behind few records related to property ownership. The fluidity of marital status in early modern England, as well as the problem of marking singleness as a category, also seem to have contributed to this apparent absence in the scholarship. A woman could, at a certain time in her life, identify herself as maid, wife, or widow, and if she was a single woman, she could also belong to none of these categories.¹⁵ A woman was a "maid" until marriage, which typically did not occur until the mid- or late-twenties for both sexes. While married she risked abandonment, since there were no enforced penalties for a person leaving his spouse. And since women generally outlived men, many found themselves widowed while still quite young. Significantly, there was little in terms of dress to distinguish these categories; a young wife or widow could easily be mistaken for a maid. Age and reputation were the primary modes of distinction, and therefore a single woman

could present herself as a wife or a widow in a town where she was not well known. The difficulty of distinguishing maids from wives and widows, and the ability of the single woman to evade such categorization, prompted legislation in the sixteenth century designed to force women to dress themselves according to marital status. The cap law of 1533, for example, was enacted to address the “disordering and abusing of apparrell” by women in Chester, who apparently had taken to wearing the same type of hat—regardless of marital status (qtd. in Wack 40). At a time when, as Fletcher points out, patriarchal power was tenuous, and men were attempting to “secure patriarchy more surely by drawing sharper lines between the sexes” (xix), the ability of the single woman to elude categorization based on marital status would have been particularly threatening. An unmarried woman might evade or reject outright the imperative of the male-headed household—the core of patriarchy—thus usurping masculine prerogative and flouting Protestant doctrine.¹⁶ Marriage, at least ideally, mitigated male anxieties about rampant female sexuality and safeguarded patriarchal authority by containing women and ostensibly controlling their sexual desire.¹⁷ But a single woman could, in some cases, choose her own status, masquerading as a wife or a widow, or even dressing as a man in order to avoid the social restrictions that were increasingly placed on her.¹⁸ The ability to dissemble and thus deceive those who would deny them social privileges caused considerable anxiety.

Cultural apprehension surrounding the ability of single women to avoid categorization based on marital status registered in the enactment and enforcement of social and legal measures designed to limit the possible activities available to single women. The same evidence, however, also indicates that unmarried women were constantly attempting to circumvent measures that would restrict their activity to some form of domestic servitude. Amy Froide’s research on women in Southampton reveals a number of cases in which attempts by single women to set up independent households or engage in business were officially denied.¹⁹ Froide demonstrates that while single women actually had the *feme sole* status that would legally allow them to “engage in formal trades,” when they tried to exercise that right, they were blocked by local officials (246). Single women were stuck between a rock and a hard place, for they found themselves punished for trying to support themselves and punished for vagrancy if they failed to do so (Froide 247). In order to survive, an unmarried woman would have to live either under patriarchal control in the home of a relative, or as a servant, or resort to a life on the social and economic fringes (Froide 249). The case of Elizabeth Quinten, pieced together by Froide from legal records, was probably characteristic:

between 1608 and 1616 Southampton's beadles arrested Elizabeth Quinten for working as a charmaid at four separate times. In 1609 Quinten briefly responded to town pressure by getting a job as a servant; in 1615 she was thrown in a cage (a prison for petty criminals); and by 1627 she was resorting to petty thievery to sustain herself. Like many other singlewomen [sic], Elizabeth Quinten lived a precarious life on the economic margins moving from job to job, eking out a living, while simultaneously trying to avoid the notice of authorities. (249)

The need of single women to be unseen by authorities explains, to some degree, the invisibility of this group of women relative to widows and wives. While it is impossible to know what single women from the period actually thought and felt, the case of Elizabeth Quinten does demonstrate that at least some single women would have understood the way their culture's social systems functioned, since their lives would have necessitated their negotiation of those systems. Femininity, in order to support emerging patriarchal ideologies, requires clear boundaries and static roles; singleness revises boundaries and reinvents roles, and therefore its resonance in dramatic works and pamphlets from the period would have been significant.

The opening act of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1609) features two single women²⁰ who seem, at first glance, to represent the virgin/whore archetypes. Jacobean audiences would have perceived Aspatia as representing female chastity, especially as she plays opposite Evadne, the voluntary paramour to the king. However, during the course of the play, the lines distinguishing these categories become blurred: Aspatia assumes some traits which disrupt established categories of both chastity and of femininity, and Evadne challenges the stereotype of the whore by behaving according to her own code of honor. Anne Haselkorn has discussed the conflation of the virgin/whore stereotypes noting that Aspatia and Evadne (along with characters from other early modern plays) exhibit a tendency in Jacobean drama for a "pious" and obedient character to stand in opposition to a sexually appealing, aggressive character (119). Although Haselkorn allows that virgin characters like Aspatia are also presented paradoxically, her analysis focuses on the erotically charged, independent female characters like Evadne, noting that "while such women are always defeated, this unconventional, even unbridled type is also presented as attractive, stimulating, and provocative" (119). She accounts for this paradox by arguing that the depiction of such characters functions as a cultural safety valve for dispelling male anxieties about strong-willed women. The characters stimulate "male apprehension" by posing "a threat to the patriarchal privilege of control," but because these characters repent or are otherwise contained by the end, the play ultimately reinforces patriarchy (120).

Shifting the focus of Haselkorn's analysis from how these female characters might function for the men in the audience to how a female spectator might respond to them brings this issue of "encoding patriarchy's creed" into question. Since playwrights were no doubt aware of the growing presence of women in the audience,²¹ their paradoxical depiction of virgins and whores can be read as disrupting the advancement of patriarchy by interrupting the construction of a submissive femininity against which a dominant masculinity might define itself. In other words, the single women in *The Maid's Tragedy* make it difficult for women in the audience to identify with the "good" character at the expense of the "evil" one. While Evadne would unquestionably have been considered a whore (sexually active and sexually provocative) and therefore worthy of censure, Beaumont and Fletcher depict her as beautiful, honest, and with a power and assertiveness unmatched by any other character in the play. On the other hand, Aspatia, while "spotless" and virginal, has some sexually suggestive lines, not to mention a petulance that ill fits the chaste, obedient, and silent stereotype. In each case, the playwrights use the figure of the single woman to complicate their culture's gender conventions.

The scenes in the play where these complicating factors manifest themselves are dramatically charged moments which would have especially engaged female spectators because they evoke the gender debates of the period. One such moment occurs when Evadne first meets Amintor alone in the bridal chamber, presumably to consummate their marriage. Her efforts to keep her promise to the king and not have sexual intercourse with Amintor are heroic, and despite his persistence, she refuses to go back on her vow: "When I call back this oath, / The pains of hell environ me!" (II.i.272-273). It would have been much easier (and safer, since he threatens to rape her at one point) for Evadne to placate Amintor and then lie to the king. But Evadne, contrary to the stereotype she represents, chooses instead to resist, dramatically holding to a code of her own devising. What is represented at this and other such moments is a character who, given the constraints of her situation, creates her own rules of conduct and holds to them, not unlike the ways in which actual single women from the period, and likely also some female spectators at the play, were resisting their culture's increasing attempts at defining femininity in restrictive ways.

Throughout the play, or at least up until her repentance, whenever Evadne upholds her honesty, she revises the category of "whore." When confronted by the king, her principled honesty seems almost foolhardy:

I swore indeed that I would never love
A man of lower place, but if your fortune
Should throw you from this height, I bade you trust
I would forsake you and would bend to him
That won your throne. I love with my ambition,
Not with my eyes. (III.i.170-175)

Picture the power that these lines would have had during a performance. But equally interesting is the multivalence of the passage: it could be used as evidence to underscore Evadne's status as a whore, and/or to redefine that category. Evadne's awareness of her sexual power is conflated with her opportunistic and aggressive ability to deploy that power. Her Machiavellian ambition would have been more recognizable in a male character. Yet in a female character, especially in one who maintains an admirable ethical code, such aggressive self-interest seems significant. Not only does her honesty complicate the cultural stereotype of the whore, but her assertiveness also challenges the established categories of masculine and feminine. Evadne makes the concept behind the label "whore" less malevolent. She also makes a legitimate case for female appropriation of masculine prerogative. During such intensely dramatic moments, Evadne's character expands and disrupts established cultural norms, suggesting to receptive female spectators that such categories are indeed malleable.

Beaumont and Fletcher's Evadne complicates the notion that independence and sexual freedom are undesirable characteristics in a woman. The play's other prominent single character, Aspatia, also challenges gender norms and, therefore, she too could have served as a disruptive model for the women in the audience. Just as Evadne has redemptive qualities, so Aspatia has traits that challenge cultural ideals of femininity and besmirch her purity. As a dutiful daughter and subject to the king, Aspatia ought not to complain about her situation, and yet she does so constantly, and in sexual terms: "This should have been / My night," she grumbles to Evadne. A few lines later, as she wishes Evadne "well" on her wedding night, she betrays suspicious "longings": "May all the marriage joys / That longing maids imagine in their beds / Prove so unto you!" (II.i.90-91). Aspatia seems rather well acquainted with the ways of physical love, or at least with the sexual fantasies of young girls—hardly appropriate knowledge for a modest young virgin to reveal. And since passionate actions would have impressed spectators even more than a woman's sexual thoughts, it is when she confronts Amintor on his way to his and Evadne's bridal chamber and brazenly demands a kiss that the audience would take special notice: "I will trouble you no more, yet I will take / A parting kiss, and will not be denied" (II.i.115-116). Depending upon how the kiss is performed (ac-

ording to the stage direction, a kiss is given), such a moment could signal to audiences that Aspatia is less than a paragon of chastity. Such a depiction broadens what counts as "chaste," providing a less restrictive model for women and undermining one of the prevailing gender tenets.

In addition to complicating and expanding the stereotype of chastity, Aspatia, like Evadne, disrupts constructions of masculinity and femininity. The dominant ideals of femininity for Renaissance women included passivity and obedience; Aspatia defies such ideals by aggressively seeking to end her life, and, interestingly, in order to accomplish this purpose she disguises herself as a man. Aspatia impersonates her twin brother, hoping to draw Amintor into a fight which will cause her death. Her plan works, and Amintor, thinking she is a man who "canst not fight," fatally wounds her (V.iii.100). This is a suspenseful scene for the audience, who by this point would know several things that Amintor does not. Beaumont and Fletcher exploit the potential of the scene by building up tension through Amintor's initial refusal to fight. This forces Aspatia to take the initiative, actually striking and kicking him. Aspatia's assumption of masculinity, then, involves more than what she wears (as is often the case with Shakespeare's cross-dressed heroines) and makes a bolder point about the appropriation of masculine traits by a woman. Aspatia controls this climactic scene and effectively orchestrates its outcome. Once wounded, she exclaims, "I have got enough, / And my desire. There is no place so fit / For me as to die here" (V.iii.103-105). Aspatia's assertiveness, her opportunistic appropriation of masculine traits, especially in this scene in which she is also cross-dressed, would have given female spectators a model of femininity that contradicted the "chaste, silent & obedient" image they encountered in other texts (e.g., Thomas Salter's *The Mirror of Modesty*). Beaumont and Fletcher underscore Aspatia's image by manipulating audience tension with strategic stage directions.

Beaumont and Fletcher's use of the figure of the single woman supports various and conflicting ways of understanding gender. For some, as Haselkorn's analysis suggests, Evadne would have registered as an unruly woman whose independence and command of her own sexual power posed a threat to the established gender order. Her repentance and subsequent death correct the ideological problems she asserts.²² But there is enough to Evadne's character to suggest that for some members of the audience she presented ways in which the limits of established modes of behavior could be transgressed. At the very least, she would have left some women puzzled about proper conduct. Similarly, Aspatia's assertiveness challenges the prevailing ideals of obedience and docility. In both cases, the figure of the single woman signals a flexibility in gender codes that disrupts the domi-

nant ideals of femininity. Evadne's and Aspatia's unmarried status would probably have had some resonance with Jacobean audiences who knew the challenges single women faced in their society. The predicament of single women may well have been on people's minds in 1609 when this play was performed, since in the period from 1607 to 1620 single women (specifically those who had never married) made up a larger portion of adult women than they have at any time since (Erickson 192). Beaumont and Fletcher capitalize on the cultural tensions surrounding the social category of singleness in *The Maid's Tragedy*; their use of unmarried female characters in prominent roles encourages the audience to question patriarchal ideals of femininity.

One of the more flamboyant single women to grace the Jacobean stage was Middleton and Dekker's Moll Cutpurse, based on possibly the most famous (or infamous) "real life" unmarried woman of the period: Mary Firth. *The Roaring Girl*, published in 1611, clearly capitalizes on the celebrity of this unmarried woman who rejected her culture's conventional ideologies of femininity. Firth, a notorious cross-dresser, did as she pleased on the streets of London, navigating with some success from the economic and social fringes to center stage at the Fortune, where she confessed to entertaining spectators "in man's apparel" by playing a song on a lute and singing.²³ Like her contemporary, the charwoman Elizabeth Quinten, and many other single women from the period who refused to accept places as servants or dependants in male-headed households, Firth occasionally found herself in trouble with the law. On 27 January 1612, she was brought before the Consistory Court of London where, according to the court records, she "voluntarily confessed that she had long frequented all or most of the disorderly & licentious places... as namely she hath usually in the habit of a man resorted to alehouses, taverns, tobacco shops & also to the playhouses..." (qtd. in Cerasano, *Renaissance Drama* 172). As the confession goes on to show, in addition to cross dressing, Firth liked to drink hard, swear, and keep "lewd company as namely with cut-purses, blasphemous drunkards & others of bad note & of most dissolute behavior"—all activities which this document declares bring about "the disgrace of all womanhood." As Fletcher and others have documented, a number of ideological prohibitions were in place to restrict female behavior; Firth's transvestitism allowed her to circumvent these restrictions, actions which "blatantly challenged the gender order and put men's patriarchal authority on the line" (24).²⁴ Firth's rejection of the cultural construct of femininity allows her to move about freely in London, and to frequent places that would have been off limits to most women.

By 1611 female transvestites like Mary Firth were appearing on London's streets in increasing numbers (Orgel 14; Woodbridge 139). While cross-dressing was nothing new, women, for a variety of reasons, were more freely impersonating men in the early 1600s. For some, especially if they passed successfully, it meant more freedom to interact with men in the public sphere, or to work in fields normally reserved for men.²⁵ Mary Firth's confession indicates, significantly, that one of the places that cross-dressed women frequented was the theater. Indeed, in *The Roaring Girl*, life, drama, and public controversy intersect most vividly: it is a drama performed at the height of a gender controversy about a real-life transvestite, which would have been viewed by women, some of whom were cross-dressed themselves.

Middleton and Dekker's representation of Moll Cutpurse, who dresses like a man throughout almost the entire play, and is pictured on the frontispiece of the printed version wearing breeches, carrying a sword, and smoking a pipe, highlights their awareness of the power of transvestitism to disrupt gender order by increasing female mobility and agency.²⁶ In more than one scene (II.ii.75), Middleton and Dekker emphasize Moll's cross-dressing: for example, portraying her being fitted for "the great Dutch slop"—a pair of baggy breeches (II.ii.81-82). But the cross-dressing plays into a larger picture that would have to include Moll's purchasing power. Not only does she dress like a man, but she commands the attentions of various merchants and tailors (at the feather shop, the alehouse, the tobacco shop)—indicating not only that she has the ability to pay for what she desires, but that her cross dressing enables her to freely patronize businesses and engage in activities such as drinking and smoking that would not have been considered "feminine." Middleton and Dekker's play responds to this cultural tendency (or the desire) of women to transcend both social rank and gender prohibitions in order to purchase certain commodities and entertainments that would ordinarily have been off limits to them.

The Roaring Girl taps into an ideological struggle that took as its extremes those who would advocate female independence and agency and those who would align themselves with the position voiced by Swetnam. By writing about a mobile and independent unmarried woman like Moll Cutpurse, Middleton and Dekker add to the debate by reflecting its paradoxes. In the Prologue, the playwrights seem to align themselves with the misogynous discourses that would consider "roaring girls" a social problem; they also emphasize the marginality of their subject matter by referring to roaring girls as "wonders" or curiosities presented to a fascinated audience:

I see attention sets wide ope her gates
Of hearing, and with covetous listening waits
To know what girl this roaring girl should be —
For of that tribe there are many. One is she
That roars at midnight in deep tavern bowls,
That beats the watch, and constables controls;
Another roars i'th' day-time, swears, stabs, gives braves,
Yet sells her soul to the lust of fools and slaves:
Both these are suburb-roarers. Then there's besides
A civil, city-roaring girl, whose pride,
Feasting, and riding, shakes her husband's state,
And leaves him roaring through an iron grate. (Prologue 13-24)

Most roaring girls, it seems, were fairly unsavory characters, guilty of any number of the crimes misogynist texts like Swetnam's level against all "froward" women. However, Middleton and Dekker do not allow a neat conclusion to be drawn about this particular social stereotype. Instead, they insist that the subject of their play is a unique, morally superior character: "None of these roaring girls is ours: she flies / With wings more lofty" (Prologue 25-26). The Prologue emphasizes the contradiction inherent in making generalizations about all women by pointing out that there are notable exceptions. The play conveys a position on the controversy that is difficult to pin down decisively; the result is a performance that disrupted the gender polemics and would likely have appealed to many on either side of the gender debate.

The paradoxes associated with gender controversy are embodied in the figure of the single woman. Like the unmarried women who function rhetorically to criticize patriarchy, Moll Cutpurse often operates in *The Roaring Girl* as a spokesperson for women's social rights while acting as an emblem of female independence. 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. In spite of this, she comes across as an almost heroic figure—one who is able to make even the opportunistic Sir Alexander see the error of his ways. Moll navigates as easily among social ranks as she does between sexes—she passes whenever she wishes, and yet sees through every other character's disguise.²⁷ But her most striking scenes involve her eloquently taking issue with the gender inequities of the period. Just before she trounces Laxton, she delivers the longest speech in the play, about men who assume certain women are whores:

How many of our sex by such as thou
Have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name
That never deserved loosely or did trip
In path of whoredom beyond cup and lip?

....

In thee I defy all men, their worst hates
And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts
With which they entangle the poor spirits of fools:
Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives —
Fish that must needs bite, or themselves be bitten —
Such hungry things as these may soon be took
With a worm fastened on a golden hook
Those are the lecher's food, his prey. He watches
For quarrelling wedlocks and poor shifting sisters:
Tis the best fish he takes. (III.i.81-101)

The women Moll defends in this passage would have been recognizable as the “whores” and “gossips” frequently disparaged in misogynous discourses.²⁸ As Susan Amussen has observed, English women, especially the laboring poor and those who engaged in small trade, engaged in public life; therefore, defamation—especially in regard to sexual reputation—was a more practical means to control their behavior than seclusion (207).²⁹ Gossip worked both ways, of course, and women used the same means to denigrate men. Moll's speech here would have evoked conflicting attitudes about the “poor shifting sisters”: some would have been sympathetic to the plight of women who found themselves driven by necessity into prostitution; others would have seen them as boozing gossips, as unruly women out of place. There is room here for both sympathy and condemnation, depending perhaps on how one understood femininity. Women who lived independently by their needles,³⁰ indulged in drink, or were stricken by poverty, all would have been seen as having precarious reputations.

Although there are passages in which Moll criticizes her own sex, much of her social commentary brings men to task for their shabby treatment of women. Middleton and Dekker create a character in Moll Cutpurse who advocates social rights for women in ways which would have met with the approval of many spectators; however, they also leave room for a reading of her character that would not threaten the patriarchal ideologies that rested on female subordination. The marginalization and isolation of Moll functions in the play to make it possible for some audience members to dismiss her as a mere curiosity. While the play outwardly celebrates the character of Moll Cutpurse, it also depicts her as completely cut off from all social connections. The Prologue places her as a paragon among

roaring girls, effectively severing her from connections with other unruly women; but neither can she be aligned with the ideally feminine character represented in the play by Mary Fitzallard.

The play repeatedly references Moll's notoriety, regardless of whether this observation comes from a hostile or apparently friendly source, setting her apart. Sir Alexander, the play's villain and Moll's most outspoken detractor, describes her as inhuman or monstrous: "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 to 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" (I.ii.128-133). Sir Alexander frets here about Moll's ability to convincingly perform either gender—the anxiety evident in this stems from Moll's ability to pass at will and thus avoid systems of control dependant upon constructions of femininity. Even here, however, Sir Alexander worries about Moll's ability to "draw more eyes" after her than a "blazing star." She is the center of attention, and as such she is removed from the various networks of social interactions that would help to define an early modern subject.³¹ Of course, the playwrights meant for Sir Alexander's vitriol to be excessive since his prejudice drives the play's plot. His son, Sebastian, plays upon his father's aversion to Moll, and he uses it to manipulate Sir Alexander into allowing him to marry Mary Fitzallard without losing his inheritance.³² Sebastian's scheme, however, turns on a subtler form of discrimination. Like Sir Alexander, Sebastian believes Moll possesses "strange" or freakish qualities and that no father in his right mind would approve of a marriage with such a person; Mary Fitzallard, then, in spite of her poor dowry, would seem like quite a prize in comparison. Sebastian's plan reveals his view of Moll's complete unsuitability as a partner, and it also underscores her isolation from social interactions, and confirms her status as a single woman. Moll herself asserts her singleness when she states: "I have no humour to marry. I love to lie o' both sides o' th' bed myself; and again, o' the' other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'l' ne'er go about it" (II.ii.36-40).³³ True to her word, Moll remains unmarried throughout the play. Singleness, celebrity, and social isolation underlie all of Moll's social commentary, making it possible to discard her pleas for gender equity. The fact that this play is a comedy also would have given the audience the opportunity to dismiss Moll's critique, laughing away the guilt evoked by the accuracy of her criticism.

The social and historical backdrop of the Swetnam debates would have added intensity to plays like *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Roaring Girl*, which feature outspoken single women in lead roles. But whereas the pamphlet wars deployed

the figure of the single woman as either unruly and thus in need of containment or as a privileged spokesperson for women's rights, the dramatic works complicate this polemic. Representations of single women in plays from this period typically do this kind of work: they function to confound the advancement of patriarchal ideologies that depend upon misogyny and the fixed and internalized understanding of femininity as subordinate and inferior to masculinity. At the same time, there are elements in the plays that support the same patriarchal ideologies that they challenge. There are ways in which an awareness of both the situation of actual single women and their rhetorical use within the gender debates informed the playwright, players, and audience members. Representations of single women on the stage mirror the conflicts and ambivalences that existed in the culture surrounding constructions of femininity. Given the rhetorical use of the unmarried women in the gender debates, some spectators would have taken the figure of the single woman as opening up a critique of misogynist discourses that adhered to a fixed ideal of femininity, while others would have taken her to represent the out of place, unruly, shrewish woman that the narrative would politically contain. In either case, the characters on the stage disrupt static constructions of femininity through their dynamic performances of gender, social rank, and sexuality. ✨

Notes

¹ James I's misogyny was well known and could have been a contributing factor to the heightened gender debates. For more on this see Leggatt (esp. 99-186).

² Of at least 163 titles from 1475-1640, Hull concludes that approximately 18 have to do with controversies over women.

³ The actual sex of the pamphleteers cannot be decisively determined. They used female names (e.g., Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, and Constantia Munda), and Anne Rosalind Jones' rhetorical analysis presents convincing evidence that they were indeed women. However, most critics take the names to be pseudonyms. On the gender of these authors, see Wayne 222-223.

⁴ Suzanne Hull has compiled much useful information about books on the gender controversies (106-126).

⁵ Similar language is used by Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure* which was being performed in 1604. A veiled Mariana relates her unusual marital status to the Duke who tells her, "Why, you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife" (V.i.176). The misogynistic tone set by the Duke is intensified by Lucio in the next line, who suggests that she might be a "punk" or whore, "for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife."

⁶ When I use the term “agency” I mean the ability to act, socially and politically. Although women were able to act effectively in the public sphere in many ways, they were nevertheless continually limited by patriarchal institutions and ideologies. For example, Laura Gowing has recently demonstrated that women often brought legal complaints, especially those involving slander and sexual fidelity, before church courts. It is important to note however that women’s participation in litigation was often limited; it did not, for example, frequently extend to disputes about property.

⁷ In general, the category of “singleness” encompasses women who would eventually marry (i.e. “maids”) as well as those who never married. However, I wish to refer to the figure of the single woman as she would have resonated with the Swetnam pamphlet debates: specifically, as neither maid nor wife nor widow. Therefore I focus primarily on women in their unmarried state. In some cases, such as with Evadne in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, I emphasize independent attitudes and behavior more than a strictly unmarried status.

⁸ I am essentially following Anthony Fletcher, who concisely defines “patriarchy” as “an institutionalized male dominance over women and children in the family and the subordination of women in society in general” (xv). Social ideologies that considered women “the weaker vessel” also worked to perpetuate this subordination.

⁹ I do not mean to suggest that every woman in an early modern audience would have been rebellious; however, I do think there was enough social turbulence about the proper conduct of women to conclude that at least some of the women in the diverse audience would have chafed against ideologies that attempted to restrict their behavior.

¹⁰ While we can never know without doubt what a playwright intended, I believe strongly that a cultural debate with the intensity that this one appeared to have would have had an impact on writers producing plays for the public theater.

¹¹ Fletcher does not go into specific detail about the historical conditions that might have accounted for this change from a negative to a positive view of womanhood that he identifies in the literature and associates with “modern gender construction.” However, such factors must have included changes in social class distributions associated with the advance of capitalism, increased literacy rates, differences in ways of understanding and experiencing subjectivity, and a valorization of the domestic domain.

¹² Many historians have noted the paucity of evidence concerning the lives of adult single women. Erickson notes that since they were restricted from setting up households, taking legal actions, or bequeathing property, this group of women left few indications of their existence (204-222).

¹³ Current scholarship by Judith Bennett, Amy Froide, Amy Louise Erickson, and others has filled in some of these absences.

¹⁴ Amy Froide reports that widows headed 12.9% of the households in England, but unmarried women headed just 1.1%. The significance of these numbers is compounded by the fact that, as Froide reports, single women outnumbered widows two to one (esp. 239).

¹⁵ While there is overlap among these categories, a distinction should be drawn between women who never married and those who eventually married (i.e. “maids” or “widows”). This article focuses on those women who never married, with the exception of Evadne in the *Maid's Tragedy*, who marries Amintor, but because of her promise to remain faithful to the king their relationship is never consummated.

¹⁶ For more on the ways unmarried women evaded patriarchal control see Weisner (esp. 58).

¹⁷ Fletcher makes the point that controlling women was a cornerstone of masculinity, but that such control was tenuous at best, which was a source of anxiety (18-19).

¹⁸ Unmarried women, especially those who never married, endured a number of restrictions (e.g., Froide 236-269).

¹⁹ Froide documents a number of cases where “independent single women” attempted to set up households but were opposed by town officials (246).

²⁰ Evadne is not legally single; she marries Amintor in the first act. In discussing her as a “figure of singleness,” I refer to her primary status as the king’s mistress, a relationship she negotiates while single. Her marriage to Amintor is arranged, by the king (with the understanding that it never be consummated), as a screen to lend her respectability, and therefore I read it as a plot device rather than a social marker.

²¹ For statistics on theatre attendance, see Gurr.

²² In her important essay “Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England,” Jean Howard argues that representations of unruly women on the early modern stage operated, at least in some cases, as a means to “contain the threat” they comprised (425). It is significant to note however that her readings of the plays are varied, arguing that a play like *The Roaring Girl*, for example, does not quite succeed at this containment. In my view, with an emphasis not on cross-dressing but on singleness, there are more interpretive possibilities. Where Howard asks, “Did the theatre... also form part of the cultural apparatus for policing boundaries, or did it serve as a site for their further disturbance?” (428), I suggest that it might variously be doing both at the same time.

²³ From the Consistory Court of London, *Correction Book*, fols. 19-20: 27 January 1612 (in Cerasano and Wynne-Davies 172).

²⁴ Recent criticism on *The Roaring Girl* has focused on the issue of Moll’s transvestitism, specifically on the question of whether or not this is a transgressive, ultimately disruptive act. In “Women in Men’s Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in the

Roaring Girl,” Mary Beth Rose argues that the figure of Firth indicates “greater freedom for women and equality between the sexes” (319). Jean Howard similarly concludes that, unlike other plays featuring cross-dressed characters, “*The Roaring Girl* uses the image of the cross-dressed woman to defy expectations about women’s nature and to protest the injustices caused by the sex-gender system” (438). Jonathan Dollimore brings the debate out of the subversion/containment paradox by suggesting that containment be understood as a “potentially productive process,” but still reads *The Roaring Girl* as generally subversive (71). Other critics, notably Jane Baston, have argued that *The Roaring Girl* enacts Moll’s “rehabilitation” (320). While Firth’s cross-dressing is an important aspect of her character, I am focusing more on her status as a single woman, a move that emphasizes the play’s ambiguity and allows speculation about the audience’s reception of it. *The Roaring Girl*, I argue, captures the cultural debates about gender without being specifically radical or conservative.

²⁵ Women cross-dressed for a number of different reasons, including the need to protect themselves from the sexual advances of men. Orgel argues that they were also crossing class lines (14).

²⁶ Critics have also emphasized the erotic (and homoerotic) possibilities enabled by cross-dressing on the stage. In *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, articles by Susan Zimmerman and Jean Howard, for example, examine the polymorphous erotic potential of the cross-dressed figure on the early modern stage.

²⁷ Jodi Mikalachki presents the provocative argument that Moll’s ability to translate or interpret the thieves’ “cant” intensifies her liminal position between the worlds of the criminal underclass and the law-abiding population. Mikalachki concludes that this has a two-fold effect: it both “focuses and to some extent exorcises anxieties about criminality and the role of criminal fictions inherent in the project of staging London’s ‘roaring girl!’” (137).

²⁸ Conduct books and fictional works often condemn drinking by women as undesirable. In some fictional works, like Samuel Rowlands’ *A Crew of Kind London Gossips*, for example, this condemnation is fueled by the suspicion that drinking women will criticize men.

²⁹ Laura Gowing has recently argued that gossip and defamation were also frequently leveled by women against other women.

³⁰ Single women and poor widows pooled their resources, working and living together in what has been referred to as “spinster clustering.” For more on this see Bennett and Froide (228-230).

³¹ Frye and Robertson usefully characterize early modern subjectivity as a network of social relations: “each subject came to consciousness and lived out her life within communities of interconnection and social interaction. Both men and women of the period condensed their understandings of community and relationship in the classical

image of the beehive, an image which locates the individual subject within a matrix of interactions" (4).

³² Marjorie Garber has argued that the characters of Moll and Mary should be read as conflated, if not as the same character. Such a reading suggests that the play might have it both ways: Moll is both radical and conventional, critical and supportive of marriage at the same time.

³³ Some critics, for example Jane Baston, interpret this line as a possible reference to same-sex desire.

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