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DIPLOMAMUNKA

MA THESIS

“Ye are underlings, underlings, and must be obedient”
The Representations of Disorderly Women in Elizabethan and
Jacobean Popular Literature

A „felforgató” nők reprezentációi az Erzsébet- és Jakab-kori populáris
irodalomban

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2017

CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH

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Abstract

This thesis is to discuss and analyse one specific discourse that emerged with relation to women in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. By relying on the (mostly) Puritan approach to women and the general misogynistic sentiment of the age, the aim is to gain an insight into some of the anxieties and fears that characterized early modern England.

In the first chapter, I aim to sketch the historical context of the chosen problem: the social-historical, demographic, economic and religious changes that all pointed towards the destabilization of social order, which led to the emergence of the discourse. Strongly connected to this, by examining the representative pieces of this ‘anti-feminist corpus’ (mostly Puritan pamphlets, sermons and conduct books), I aim to describe the male and female ideals prevalent in the discourse.

The second chapter of the thesis focuses on the two chosen genres in which the representations of the female criminal were the most emphatic: on the one hand, some of the well-known pieces of rogue literature (the texts of Thomas Dekker, Thomas Harman, John Awdeley and Robert Greene), on the other hand, broadside ballads that dealt with cases of mariticide and infanticide. The two genres – due to generic differences – presented women somewhat differently, however, the representations did not diverge from the domestic and familial spheres, therefore they could be analysed in the context of (patriarchal) order and stereotypical female roles.

Following this line of thought, the questions of (patriarchal) order, female roles and femininity as such, the last chapter will focus on one individual case. By reading the representations of one specific character – a notorious thief, Moll Cutpurse – in a narrower context, that of crossdressing and its relation to the male–female ideals, the issues of transgression and social order can be discussed. After presenting the most important arguments of the Puritan discourse on crossdressing, I will focus on a literary text, *The Roaring Girl*, written by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton in 1611.

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Introduction

Unnatural, inhumane, barbarous: these are just some of the adjectives the unknown writers of broadside ballads attached to women, who committed crimes against nature and the social order by killing their husbands or children, stealing or scolding. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, the focus of popular literature shifted towards the figure of the female criminal. This tendency can be linked to a variety of forces that shaped the social, economic and political spheres of England in these two turbulent centuries. From the fourteenth century on, the history of England was characterized by a ‘chain of crises’. These transformative events affected English society in profound ways, resulting in destabilisation and fear. As a consequence, various patterns of behaviour perceived to be ‘deviant’ were under the scrutiny of the centralizing state. The rogue, the vagabond, the thief, the beggar and the mentally ill, groups of deviants hitherto lightly, or not at all prosecuted, became categories the authorities were most likely to focus on.¹ This gave way to the rise of disciplinary institutions, the multiplication of executions and the process of poor-law-making that aimed to regulate the undeserving poor.

These experiences found their way into the literature of the period. Furthermore, these tendencies and the underlying problems were projected into the urban sphere.² The roots of all evil were to be found in the capital city: the problem of poverty, deviance and the fast-growing crime rates were located by most writers and pamphleteers in London. Consequently, many narrative sources highlighted the image of a sinful city, with its well-known characters, and among them, various types of the female criminal. A narrower category of these disorderly women, thieves, rogues and murderers, will be in the primary focus of this thesis. The aim is not to give an in-depth analysis of one specific text or even a genre, but the analysis of the

¹ Cf. REXROTH, Frank, *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 27–67; UNDERDOWN, David, *Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England, 1603–1660*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 9–43.

² ARCHER, Ian. W., *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 204.

contemporary perceptions of social (dis)order with relation to women. Therefore, I have chosen a variety of narrative texts – literary and non-literary as well – to shed light on some of the characteristics of the discourse around women and their relations to the issues of order and disorder. Throughout the thesis, I aim to apply a historical approach, and read the literary texts in terms of their relation to the social–historical background, into which they were embedded.

To be able to give a clear analysis of the chosen problems in some of the representative texts of each examined genre (broadside ballads, rogue literature, drama, Puritan pamphlets and sermons), I have divided my thesis into three main parts. All parts could represent a different level or layer, proceeding from the broader background to an individual case. Therefore, in the first chapter, I will be dealing with the social, historical and political background of the problems of order and disorder. Strongly related to this, I also try to sketch the general misogynistic sentiments towards women. My arguments are based on popular religious pamphlets, sermons and conduct books.

Bearing this general context in mind, I will turn to the narrower issue of female criminality and its representations in two popular genres, in which the discussion of such issues was emphatic. Rogue literature and broadside ballads featured women who committed ‘crimes against nature’. They presented them – though, of course, with disparate emphases because of their basic generic differences – in the context of family and marriage. As family can be considered as the basic unit of society, and therefore being one of the strongest ‘pillars’ of social order, these texts can support my analysis of the general contemporary perception of women as the promoters of disorder. The two genres could also represent two (almost) separate levels of literacy,³ as they were written for different audiences with different purposes. Rogue literature targeted a narrower and more learned audience: this shows both in their main texts, paratexts and structures. Whereas broadside ballads were published anonymously, in the form of cheap

³ CRESSY, David, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. 1–18.

leaflets and they were both typographically and linguistically simpler. As a ubiquitous genre (read, sung, pinned on walls), broadsides could reach a much wider audience, literate and illiterate alike.

The final part of my analysis will focus on an individual case. The dramatic representation of one of the most peculiar and most famous (infamous) female characters of the period, whose figure, somewhere between reality and fiction, incorporates all the issues discussed in the first two chapters. Mary Frith, also known as Moll/Mal Cutpurse was one of the most notorious characters of the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Working as a female thief in a man's attire, he sparked the interests of many, among them Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, who devoted an entire drama to her figure (*The Roaring Girl*, 1611). The analysis of the texts focuses on the correlations between femininity and criminality, crossdressing and the related issues of social (dis)order, as embodied by Moll's notorious character.

1. The Subversion of Good Order? The ‘Monstrous Rule’ of Women in Early Modern England

1.1 The roots of disorder in early modern England

As emphasized in the introduction, the history of England between roughly the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, was characterized by a long line of crises that resulted in social insecurity. Therefore, I find it important to briefly summarize the broader context of the problem I will be dealing with later. On the one hand, the general tendencies (not specific to England in all aspects) have to be taken into consideration. On the other hand, the urban context and the case of London should be discussed, as most of the works the subsequent analysis focuses on, were usually popular in the urban setting, where they were widely read or disseminated otherwise.

From the fourteenth century on, English society underwent a series of transformative events in the demographic, economic, religious and political spheres. As for economy and demography, the Black Death of 1348/49 can be considered as a turning point with considerable impacts on society and economy (famine, rising prices, the transformation of the labour market). The sixteenth century saw further crises in economy with the enclosures, the price revolution, inflation, under- and unemployment, population growth and the successive waves of immigrants towards the most populous cities of the country.

Politically, England was characterized by both external and internal conflicts during the late medieval and early modern period. One of the economically, politically and morally most devastating external struggles was the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453) between England and France. It was followed by an internal dynastic conflict, known as the Wars of the Roses (1455–1485), which led to the change of regime, the rise of the middle classes and the emergence of a new nobility. The general feeling of insecurity during the period was invigorated by the

‘dubious legitimacy’⁴ of the Tudor dynasty (1485–1603). What is more, as for the political sphere, the century of the Tudors brought a further problem to the fore: the issue of female rulers. Between 1553 and 1603 England was ruled by two women, Mary I (1553–1558) and Elizabeth I (1558–1603), and this – as the analysis of the Puritan texts will reveal – was seen as alarming and threatening by many.

Finally, one of the most profound and irreversible transformations was brought to England by the Protestant reformation, which was, first of all, a political reformation initiated by Henry VIII (1509–1547). It resulted in the break with Rome (the papal authority), declaring the king as the Supreme Head of the Church of England (renounced by Mary I in 1553 and reasserted by Elizabeth I in 1559). Considerable steps towards the introduction of Protestant practices began with Edward VI (1547–1553), and after an interval between 1553 and 1559, when papal jurisdiction was restored by Mary I, it continued during the reign of Elizabeth I. However, the structure, the practices and the theology of the Church were still debated in the following centuries. This debate led to the emergence of Puritanism, demanding complete reformation and the eradication of ‘popishness’ in England.

These underlying tensions that surfaced in the popular literature of the period were particularly visible in the case of London. The reasons for the intensification of migration towards London were manifold. It can be attributed to the aforementioned demographic and economic changes, as a result of which London became one of the liveliest and most exuberant capitals of contemporary Europe. It was transformed into a leading commercial centre, handling the trade and distribution of finished products and consumer goods at the European markets.⁵

⁴ There are three main points to the debate concerning Henry VII’s (1485–1509) right to the throne: the questions of bloodline, the claim by defeating Richard III (1483–1585) and marriage. Henry VII had the claim for the throne through his bloodline, as his mother, Margaret Beaufort was the heiress of the Beauforts (a branch of the Lancaster) – though it was problematic because the claim was through his mother. After defeating Richard III in the Battle of Bosworth (1485) he could also claim the throne through the right of conquest. Though he could only solidify his position after marrying Elizabeth of York, thus unifying the Lancaster and the York claims and ending the Wars of the Roses.

⁵ MCMULLAN, J. L. “Criminal Organization in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century London” In. *Social Problems*, Vol. 29., No. 3. (1982). 311.

The city started to attract those who were running from unemployment and economic problems, seeking new opportunities. London offered entertainment and the possibility of finding livelihood to the new arrivals. They, in most cases, came from a 60-mile radius from around London or the nearby counties, and sporadically from Yorkshire or other less developed regions of the country.⁶ London not only allowed the migrants to enter the city, but was also dependent on them. The crowded city, as the hotbed of epidemics, murder and various accidents, required 5–8,000 new inhabitants a year to keep up her population.⁷

Municipal authorities soon found a way to address the problem. From mid-century on, the legislation of the city became more severe, as authorities aimed to restrict and minimize crime within the city of London.⁸ Regulation of sturdy beggars (able-bodied, fit to work) and vagrants intensified after the Vagrancy Act of 1572: the number of proceedings against able-bodied beggars increased. These measures resulted in various forms of punishment: vagrants and beggars were either fined, whipped, sent back to their place of origin or in some cases were offered to take up work again.⁹ Additionally, at the municipal level, Bridewell Hospital, founded by Edward VI (1547–1553) was to control and regulate the issue of vagrancy and begging. It is hard to find a proper definition for Bridewell: by name it was a hospital, though originally it was intended to be a workhouse or house of correction.¹⁰

How women and their criminal activity related to this social–historical background both in practice and in the literary accounts, is discussed in the second chapter. Now I turn to the analysis of the general perception of (disorderly) women in Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

⁶ VELICH, Andrea, “Idegenek Londonban a 15–16. század fordulóján” [“Aliens in London at the Turn of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries”] In. *Aetas*, Vol. 11., No. 1. (1996). 54.

⁷ PORTER 1994: 42.

⁸ ARCHER 2002: 243.

⁹ BEIER, A. L. “A New Serfdom: Labour Laws, Vagrancy Statutes and Labour Discipline in England, 1350–1800” In. BEIER, A. L. – OCOBOCK, P. (Eds.) *Cast Out. Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008. 47–48.

¹⁰ SPIERENBURG, Pieter, *The Prison Experience: Disciplinary Institutions and their Inmates in Early Modern Europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007. 23–24.

1.2. A crisis in gender relations?

The underlying anxieties linked to these social, political and religious changes, can be traced in the general anti-female sentiment that emerged between around 1560 and 1640. There is a general agreement in scholarly literature that these decades were characterised by a ‘crisis in gender relations’.¹¹ According to David Underdown, prosecutions against disorderly and criminal women (scolds, infanticides, mariticides) intensified and increased in number. This was further strengthened by the fact that it was also the period when witchcraft trials reached their peak.¹² This is not to say that the number of those women who committed crimes increased, but rather – and this is why this tendency fits well into the above described processes – it signals an intensifying focus on and interest in all patterns of deviant behaviour. And what could be perceived as more ‘deviant’ in a society that assigned mostly home-based and subordinate roles to women,¹³ than a female making decisions and performing acts upon her own will? According to the prescriptive works of contemporary ‘social theorists’, this subordination entailed obedience, chastity, servility and complete silence. They did not only blame women who went as far as killing or abusing a family member, but also those, who wished to have (any kind of) voice. In short, ideal women conforming to the rules of patriarchal society had to restrain themselves to the sphere of the family and the home, not having a public voice,¹⁴ as suggested by an advice from the 1650s: “*the emblem of a woman who should be a*

¹¹ AMUSSEN, Sarah D., “Gender, Family and the Social Order, 1560–1725” In. FLETCHER, A. – STEVENSON, J. *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 196–217; CAPP, Bernard, “Separate Domains? Women and Authority in Early Modern England” In. GRIFFITHS, Paul – FOX, Adam – HINDLE, Steve (Eds.) *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*. London: Macmillan, 1996. 117–145; DAVIS, Natalie Zemon, “Women on Top” In. DAVIS, Natalie Zemon. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987. 124–151; INGRAM, Martin, “Scolding women cucked or washed?” A Crisis in Gender Relations in Early Modern England” In. WALKER, Garthine – KERMODE, Jennifer (Eds.) *Women and the Courts in Early Modern England*. London: UCL Press, 1984. 48–80; SHEPHARD, Alexandra, “Manhood, Credit and Patriarchy in Early Modern England” In. *Past & Present* 167. (2000), 75–10; UNDERDOWN, David, “The Taming of the Scold: The Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England” In. FLETCHER, A. – STEVENSON, J. *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 116–136.

¹² UNDERDOWN 1985: 118–119.

¹³ INGRAM 1984: 47–48.

¹⁴ UNDERDOWN 1985: 117–118; CAPP 1996: 119–120.

keeper at home, as the tortoise seldom peeps out of its shell".¹⁵ This is also a reference to the representation of the wifely virtues¹⁶ (*uxoriae virtutes*) in Geoffrey Whitney's emblem book, the *Choice of Emblemes* from 1586.

Marriage and family were the two key notions related to the idea of social order, both in religious thought and contemporary political theory. The primary normative context of the ideas on marriage, order and hierarchy was of course provided by the Bible. The argumentation of the texts analysed in this chapter, always goes back, in the form of either explicit or implicit references, to the relevant Biblical passages. The questions of superiority and inferiority in marriage are discussed primarily in St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. Such notions on male–female relations will constantly surface in the Puritan sermons and conduct books: "21. *Submittynge your selues one to another in the feare of God.* 22. *Wyues, submit your selues vnto your owne husbandes, as vnto the Lorde:* 23. *For the husbände is the head of the wyfe, euen as Christe is the head of the Church: & he is the sauior of the bodie*".¹⁷

As for political theory, a detailed analysis was provided by Susan D. Amussen, who examined the pre-Lockean and Lockean conceptions of family. She claims that from early modern political theory before Locke, who defined the family as private, a distinction between family and society was completely absent. It means, that an analogy (not equity) was drawn between the general make-up of society and the family, thus, the family could be perceived as a 'little commonwealth'. As part of this, the father (his role being analogous with the king's) rules and all members of the household (the wife, the children and the servants) owe obedience

¹⁵ Qtd. in CAPP 1996: 119.

¹⁶ See Appendix; The side-note to the emblem is as follows: "*This representes the vertues of a wife, / Her finger, / staies her tonge to runne at large. / The modest lookes, doe shewe her honest life. / The keys, declare shee hath a care, and chardge, / Of husbandes goodes: let him goe where he please, / The Tortoyse warnes, at home to spend her daies.*" GREEN, Henry (Ed.), *Whitney's Choice of Emblemes: A Fac-Simile Reprint*. London: Lovell Reeve & Co., 1866. 93b.

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:21–23. (Bishops 1568). In the thesis, I refer to the texts of two English Bible translations: Bishops' Bible (1568) and the King James Version (KJV).

and loyalty to him. They also have to acknowledge his superiority above all.¹⁸ The idea of the family–commonwealth analogy was most explicitly expressed in Sir Thomas Smith’s *De Republica Anglorum* (1583). He maintained the belief that the source of all political formations (the city, the kingdom and basically all civil societies) derived from the family.¹⁹

However, if one moves from (political) theory to practice and examines the other side of the coin, the bleak picture drawn by the theoretical works can to some extent, be refuted. As Bernard Capp argues, female dominance was emphatically there in many cases in early modern society. For example, the position of the widow – especially in the case of wealthy families – was peculiar as compared to other women’s. After the death of the husband, if they decided not to remarry, they could replace their husbands as the head of the family. Also, even non-widows could occupy leading positions, not necessarily within the family, but within the household. In many cases the household was rather matriarchal, as women were responsible for running it and decision-making in most matters was their domain.²⁰

Even though theory and practice did not match, the fears and insecurities that were characteristic of early modern English society, especially around the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, can be well reconstructed based on the somewhat exaggerated accounts of pamphleteers, clericals and social theorists. By relying on the popular marriage and household conduct books,²¹ all containing normative knowledge with relation to the roles of

¹⁸ The obedience of family members to the superior head of the household/family (embodying a variety of roles, that of husband, father and master), fits smoothly into the theory of obedience and respect for one’s superior propagated in the period on a Biblical basis, as illustrated by the Puritan theologian Thomas Beard’s argumentation in his pamphlet *The Theatre of God’s Judgements* (1597): “Now as its is a thing required by law and reason, that children beare that honour and reverence to their natural parents which is commanded; so it is necessary by the same respect, that all subjects performe that duty of honour and obedience to their Lords, Princes, and Kings, which is not derogatory to the glory of God; & the rather, because they are as it were their fathers in supplying duty towards their subjects which father owe to their children: as namely in maintaining their discipline of God’s Church; to which two ends they were ordained. For this cause the Scripture biddeth every man to be subject to the higher powers; not so much to avoid the punishment which might befall the contrary, as because it is agreeable to the will of God.” BEARD, Thomas, *The Theatre of God’s Judgement*. London: Printed by S. I. & M. H., 1648. The Second Booke, Chap. II. 160.

¹⁹ AMUSSEN 1985: 197–199.

²⁰ CAPP 1996: 118–119.

²¹ GATAKER, Thomas, *Marriage Duties Briefely Couched Together*. London: Printed by William Jones, for William Bladen, 1620; GOUGE, William, *Of Domesticall Duties*, Puritan Reprints, 2006 [1622]; EDGAR, Thomas,

men and women in society, and some of the well-known pamphlets and sermons,²² in which the anti-feminine sentiment is well-detectable, I will try to reconstruct some elements of the misogynistic discourse of the period. Partly this discourse provides the background of the literary texts to be analysed later.

When discussing the inferiority of women in the early modern period, theorists turned to two main traditions: anatomy and, as mentioned earlier, theology. Since theological explanations dominate in the examined texts, I will discuss that direction in more detail. However, the two explanations are inseparable, as anatomical theories²³ were used to support the ideas of female inferiority and passivity. From the viewpoint of anatomy, two main traditions should be highlighted. These characterized the perception of the female body in the medieval and early modern periods. The two medical traditions are the Aristotelian and the Galenic. It is important to emphasize here, that Aristotle treated the female as the passive element in reproduction, requiring the active male element in the ensouling of the fetus.²⁴ Galen claimed that women have all the same reproductive organs as men, but as they remained internal, they are and invisible, therefore mysterious. This ‘problem’ was complemented by the menstrual flow, which was perceived to be a further element to their monstrosity and uncleanness. These anatomic ideas supported the idea of the female being lower in the hierarchy of creatures than the male.²⁵

The Lawes Resolutions of Women's Rights. Clark, New Jersey: The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd., 2005 [1632]; WHATELY, William, *Bride-Bush, or Directions for Married Persons: Describing the Duties common to both, And peculiar to each of them*. Bristol: Printed by William Pine, in Wine-Street, 1768 [1619].

²² LATIMER 1842 [1550]: 70–84; BEARD 1648 [1597]; KNOX, John, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, 1558; STUBBES, Philip, *The Anatomie of Abuses in England in Shakspeare's Youth*, A. D. 1583. London: Published for the New Shakspeare Society by N. Turner & Co., London, 1882 [1583].

²³ The two anatomical models, the one-sex and the two-sex-models will be referred to in the third chapter of the thesis, as part of the discussion on crossdressing.

²⁴ LINDEMANN, Mary, *Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 12–17.

²⁵ LINDEMANN 1999: 12–17; BERRIOT-SALVADORE, Eveline, “The Discourse of Medicine and Science” In. FARGE, Arlette – DAVIS, Natalie Zemon. *A History of Women in the West, Volume III: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*. London: Belknap Press, 1993. 348–353.

Hierarchy was an important notion, often referred to in conduct books that prescribed normative knowledge concerning the affairs of marriage. The Genesis, the creation of man and woman was perceived to be the starting point and strongest basis of order. As the Bible was the ultimate source of normative knowledge, conduct books turned to it for legitimation of the notion of man's primary and superior nature:

By the order of it; in that The man was first created, and not the woman, and therefore the man hath the Birth-right, as the first born in the family; in regard whereof God speaketh of Eve to Adam, as of Abel to Cain, Thy desire shall be subject to his; and he shall rule over thee. By the manner of it; in that The woman was made of the man, and not the man of the woman: she had her being at first from him, as their children now have from them: and in that regard is the woman said to be the image and glory of the man, and not the man for the woman: she was made to be as a help unto him and it is a rule general.²⁶

And even the idea that the marriage as the basic unit of society is analogous to a 'little commonwealth' is corroborated by Biblical origins, and surfaces not only in political theory, but religious treatises as well.²⁷ For example in William Gouge's (1575–1653) *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622), one of the most famous conduct books of the Stuart period:

[...] the family is a seminary of the Church and Commonwealth. It is a bee-hive, in which is the stock, and out of which are sent many swarms of bees: for in families are all sorts of people bred and brought up: and out of families are they lent into the Church and Commonwealth.²⁸

Social order therefore is understood as divine order, both in the primacy of the male and the basic make-up of society (little commonwealths forming a kingdom). What is more, female

²⁶ GATAKER 1620. n. p.

²⁷ The same idea surfaces in William Whately's *Bride-Bush, or a Direction for Married Persons* (1619), claiming that godly order and social order are one and it is inherited (written in) the conscience of all believers: "The law of God, the law of nature, the laws of well-ordered societies, do enjoin it. It is written in every man's breast, and none can chuse, but read it in his own conscience, if long continuance in wilful sinning, have not put his eyes quite out." WHATELY 1768 [1619]: 6.

²⁸ GOUGE 2006 [1622] Book I. 8; 12.

inferiority in terms of marriage duties and even common law is further strengthened by a Biblical explanation going back to the Genesis. Women's suffering in childbirth, as well as their wifely virtues of subordination, obedience, silence are linked to the concept of the original sin:

Returne a little to Genesis, in the 3. Chap. whereof is declared our first parents transgression in eating the forbidden fruit: [...] Eve because shee had helped to seduce her husband hath inflicted on her, an especiall bane. In sorrow shalt thou bring forth thy children, thy desires shall bee subject to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. See here the reason of that which I touched before, that Women have no voyse in Parliament, They make no Lawes, they consent to none, they abrogate none. [...] The common Law here shaketh hand with Divinitie.²⁹

Consequently, the most important ideal men and women were supposed to be working towards together was the maintaining of marriage. A stable marriage was the mirror-image of divine order, which, following the lines of this reasoning, was the basis of social order in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In order to comply, both men and women had roles and tasks to fulfil. Men were warned to maintain their authority within the family:

The husband's special duties are referred to two heads; he must govern his wife, and maintain her; and as our Lord Jesus is to this church, so must he be to his wife, a head and saviour. As for government, two things also are required of him: one, that he keep his authority; the other, that he use it.³⁰

Keeping and using authority, as well as being able to provide for the family economically (though women could be significant providers as well),³¹ were the most significant male roles to be fulfilled within society. A man's masculinity and credibility depended partly on his ability

²⁹ EDGAR 2005 [1632]. Booke I; Sect. III; 6.

³⁰ WHATELY 1768 [1619]. Chap. VIII; 47.

³¹ CAPP 1999: 127.

to be able to exert authority in a social order built on honour, ranks and credit.³² Therefore, it is not surprising that weak men were seen just as threatening as dominant women.³³

The cited works have all drawn a parallel between divine order and social order, making God's orders the basis of their argumentation. Marriage, as referred to earlier, in late Tudor and early Stuart England was perceived to be the cornerstone of a well-working society. Therefore, the subversion of marriage roles was the beginning of social disorder. Contemporary criticism often explained social insecurity with the operation of the 'unruly, disorderly and ungodly' women, transgressing the boundaries of marriage (which often simply meant having a voice): "*Where the woman stands upon norms of equality with her husband, much more of she will needs account herself his better the very root of all good marriage is withered, and the fountain thereof dried up: out of place, out of peace.*"³⁴

The previous quotation comes from a William Whately's (1583–1639) conduct book, *Bride-Bush, or a Direction for Married Persons*, published in 1619. 'The crisis in gender relations' as manifested in subverted marriage roles, surfaced emphatically at the very beginning of our examined period as well. Hugh Latimer (1490–1555), one of the martyrs of Anglicanism, Edward VI's chaplain, burnt at the stake by Mary I, in one of his last sermons preached before the king, warned him of the dangers of the general 'marriage crisis' characterising England at the time:

For the love of God, take an order for marriages here in England. For here is marriage for pleasure and voluptuousness, and for good; and so that they may join land to land, and possessions to possessions, they care for no more here in England. And that is the cause of so much adultery, and so much breach of wedlock in the noblemen and gentlemen, and so much divorcing.³⁵

³² SHEPHARD 2000: 85–87.

³³ DAVIS 1987: 124–151.

³⁴ WHATELY, Chap. XIV. 76.

³⁵ LATIMER 1842 [1550]: 74.

Latimer goes further and advises severe punishment upon those who transgress the boundaries of the general order of marriage. He goes as far as proposing death penalty for adulterers. Latimer's strict views were not uncommon in the period, this idea is echoed in other works as well.

With the emergence of Puritanism during the rule of Elizabeth I, concerns over the subversion of marriage hierarchy were voiced. One of the most interesting texts dealing with the problem was Philip Stubbes' (1555–1610) *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583).³⁶ Stubbes was one of the most famous Puritan pamphleteers of the period. After finishing his studies in Cambridge, he started to travel across England to gain experiences and an insight into social problems. These experiences then formed the basis of his comprehensive work on contemporary English society. The book quickly gained popularity and went through several editions by the end of the sixteenth century. Stubbes realised that a significant transformation was going on in English society. He created a system in which all aspects of social evils (from dancing to wearing make-up) were touched upon. In the first part of his two-volume synthesis, he reflected on the questions of marriage, adultery and 'the horryble vice of whoredom' as well.

The idea of punishment therefore surfaces in Stubbes' argumentation as well. Latimer, simply proposed capital punishment for adultery: "*I would wish that adultery should be punished with death*".³⁷ Stubbes also proposes other methods of punishment: "*some burne them quick, some hang them on gibbets, some cut off their heds, some their armes, legs and hands, some put out their eyes*".³⁸ What is more, to highlight the severity of the problem, he borrows these methods from those he termed 'heathens', 'barbaric' and 'ungodly'. In his view, England was in a far worse state, if its society was more willing to tolerate whoredom and the transgression of marriage boundaries, than heathen, barbaric communities.

³⁶ The second part was published under the title *The display of corruptions requiring reformation* in the same year.

³⁷ LATIMER 1842 [1550]: 75.

³⁸ STUBBES 1882 [1583]: 92.

As for order and hierarchy, a further remark should be made upon the questions of order, disorder and the subversion of roles on a grander scale. As mentioned in the introduction, the emergence of the anti-female sentiment in England and a general misogynistic atmosphere corresponded with the emergence of two female monarchs on the throne. Connected to this, at the end of the Catholic Mary's rule, in 1558, John Knox (1513–1572), Scottish minister, theologian and the main advocate of the Scottish Reformation devoted a well-known pamphlet to the 'monstrous rule' of female monarchs. Though not unprecedented in history, Knox treats female rulers as the ultimate transgressors of divine order, weaklings, who overrule patriarchal order (the fundamental order of God and nature):

For who can deny but it is repugnant to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to lead and conduct such as do see? That the weak, the sick, and impotent persons shall nourish and keep the whole and strong? And finally, that the foolish, mad, and frenetic shall govern the discreet, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be all women, compared unto man in bearing of authority. For their sight in civil regiments is but blindness; their strength, weakness; their counsel, foolishness; and judgement, frenzy, if it be rightly considered.³⁹

His main argumentation follows the general lines of discourse of the period. However, besides the Bible, Knox's theory of the unnaturalness of female monarchs is supplemented with other sources as well: other authorities containing age-old and repetitively referred normative knowledge, such as Aristotle's *Politics* or *The Digest*.

To conclude this chapter, we must emphasize that in the general context of a society affected by a myriad of problems and crises, the problem of transgression and subversion were bound to be in the focus of authorities, social theorists and of course, literary works. In the next chapter, the main focus will be on a narrower category of disorderly women in the mirror of two genres, rogue literature and broadside ballads.

³⁹ KNOX 1558. n. p.

2. From the ‘Inverse Angel in the House’ to the Cold-Blooded Murderer

2.1. *The female criminal*

In this chapter I will focus on the representations of a narrower category of disorderly women in Tudor and Stuart popular literature, the female criminal. Before I would turn to the analysis of the texts, as the narrower context of the problem, I will summarize the most important features and activities of the ‘female criminal’ in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.

As mentioned in the introductory part of the thesis, the problem of criminality was located by most social critiques in an urban setting. Thus, it is necessary to sketch what opportunities women had in an urban context in early modern England.

As migration intensified towards the cities of the realm, the proportion of young, single women among all the migrants arriving to London became significant, amounting to about a quarter.⁴⁰ Women, as well as young men, entered the city gates with the idea of a bright future, hoping for the myriad of opportunities the city could offer. However, most channels of upward mobility were not open to them.⁴¹ Therefore, mostly marginalisation and pauperization awaited them in London. Consequently, most of them were forced to undertake illegal jobs for low wages, outside the city walls, in infamous wards such as Southwark or Whitechapel.⁴² However, not only migrants, but city-dwellers from a poorer background could fall victim to these tendencies. Many young servants, apprentices and maids were constrained to the margins of society because of their embittered relationship with their masters. Most ‘masterless men’ had to flee because of ill-treatment, physical abuse or untenable work hours and low wages. In the case of women, this was often aggravated by rape, resulting in pregnancy, dismissal and the

⁴⁰ BEIER, A. L. “Vagrants and the Social Order in Early Modern England” In. *Past & Present*, Vol. 64., No. 7. (1974), 6.

⁴¹ VELICH, Andrea, “Szegénykérdés a 16. századi Londonban” [The Problem of Poverty in Sixteenth-Century London] In. ERDŐDY Gábor – HERMANN Róbert (Eds.) *Magyarhontól az Újvilágig. [From Hungary to the New World]*. Budapest: Argumentum, 2002. 16.

⁴² BEIER 1978: 208.

consequent marginalization,⁴³ that, according to the contemporary perception, could easily result in criminal behaviour.

However, the figure of the female in criminal cases was attributed less significance in historical literature, than male offenders'. Pieter Spierenburg discusses this problem in detail, highlighting that women, when represented in the context of crime, violence and aggression, are often placed in the victim's position and shown as the passive sufferer, rather than an active agent or actor.⁴⁴ Moreover, even when women's violence is emphasized, the conclusion is usually drawn, that in early modern Europe's culture, where violence was a ubiquitous phenomenon, looking at the tableau of all violent crimes, women as active agents played only a marginal role in physically violent acts, the main scope of their criminal activity being only verbal aggression.⁴⁵ Verbal offences were as much female-specific as brawling was with men, and it even constituted a separate criminal category (*scold*). This can be attributed to the main sphere of women's activities: as they were not at all confined to their homes and were allowed into public and communal spaces, such as the market, the washhouse and different shops, they became the bearers of news and gossip. They knew everything and made sure that everyone else did too, however, this intense exchange of information often resulted in conflicts and could lead to nasty remarks and a variety of verbal offences.⁴⁶

Apart from verbal aggression, there is only a limited amount of specialized cases where female agency is emphasized. Infanticide was considered to be a gender-specific type of criminal behaviour, an offence hardly committed by men.⁴⁷ This specific crime is going to be the backbone of my analysis when it comes to broadside ballads, thus I find it important to

⁴³ BEIER 1978: 217.

⁴⁴ SPIERENBURG, Pieter, "How Violent Were Women? Court Cases in Amsterdam, 1650–1810" In: *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés*. Vol 1., No. 1. 9–28. (1997), 9–10.

⁴⁵ NOLDE, Dorothea, "The Language of Violence: Symbolic Body Parts in Marital Conflicts in Early Modern France" In: BODY-GENDROT, Sophie – SPIERENBURG, Pieter (Eds.) *Violence in Europe: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Dordrecht/New York: Springer, 2008. 141–159.

⁴⁶ CASTAN, Nicole, "Criminals" In: DAVIS, Natalie Zemon – FARGE, Arlette (Eds.) *A History of Women in the West, Volume III: Renaissance and the Enlightenment Paradoxes*. London: Belknap Press, 1993. 481–482.

⁴⁷ SPIERENBURG 1997: 10.

highlight some of the early modern approaches to infanticide here.⁴⁸ In general, and this was true in most territories of early modern Europe, legislation intensified against women who concealed their pregnancy or took the life of their own child. This is not to say that infanticide was on the rise in our period and thus had to be legislated more severely. The practice supposedly existed for centuries, but along with the general trends in criminal legislation and the attention directed towards the ‘deviant elements’ in society from the sixteenth century on, infanticide fell under the control of authorities more emphatically and thus was included in legal codes all over Europe. The first region to take up the issue was the Holy Roman Empire as early as 1532: infanticide was already included in the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*. According to both popular opinion and the legal regulation, not only the act itself, but the concealment of one’s pregnancy was punishable by death, as concealment could mean premeditation directly leading to murder.⁴⁹ The same conditions were included in the English legal act⁵⁰ regulating the handling of infanticide almost a century later in 1624,⁵¹ though a less comprehensive legislation existed since the reign of Henry II (1154–1189).⁵²

Though statistically speaking women, counting the cases of infanticide as well, constituted the minority of offenders with their representation being between 10% and 20%, in

⁴⁸ For the multiple interpretations of infanticide see: WALKER, Garthine, “Just stories: telling tales of infant death in early modern England” In: MIKESSELL, Margaret – SEEFF, Adele (Eds.) *Culture and Change: Attending to Early Modern Women*. Associated University Presses, 2003. 98–115. (Later referred to as: WALKER 2003/a).

⁴⁹ LEWIS, Margaret Brannan, *Infanticide and Abortion in Early Modern Germany*. London: Routledge, 2016. eBook.

⁵⁰ An Act to Prevent the Murthering of Bastard Children, 1624: “Whereas many lewd women that have been delivered of Bastard Children to avoid their Shame and to auoyde Punishment, doe secretlie bury, or conceale the Death of their Children & after if the Child be found dead the said Women doe alledge that the said Childe was borne dead, whereas it falleth out sometimes (although hardly it is to be proved) that the said Child or Children were murdered by the said Woman their lewd Mothers, or by their Assent or Procurement: For the Preventing therefore of this great Mischiefe, be it enacted by this Present Parliament, That If any Woman [...] be delivered of any Issue of her Body Male or Female, which being born alive, should by the Lawes of this Realme be a Bastard, and that she endeavour privately, either by drowing or secretlie burying thereof, or any other way, either by herself or the procuring of others, so to conceal the Death thereof, as that it may doe come to Light, whether it was borne dead or not, but be concealed: In every such Case the said Mother so offending shall suffer Death as in case of Murder, except such Mother can make Proof by one Witness at the least, that the Child (whose Death was by her so intended to be concealed) was borne dead.” *The Statutes of the Realm, Vol. 4., Part. 2*. London, 1819. 1234–1235.

⁵¹ Martin, Randall, *Women, Murder and Equity in Early Modern England*. London: Routledge, 2008. 156–157.

⁵² CASTAN 1995: 477.

criminal records, their activity or passivity in cases of violent, serious or even petty crime, is only a matter of interpretation.⁵³ The offences were concealed in many cases. This, in most cases, is explained by the relations of patriarchal society and traditional gender roles within a marriage. It is difficult to reconstruct how violence within the family could manifest, as due to underreporting, court materials show practically no records of serious assaults between husband and wife. Thus, these records can be misleading as a consequence of underreporting, which is attributable to the counter-productiveness of such allegations. On the one hand, women's reports could lead to the intensification of the husband's violent behaviour. On the other hand, men reporting violent wives could cause public humiliation.⁵⁴ Dominant, violent or even murderous women could represent a world upside down,⁵⁵ reversing gender roles and that of marital hierarchy, hence breaking the rules of society. The dangers of reversion were highlighted by Natalie Zemon Davis, who argued that rituals connected to the reversing of roles could either strengthen the social order, or, to the contrary, when leaving the realm of rituals (carnival, feasts, comedy) behind and entering the sphere of the everyday and the serious, they could challenge the existing social order and question women's original place in it.⁵⁶ Hence, women taking up masculine roles (even if its connected to crime and aggression, activities already perceived to be norm-breaking) were dangerous to the established norms of society.

As for murderous women, another aspect should be taken into consideration. The killing of the husband carried a strongly symbolic meaning for contemporaries. Legally, it was considered petty treason.⁵⁷ It differed from high treason, but still counted as a sin punishable

⁵³ WALKER, Garthine, *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 75. (Later referred to as WALKER 2003/b).

⁵⁴ SHARPE, J. A. "Last Dying Speeches: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England." In *Past & Present*, Vol. 107., No. 1. (1985), 32.

⁵⁵ NOLDE 2008: 146.

⁵⁶ DAVIS 1987: 124–151.

⁵⁷ See the explanations of contemporary legal handbooks written for the justices of peace: "*So that is a clarke doe maliciously kill his Prelate (or superiour) to whom he oweth obedience: or a wife, her husband: or a seruant the master, or maistresse, (who haue a ciuile soueraigntie ouer them:) this will be Petit Treason*" LAMBARDE, William, *Eirenarcha, or of The Office of the Iustices of Peace, in Foure Bookes*. London, 1588. 248; "*The wife maliciously killeth her husband, this is pettie treason. 25 Ed. 3. cap. 2. The husband maliciously killeth his wife,*

by death and meant either the betrayal or the murder of someone's superior.⁵⁸ Thus, the answers (the subsequent punishment) given to mariticide and patricide highlighted women's place, roles and most important virtues (subordination, obedience) in society. This idea in legal thinking relates to the analogy drawn between the family and the commonwealth in political theory and theology, referred to in the previous chapter.

Consequently, women who committed assaults (theft, infanticide, mariticide, patricide) were considered to be threatening and were often treated as deviants. Deviants, in a sense that they overruled the norms of society concerning the ordinary scope of women's (criminal) behaviour, thus diverging from normal gendered demeanour.⁵⁹ Hence, murderous women however low in numbers, were made to be public spectacles,⁶⁰ often represented in street literature, in sensationalistic accounts, ballads, pamphlets and plays. Even though pieces of street literature cannot be used by the historian to reconstruct the course of events as they happened in real life, a valuable insight can be gained into the contemporary attitudes⁶¹ towards the female criminal by examining the language and the most common themes.

Before looking at the representations of the problem in literary sources, I will outline another aspect of the criminal activity of women: the crimes of poverty. As in the case of murder and physical violence, women were also underrepresented – both in the official records and literary accounts – in crimes of property. Whenever women were discussed, they were either shown as timid, being mere accessories to men, or engaging only in petty crime.⁶² Based on

this is but murder. The reason of this difference is, for that the one is in subjection and oweth obedience, and not the other. The wife and the servant doe conspire to kill the husband, and the servant killeth him in the wives absence, this is pettie treason in them both. The wife and the stranger do conspire to kill her husband, and he killeth her husband in the wives absence, this is no Petie treason in the wife, but murder in the stranger." DALTON, Michael, *The COUNTRY Justice*. London, 1655. 293.

⁵⁸ MUCHEMBLED, Robert, *A History of the Devil: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003. 141–142.; CRESSY, David, *Dangerous Talk. Scandalous, Seditious, and Treasonable Speech in Pre-Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 39–42.

⁵⁹ WALKER 2003/b: 75.

⁶⁰ CLARK, Sandra, *Women and Crime Literature in Early Modern England*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 11.

⁶¹ CAPP, Bernard, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 20–21.

⁶² WALKER 2003/b: 159.

Garthine Walker's thorough research on the representation of women in theft and related offences (such as trading with stolen items) this stereotype can, to some extent, be confuted. Based on court records from seventeenth-century Cheshire, she proved that trends in theft for women and men are broadly comparable. Women did not only engage in petty crime, stealing less valuable objects, but representations in lower and higher category theft (based on the value of the stolen goods) were generally proportionate. However, it is true that there were specialized types of crime, or rather types of stolen goods that were unique to either men or women. Men were generally more inclined to stealing larger bodied animals, for instance, they were over-represented in horse theft, whereas far more women were prosecuted for stealing clothes or linen. What is more, many of them were involved in trading networks, where these clothes and linen, the valuable commodities of early modern society, changed hands.⁶³

Therefore, treating women as accessories to men, being involved only in petty crime, would be misleading. However, literary sources detailing the world of crime, often work with stereotypes and common misconceptions, deriving from the expectations of society. And here, London plays a key role. As mentioned before, contemporaries viewed London as a site of evil, a sinful city with its growing underworld and organized criminal network appearing in rogue literature, a counter-world based on the idea of institutions (guilds, the government).⁶⁴ The figure of the female criminal and her place in society is embedded into this world, replicating roles perceived to be normal in society.

2. 2. Women and the republic of vagabonds

Rogue literature cannot be defined as a unified genre, it is rather an 'umbrella term',⁶⁵ as the texts that belong to this category were linked by thematic similarities, rather than structural or

⁶³ WALKER 2003/b: 159–165.

⁶⁴ BURKE, Peter, "Perceiving a Counter-Culture" In. BURKE, Peter. *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 70.

⁶⁵ However, for the sake of clarity, I will refer to it as a 'genre' throughout the thesis.

stylistic correspondences. It did not develop in the sixteenth century, among its medieval sources one can find for example fables that often borrowed their protagonists from everyday life, featuring rogues, vagabonds and criminals (for instance, the Robin Hood-stories). In the sixteenth century, many European parallels can be found, written in the respective vernaculars, such as the German *Liber Vagatorum*, the Italian *Il Vagabondo* or the Spanish picaresque.⁶⁶

The following analysis is based on the four well-known texts of rogue literature: John Awdeley's *The Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1561), which could serve as a model for the works of Thomas Harman (*A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursitors*, 1566), Thomas Dekker (*The Belman of London*, 1608)⁶⁷ and Robert Greene's cony-catching pamphlets (first published around 1592). The featured categories, the material of canting dictionaries, detailing the distinct language used by thieves (though they were re-worked as the century progressed, as some 50 years passed between the publication of Awdeley's and Dekker's books), the fictitious rituals and hierarchies of criminals presented are very similar in the four chosen pieces of rogue literature. The odd one out seems to be Greene's body of works. While Awdeley, Harman and Dekker were thinking in categories and presented the taxonomy of criminals to the reader, Greene's pamphlets seem to be synthesizing these categories. He included them in a variety of narratives all set in the counter-world of thieves and rogues.

As for the representation of women, England seems to be unique. As compared for example to Rome, the absence of religious, especially Catholic categories is apparent. Which is, of course, understandable in the case of a Protestant country. In Catholic Rome, fake priests, fake pilgrims, beggars carrying the images of saints, etc. were in the focus of such works – a problem that seems to have been concerning the dwellers of the city of Rome. In England, the

⁶⁶ SULLIVAN, Garrett – Linda WOODBRIDGE, "Popular Culture in Print" In: KINNEY, Arthur F. (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 270–271.

⁶⁷ This is not the only text, in which Dekker deals with the world of rogues and thieves. His *Lanthorne and Candle-light* (1609) focuses on the same matters.

focus was partly on the various categories of female rogues, such as *dells*, *doxies*, *walking morts* or *bawdy baskets*.⁶⁸

What could explain the overt emphasis on women in Elizabethan and Jacobean London? It is by now a generally accepted theory, that the period between 1560 and 1640 witnessed a ‘crisis in gender relations’. These decades were characterised by a number of prosecutions against disorderly women, such as scolds, witches, women involved in mariticide or infanticide. In sum, women who were perceived to be threatening to the patriarchal order, and therefore contributed to the destabilisation of social order.⁶⁹ This is also evidenced by the literature of the period.

In the works of rogue literature, the representation of women can be approached from the direction of the two main (stereotypical) roles of women. On the one hand, subordination to men, and on the other hand, the role they played in the ‘female spheres’, the family and the household (the responsibility of keeping the house, attending to their husband’s needs, etc.). The overwhelming majority of descriptions focus on these two, and though their roles are turned upside down, and women are placed in the context of a counter-world, their representations are not so different from the roles they played in the normal world.

At first, it is important to look at the way a criminal career could begin in the underworld of London in the sixteenth century. In most cases the reason for a girl’s fall is linked to the death or neglect of the parents, insufficient upbringing or the cruelty of their masters. The environment could play a decisive role in the process. If one was born as the child of criminals, the path to a life of crime was almost unavoidable – this is an idea not unfamiliar to the modern mind either.

⁶⁸ BURKE 2005: 67.

⁶⁹ CAPP 2003: 21–22; JONES, Karen, *Gender and Crime in Late Medieval England. The Local Courts in Kent, 1450–1560*. London: Boydell Press, 2006. 10.

As for Harman's (1566) and Dekker's (1608) descriptions of these first steps, the idea of underlying causes seems quite similar. Almost 50 years passed between the publication of the two works, however, mentalities were subject to slow change. Both authors highlighted the decisive role of early breeding, though Harman focuses more on the environment: "*these wylde Dels being traded vp with their monstrous mothers, muste of necessitie be as euil or worse then their parentes, for neyter we gather grapes from greene bryars, neyter fygges from thistels*".⁷⁰ Whereas Dekker names a few possible and actual causes of the downfall of a girl at such a young age: "*yong wenches that either by death of parents, the villanie of Executors, or the crueltie of maisters and mistresses fall into this infamous and damnable course of life*".⁷¹

Once a young girl started her criminal career, she was most likely to fall into the hands of the upright man, who, as a superior would be responsible for each aspect of their lives. This is analogous to the hierarchy of a 'normal' society. In this regard, these women do not subvert the roles that were assigned to them in the social/divine order. In each text, the upright man is described as the 'ruler of the underworld', and every man and woman in the hierarchy was subordinate to him. They were depicted similarly to the villain-heroes of late Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. Their determination to lead a corrupt lifestyle might even remind one of the famous line of Shakespeare's Richard III ("*I am determind to prove a villain*"). As Dekker sums up: "*Yea not without punishment by stockes, whyppinges, and imprisonment [...] yet notwithstandinge they haue so good lyking in their lewde leacherous loyteringe, that fully quicklye all their punishments be forgotten*".⁷² These villainous men, reigning over the lives, careers and bodies of their women, were indeed superior to each female member of a given gang: "*He may also command any of their women, which they call Doxies, to serue his turne*".⁷³

⁷⁰ HARMAN, Thomas, *A Caveat or Warning for Common Cursetors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds*. London: Reprinted by T. Bensley, 1814 [1566]. 58.

⁷¹ DEKKER, Thomas, "The Belman of London" In. *The Non-Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker, Vol. III*. London: Printed by Hasel, Watson & Viney. 1885 [1608]. 106–107.

⁷² HARMAN 1814 [1566]: 13–14.

⁷³ AWDELEY, John, *The Fraternitye of Vacabondes*. London: Early English Text Society, 1869 [1561]. 4.

This last remark, *to serue his turne* has sexual connotations, meaning that women's tasks entailed fulfilling his commands in all areas of life. This can be interpreted as a sign of complete subordination.

This control is well illustrated by a specific path a woman could run within the hierarchy of the republic of vagabonds. The girls, at the beginning of their career, fell into the category of the so-called *dell*. They were reserved to the upright man to be deflowered: "*A Dell is a younge wench, able for generation, and not yet known or broken by the vpright man*".⁷⁴ This idea is probably related to *ius primae noctis*, the supposed legal right of feudal lords of having sexual relations with subordinate women on their wedding night. Dekker's characterization of the *dell* shows borrowing (or at least knowledge of) Harman's work and extends the description further, by showing the next level (*doper*) a woman could enter after having been broken by the upright man:

A Dell is a young wench, ripe for the Act of generation, but as yet not spoyled of heir maidenhead: these Dells are reserued as dishes for the Vpright-men, for none but they must haue the first tast of them; & after the Vpright-men haue deflowred them, (which is commonly when they are very gong), then are then free for any of the brother-hood, and are called no more but Dopers.⁷⁵

The highest-ranking of these women were the *doxies*, usually described as the lovers or wives of the upright men. They, on the one hand, were under more protection within the world of criminals than any other women. What is more, there was a strong bond between them and their masters: their relationship was built on cooperation not only with respect to sexual relations, but in thievery as well. However, not only were these women protected and seen as partners in crime, their subordinate role was also apparent, as they had to serve their masters/husbands, even if it meant jeopardizing their own freedom:

⁷⁴ HARMAN 1814 [1566]: 57.

⁷⁵ DEKKER 1885 [1608]: 106.

[...] they come to such good gentlemens houses, if any searche be made or they suspected for pilfering clothes of hedges, or breaking of houses which they commonly do, when the owners bee eyther at the market, church, or other ways occupied about their business, either robbe some sely man or woman by the hye way, as many times they do. Then they hygh them into wodes, great thicketts, and other ruffe corners, where they lye lurking three or foure dayes together, and haue meate and drinke brought them by theyr mortes and doxes.⁷⁶

This is a set of roles that belongs to the domestic sphere. Other categories also strengthen this image. A typical crime a woman could commit, especially in an urban setting – even in the mirror of legal records⁷⁷ – was the stealing of linen. This is embodied by the character of the *bawdy basket*. As the name suggests, she was walking the streets of London with a basket in her arm and took drying clothes, linen and various small accessories: “*These Baudye Baskets bee also women, and goe with baskets and capcases on their armes, where in they have laces, pinnes, nedles, whyte inkel, and round sylke gyrdels of all colours. These will bye conneskinnes, and steale linnen clothes of on hedges*”.⁷⁸ The sheer existence of this category sheds light on an important issue of contemporary social reality. Even though stealing linen counted as petty crime and something that was hard to control, in everyday life, especially in the case of poor people, who owned relatively few garments and found the stolen items particularly hard to replace, this could cause real struggles, hence the emphasis on the problem in these works of fiction.⁷⁹

As for the domestic sphere, marriage – being the ultimate manifestation of patriarchal order – also played an important role in these texts. Not only in the case of the upright men and their doxies, but also in the case of women who were hiding behind the false pretence of normality (in this case, marriage), but nevertheless lived the life of a criminal. The category of

⁷⁶ HARMAN 1814 [1566]: 15.

⁷⁷ CASTAN 1995: 485; JONES 2006: 43.

⁷⁸ HARMAN 1814 [1566]: 48.

⁷⁹ BURKE 2005: 71.

the married criminal can be further subdivided. Those who were actually married, the so-called *autem mortes* and the *walking mortes*, who only pretended to be married, lying that their husbands were soldiers and died on duty. The word *autem* in contemporary cant referred to women who were married in a church, though Harman's description of them is somewhat ironic, saying "*they be as chaste as a cowe*".⁸⁰

They usually earned their living by stealing and often used their children for this purpose (this is where we can detect the first steps of a criminal career): "*These pilfer clothes of hedges, some of them go with children of ten or xii. yeares of age, of time and place serue for their purpose, they wil send them into some house as the window to steale and robbe*".⁸¹ Furthermore, both categories of these women – married or just pretending to be – were, as well as the others, subordinate to the upright men, being at the same time dependent on and terrified of him: "*they are quickly shaken out of all by the vpright men, and they are in a mareulous feare to cary any thing abot them that is of any value*".⁸² Hence, marriage in this context was not only a protective and honourable institution (as a matter of fact, neither was it in the world of 'normality'), subordination also meant defencelessness.

The images of defencelessness and exploitation, stemming in the patriarchal male–female relations, are mirrored in Greene's pamphlets as well. As mentioned earlier, Greene did not describe a hierarchy. Rather, he embedded the categories hitherto existing in the texts of Awdeley, Harman and others in his own narratives, and grouped them with respect to the different categories of criminal offences (*cony catching, cros-biting, sacking*). In his description, one of these categories, *the law of cros-biting* is strongly related to female criminality, and it is also suitable to give an image of the male–female relations of the fictional underworld of London. In contemporary cant, the expression *cros-biter* denoted men, who

⁸⁰ HARMAN 1814 [1566]: 49.

⁸¹ HARMAN 1814 [1566]: 49.

⁸² HARMAN 1814 [1566]: 50.

exploited the desirable features of their wives for financial gain: “*they constrayne their wiues to yeeld the vse of their bodies to other men*”.⁸³ And this financial gain usually entailed the robbing, cheating and using of men named *conies*. *Cony* (or *conny*, *coney*), which originally meant a tame rabbit, raised for eating, in the Elizabethan slang denoted a gullible man, easy to fool and cheat out of their money and valuables by the upright men and their women: “*they vse the benefite of their wiues or friends, to the cros-biting of such as lust after their filthie enormities: some simple men are drawn on by subtill meanes, which neuer intended such a bad matter*”.⁸⁴

The thieves – strictly relying on the desirability and sexual power of women – applied three main methods to fool the conies: the woman seduced the victim, took him to a dark place where the upright man was waiting for them and they robbed him together. In another scenario, the woman seduced the cony in a pub, took him to an isolated place, where the upright man awaited them and accused the victim of seducing his wife/sister (changing narrative). The story usually ended with an agreement, where the cony would pay, the upright men drops the matter and does not take the case before court. The third scenario was similar to the first one, but the woman took the victim to a room in a pub, where the upright men waited for them to rob the cony together.⁸⁵

Based on these examples, I would argue that the descriptions of the counter-world of thieves, rogues and criminals mirror a complicated web of relations between men and women, in which the superiority of men and the subordination of women point to a strict world of hierarchy. Therefore, the image of this world – however fictional and exaggerated it might be – sheds light on the stereotypical roles women had in a normative setting: women as subordinate and marriage as the ultimate value. In rogue literature, the image of the ‘inverse angel of the

⁸³ GREENE, Robert, *The Second and Last Part of Conny-Catching*, 1592. Online edition: <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/resour/mirrors/rbear/greene4.html> (Retrieved: 28.09. 2016.)

⁸⁴ GREENE 1592. n. p.

⁸⁵ GREENE 1592. n. p.

house' is created, who goes through the steps of a peculiar criminal career and embodies the different stages of a woman's life: the virgin, the wife and the whore.

2. 3. "*Shame unto all womenkinde*" *The representation of women in broadside ballads*

As opposed to the complicated descriptions of male–female relations in rogue literature, street ballads worked with much simpler imagery. This could be attributed to the different audiences of the two genres, as well as the structure, language and the quality of information they transmitted (however fictitious it might be). Among the writers of rogue literature, we can find some of the well-known writers and playwrights of the Elizabethan period, for example, Robert Greene or later Thomas Dekker, who was very prolific in a variety of genres. This is mirrored by the style and even the paratexts of the texts: their language is more sophisticated and the works often include dedications and prefaces. Moreover, topicality was also an issue: whereas rogue literature reflected on longer-standing problems of poverty and crime, street ballads were reflecting instantly on sensational events, murder cases, scandals and even stage plays. They were printed on cheap, easily available leaflets with simple language, recurring (stereotypical) elements and crude woodcuts for illustration. These ballads could be read, told, sung and nailed on the walls of a pub or at home; their ubiquity made it hard not to encounter them one way or another. Due to their wider circulation, broadside ballads could reach illiterate audiences, too.

The image of the female criminal in these ballads was not entirely different from that of rogue literature. Though the narratives, linguistic elements and manner of presentation on the whole were different, the sphere of women's activity was still the domestic and the familial. Feminine violence was considered serious when it was linked to harming one's husband or child, and even though murderous women were few in numbers (or at least this is what the legal records suggest), they diverged from normal gendered behaviour. Therefore, they threatened social order, strongly associated with patriarchal order. Hence, disorderly, murderous and

disobedient mothers and wives were made public spectacles at executions or exaggerated accounts in literature; the sheer number of these accounts is very telling.⁸⁶

In these accounts wives who murdered their husbands were often repenting their sins at the place of execution. These specific texts belonged to a subgenre of street ballads, the so-called ‘gallows literature’. This subgenre consists of pamphlets that depicted the events of executions, as a fictive speech delivered by the condemned at the gallows, mostly building on stereotypical images, consisting of recurring narrative elements. The proclaimed intent behind these publications was to deter and warn the readership by making the condemned repent their sins and accept the deservedness of their punishment.⁸⁷

Forgive my fact before my life is ended.
Ah me the *shame unto all women kinde*,
To harbour such a thought within my minde:
That now hath made me to the world a scorne,
And makes me curse the time that I was borne.
I would to God my mothers hapless wombe,
Before my birth had beene my happy tombe:
Or would to God when first did I take breath,
That had I suffered any painefull death.⁸⁸

The wording of the texts also helps to emphasize the deterrent aim. In a lament over murdering Davis Locke, repetition aids the writer in reaching the goal, that is, highlighting how unnatural the wife’s act was:

If woefull objects may excite,
the minde to ruth and pittie
Then here is one will the affright

⁸⁶ WALKER 2003/b: 75.

⁸⁷ SHARPE 1985: 150–151.

⁸⁸ *Anne Wallens Lamentation For the Murthering of her husband John Wallen a Turner in Cow-lane neere Smithfield; done by his owne wife, on satterday the 22 of June. 1616. who was burnt in Smithfieldd the first of July following. To the tune of Fortune my foe.* Printed for Henry Gosson, London, 1616. *English Broadside Ballad Archive*.

in Westminster faire Cittie:
 A *strange inhumane Murther* there,
 To God and Man as doth appeare:
 oh murther, most inhumane
 To spill my husbands blood.
 But God that rules most of Heaven,
 did give me ore to sinne,
 And to vild wrath my minde was given,
 which long I lived in;
 But now too late to repent,
 And for the same my hearth doth rent:
 Oh murther, most inhumane
 To spill my husbands blood.⁸⁹

I would argue that the use of words in these and many similar texts could shed light on the way a woman's murderous act was seen and perceived in the period. By repeating expressions such as *strange inhumane murder, wicked deed, the most barbarous act, unheard of murder, the greatest villain in the land*, the rare, though horrendous act of a woman is sensationalised. And this sensationalism was not only there to entertain and inform the readers/listeners of such acts, but also to educate, warn and deter common women from even thinking of committing these crimes. These ballads were not only a form of instant entertainment and sources of topical information, but at the same time they could help in maintaining the needed social security in England in the turbulent decades of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Besides mariticide, the gravest sin a woman could commit was the murdering of her own child. As mentioned in the introductory part of this chapter, infanticide by the sixteenth century, as opposed to the milder legislation of the Middle Ages, became a strongly sanctioned

⁸⁹ *The unnaturall Wife: Or, The lamentable Murther, of one goodman Davis, Locke-Smith in Tutle-streete, who was stabbed to death by his Wife, on the 29. of June, 1628. For which fact, She was Araigned, Condemned, and Adjudged, to be Burnt to Death in Smithfield, the 12. July 1628. To the tune of Bragandary.* Printed for M. T. Widdow, London, 1628. *English Broadside Ballad Archive.*

crime. The narrative representations of troubled motherhood formed a small, but important part of early modern news-literature. Ballads presented the readers with stories of women who killed their infants or young children over and over from as early as the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in their titles usually highlighting the unnaturality, bloodiness, pitilessness, monstrosity and cruelty of such acts.⁹⁰ These ballads were usually not taking women's motivation (poverty, brutality of their fathers or husbands) into consideration. This is exemplified by the case of Jane Lawson who committed suicide after killing her two children to escape his husband's violence:

Long after that she did not live
Nor her poor Children dear
Two of them then she caught
As several neighbours tell;
These babes destruction then she wrought
With her own in a Well.⁹¹

Shame was also a strong motivating factor, especially in higher-ranking circles where a pregnancy out of wedlock could ruin the reputation of a family. Moreover, hidden pregnancies were also becoming strongly sanctioned by the first half of the seventeenth century, as in the contemporary legal approach concealment could easily be understood as premeditation.⁹²

Shame and concealment form the backbone of the story of a duke's daughter from 1672, who, after giving birth to two children in the woods, stabbed them in the heart and buried them. Though this ballad is dated a couple decades after the period examined in the thesis, the motif its text worked with referred to an age-old problem and could have earlier variants as well.

⁹⁰ MARTIN 2008: 155.

⁹¹ *The Unnatural Mother: Being a true Relation of one Jane Lawson, once living at East-Barnet, in Middlesex; who Quarreling with her Husband, urged him to strike her, and thereupon the same night, being the first of Sept. 1680. Drowned her self and two poor Babes in a Well. The Tune is, There was a Rich Merchant Man.* Printed for F. Coles, T. Vere, J. Wright, I. Clarke, W. Thackeray, / and T. Passinger. London, 1680. *English Broadside Ballad Archive*.

⁹² LEWIS 2016. eBook.

And there she had two pretty Babes born,
 Gentle Hearts, etc.
 She took her filliting off her head,
 Come bend, etc.
 And there she ty'd them hand and leg,
 Gentle Hearts, etc.
 She had a Penknife long and sharp,
 Come bend, etc.
 And there she stuck them to the heart,
 Gentle hearts, etc.
 She dug a Grave, it was long and deep,
 Come bend, etc.
 And there *she laid them into sleep*.⁹³

Both of these acts – hiding her pregnancy and murdering her children – meant trespassing. Two of the most essential and traditional female roles⁹⁴ were violated by the duke's daughter: that of marriage (having children out of wedlock, keeping her pregnancy a secret) and motherhood.

The cruel stepmother, one of the stereotypical villains of folk tales and popular works – and hence, one of those monstrous women condemned in the period – also surfaces in street ballads. The tragedy of Lady Isabella and the recurrence of the same story over and over again

⁹³ *The Duke's Daughter's Cruelty: / OR, THE / Wonderful Apparition of two Infants whom she Murther'd / and Buried in a Forrest, for to hide her Shame*. Printed for J. Deacon, at the Sign of the Angel in Guiltspur-street. London, 1671–1702(?). *English Broadside Ballad Archive*.

⁹⁴ Though not strictly linked to motherhood and the domestic sphere, another interesting case of trespassing recurred in contemporary ballads: the story of the murderous midwife. Midwifery was the 'ultimate' female profession and since they held great power in their hands (the matters of life and death basically), they could easily be seen as disorderly (as evidenced by the great number of midwives prosecuted in witch trials). Their unnaturalness or monstrosity derived from the violation of the trust vested in them, that often manifested in the mistreatment of children or the insufficient care provided for women. These images of mistreatment and cruelty are featured in the story of the *Midwife of Poplar's* published sometime between 1684 and 1700, detailing the horrendous acts of a midwife, who not only murdered infants, but tortured children together with her maid in the basement of her house. Three versions of the story survived, all of them told from a different point of view: one is narrated from an outer perspective, one from the point of view of the maid and the third by the condemned at the gallows. However, as the wording and elements in the story are exactly the same in each case, the multiple uses of a ballad's text (education, deterrence, entertainment) can be seen, as all versions and readings strengthen and complement each other. Cf. *The Midwife of Poplar's Sorrowful Confession and Lamentation*. Printed for J. Bissel, at the Bible and Harp in West-Smith-Field. London, 1693; *The Bloody minded Midwife*. Printed for J. Bissel, at the Bible and Harp in West-Smith-Field. London, 1684–1700(?); *The Midwife's Maid's Lamentation*. London, Printed and Sold by L. Moore. London, 1693. *English Broadside Ballad Archive*.

throughout the period, between the late seventeenth and late eighteenth century,⁹⁵ shows how the transgression of (step)motherly roles was seen just as deviant and disorderly as killing one's own infant/child. The *Tragedy of Lady Isabella* (strongly resembling and probably a variant of the Snow White-story) tells the story of the fall of a stepmother, who ordered the master cook of the household to murder her stepdaughter, Lady Isabella, in the absence of her father. Though the servant boy attempted to save the damsel in distress (another classical and recurring theme in literature), the girl was slain and baked into a pie, a pie later that day served to the father:

O then bespake the Scullen-boy,
with a loud voice so high,
If that you will your daughter see,
my Lord cut up that Pye.
Wherein her flesh is minced small
and parched with the fire
All caused by her Step-Mother,
who did her death desire.⁹⁶

The story ends as any folk tale would: the stepmother and the master cook receive their deserved punishment, and the hero of the story, the servant boy is made the heir of the lord's land. The exemplary tone and the popularity of this specific story shows that disorderly and murderous women, committing the most unnatural crimes were made public spectacles to highlight that threatening the established values and the order of (patriarchal) society was not a tolerable act in early modern English society.

Though the two genres approached the figure of the monstrous female somewhat differently, certain stereotypes and the sphere in which women were placed were similar. Rogue

⁹⁵ Lady Isabella's tragedy could have an earlier source, the drama of Henry Chettle and Thomas Dekker, *The Stepmother's Tragedy* (1599), the text of which was lost, nevertheless, the story could be reconstructed based on the diary of Philip Henslowe. WIGGINS, Martin, *British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue, Volume 4, 1592–1608*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 146.

⁹⁶ *The Lady Isabellas Tragedy; or, The Step-Mothers Cruelty*. Printed for P. Brooksby at the Golden-Ball in Pye-Corner. London, 1692–1696(?). *English Broadside Ballad Archive*.

literature depicted the female criminal as part of a complicated hierarchy, whereas street ballads worked with much simpler and comprehensible images and clearer messages with regards to female roles in society. Nevertheless, these representations reveal a lot more about the values of normal society as they do about the real or imagined underworld of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London. In these texts, the fears and the uncertainty of contemporary society surface. This can be associated with the several periods of crises English society had to undergo over the decades, such as vagabondage, begging, the transforming image of the poor and poverty, the general misogyny of the period, coupled with the fear of rebellion and the subversion of the values of patriarchal order.

3. “...straiēs so from her kind, Nature repents she made her”⁹⁷ Moll Cutpurse and the Subversion(s) of Social Order

As we have seen so far, the core problem and main preoccupation of the Puritan polemicists, rogue literature and broadside ballads was the subversion of social order with strong links to the family as the basic (and most secure) unit of society, and the question of the freedom of women in a society, which set the strict order of patriarchy as an ideal. Bearing all this in mind, in this chapter, I will focus on one of the most eccentric figures of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods as a case study. She was a notorious thief, a rogue woman walking the streets of London in male attire. Mary Frith, commonly known as Moll Cutpurse was presented as the ‘ultimate transgressor’ of patriarchal order, at least if we read her representations in the light of the prescriptive works of Puritan polemicists and social thinkers.

Her figure suits my analysis as she can be linked to many of the aspects of subversion I have raised so far. As an ‘untameable’ woman she had the power and freedom to refuse to get married, to have a family or even to dress as a ‘proper woman’, following the traditional prescriptive rules of patriarchy. Her distinguishing characteristics were here her breeches, doublets and jerkins, as well as an ever-present smoking pipe. She was known to be stealing, drinking and swearing – all going against the hitherto described chaste, submissive and silent female ideal. What is more, she did not use the male attire as a disguise to hide her femininity and gain social or financial advantages – she seems to have done so, because such behaviour suited her personality the most. In Dekker and Middleton’s play she is served well by this “*braue disguise*⁹⁸ and a safe one”.⁹⁹ This act of transgression – having a free will of her own

⁹⁷ Thomas DEKKER – Thomas MIDDLETON, “The Roaring Girl” In. BOWERS, Fredson (Ed.), *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958. II.ii, 213–214.

⁹⁸ Disguise here does not refer to the complete concealment of one’s identity, but, in my interpretation, to an attire which aided her to get by in contemporary London. According to Mary Beth Rose, she is not one of the ‘disguised heroines’ of contemporary comedy; she seeks not to conceal her female identity, but to display it in a rather eccentric manner that suits her goals the most. See: ROSE, Mary Beth, “Women in Men’s Clothing: Apparel and Social Stability in The Roaring Girl” In. *English Literary Renaissance*, Vol. 14., Issue 3. (1984), 367.

⁹⁹ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: *To the Comicke Play-readers, Venery, and Laughter*. 11.

in choosing such a ‘transgressive disguise’ – was seen as most dangerous to the social order. As we will see, in the context of the play – in her immediate social surroundings – she evokes unspeakable discomfort, which, even though the play exploits their comic force, reveal a lot about contemporary social anxieties.¹⁰⁰

She also moved relatively freely in London, with a knowledge of rogues, vagabonds and all the other characters known from the works of rogue literature, what is more, as we shall see in Dekker and Middleton’s representation of her, she was feared and respected by many.¹⁰¹ This relative freedom of movement in and knowledge of the city spaces meant the stepping out of the home. In the period, the home was seen as the only safe place for women, guarding their chastity and morals. Though at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the city spaces became more and more ‘gendered’, meaning that women’s horizons and the places they were allowed into were expanding gradually,¹⁰² women who moved freely in the city still aroused suspicion and stepping out of the home was often – as in Moll’s case – was perceived as the transgression of boundaries.

In my analysis, I will introduce the core problem connected to the figure of Moll – the issue of cross-dressing – through which, in my reading, all the other transgressive acts manifested. To do so, I will focus on the relevant passages of some of the Puritan texts¹⁰³ introduced in the first chapter of the thesis and the polemic writings of 1620¹⁰⁴ – the year of the

¹⁰⁰ ROSE 1984: 367–369.

¹⁰¹ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: V.i.

¹⁰² STAGE, Kelly J., “The Roaring Girl’s London Spaces” In. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, Vol. 49., No. 2., Tudor and Stuart Drama (2009). 425.

¹⁰³ STUBBES 1583; BEARD 1597; ADAMS, Thomas, *Mysticall Bedlam, or the world of Mad-men*. Printed by George Purslowe, for Clement Knight, and are to be sold at his shoppe in Paules Church-yard, at the Signe of the Holy Lambe: London, 1615.

¹⁰⁴ The problem of cross-dressing, especially women masking themselves in male attire, seems to have got out of control, as King James (1603–1625) ordered the clergy to address the problem: “*to inveigh vehemently and bitterly in their sermons against the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn, and some of them stilettos or poniards, and such other trinkets of like moment.*” Qtd. in: CRESSY, David, “Gender Trouble and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern England” In. *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 35., No. 4. (1996), 444; See also: CLARK, Sandra, “‘Hic Mulier’ ‘Haec Vir,’ and the Controversy over Masculine Women” In. *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 82., No. 2. (1985), 157–160; HOWARD, Jean, *Crossdressing, The Theatre and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England*” In. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 39., No. 4. (1988), 420–422.

culmination of the anxieties connected to cross-dressing – *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir*,¹⁰⁵ problematizing the issue of the ‘male female’ and the effeminate man. Thereafter, in the prescriptive and normative context of these works, my analysis will focus on the 1611 play of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Roaring Girl* – a city comedy, which, in my reading, takes a rather positive approach to the figure of Moll, mostly using the comic force of her character, as well as her environment characterized by mediocrity, meanwhile pointing at some of the topical social issues of the period concerning male–female relations and anxieties about the ‘crumbling’ social order.

3. 1. “Monsters of bothe kinds, half women, half men”¹⁰⁶: Crossdressing and the subversion of social order

Though the upsurge of writings¹⁰⁷ against female wearing male attire can be dated to a relatively short period, the late years of reign of James I (1603–1625), between roughly 1615 and 1620, this short-lived phenomenon has important cultural implications and points at the crisis of gender relations discussed in the previous chapters. The first voices against cross-dressing were formulated in the late Elizabethan period as part of the ‘Puritan attack on theatre’, this is well illustrated by the late sixteenth-century works of the already mentioned Philip Stubbes and Thomas Beard, the two famous Puritan polemicist, and ‘social theorist’, but culminated only in the period between 1615 and 1620, the year of King James’ order to the clergy to address the problem of cross-dressing.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ *Hic Mulier: or, The Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminine of our Times. Exprest in a briefe Declamation.* London, printed for J. T. and are to be sold at Christ Church gate, 1620; *Haec-Vir: or, The Womanish-Man: Being an Answer to a late Booke intituled Hic-Mulier. Exprest in a briefe Dialogue betweene Haec-Vir the Womanish-Man, and Hic-Mulier the Man-Woman.* London, printed for J. T. and are to be sold at Christ Church gate, 1620.

¹⁰⁶ STUBBES 1583: 73.

¹⁰⁷ In 1620, two polemical tracts were published anonymously in London, the *Hic Mulier*-pamphlet, narrated from a single point of view, takes a rather conservative approach to the problem of cross-dressing, fiercely attacking those who are “are neither men, nor women, but iust good for nothing”, whereas the *Haec Vir*-pamphlet, written in a dialogue-form is a more liberal and apologetic approach to the question of female cross-dressers, arguing for a more equal treatment of women in society. Cf. *Hic Mulier* 1620; *Haec Vir* 1620. and ROSE 1984: 378.

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 104.

The issue of cross-dressing again, should be read in the context of social order, or rather disorder, from two main viewpoints, that eventually met in the argumentation of the social theorists. According to Jean Howard, who, in her exhaustive analysis of the semiotics of cross-dressing points out the main anxieties of the period, contemporaries probably perceived a gap between the “*supposed reality of one’s social station and sexual kind*” and the clothes that they were actually wearing as the display of their identities.¹⁰⁹ In short, there was a congruence between the supposed reality and the displayed reality. Here, it is necessary to mention the theory of the ‘world before sex’,¹¹⁰ or the one-sex model, which identifies the male and the female as points on a continuum, rather than two substantially different entities and was dominant in much of the early modern period.¹¹¹ However, it should be clear from the argumentation of the polemicists, that they were thinking in terms of a two-sex model, in which the sex and gender of a male and a female were essentially tied. As each man and woman were assigned a given place in society, they had to behave and dress accordingly. This is fundamental to the strict hierarchical order they envisaged in their works.¹¹² Therefore, I would argue that the polemicists of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century followed a two-sex model in their descriptions of society.

This raises two problems from the viewpoint of social–patriarchal order: on the one hand, the broader context of a prescribed dress code in early modern England, and on the other hand, the narrower problem of a female, who, by turning the male–female relations upside down, transgresses the boundaries she was allowed to move within.

¹⁰⁹ HOWARD 1988: 420–421.

¹¹⁰ GOWING, Laura, “Women’s Bodies and the Making of Sex in Seventeenth-Century England” In. *Signs*, Vol. 37., No. 4. Sex: A Thematic Issue (2012), 814.

¹¹¹ On this theory, see: LAQUEUR, Thomas, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990; As for the theatrical representations of the problem: GREENBLATT, Stephen, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. 66–93; esp. 91–93. and BULLOUGH, Vern L. – Bonnie BULLOUGH, *Cross-Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993. 74–112.

¹¹² HOWARD 1988: 422.

The sumptuary legislation of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods addressed this specific problem. The pursuit of keeping up social order manifested in legislative measures that aimed to assign each person a place in society and keep them in the ‘social places’ they were born into. Therefore, dress was heavily loaded with symbolic meanings and messages. Certain fabrics, adornments and colours were assigned to each social layer. Of course, it is hard to measure how effective this specific type of legislation must have been, however, based on the relative frequency of their issue, one might argue that social practice did not necessarily meet the expectations of the legislators.¹¹³

As dressing ‘out of one’s social class’ was seen as an act of subversion, similarly, ‘dressing out of one’s gender’ could have the same dangers to the order propagated by the moralising accounts. Similarly to their general accounts of the ideal hierarchy of men and women, discussed in the first chapter, they based their ideas concerning cross-dressing on a strong Biblical argumentation, mostly going back to the relevant passage of Deuteronomy: “*The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.*”¹¹⁴ For them, this ‘abomination unto the Lord’, which is often cited in the respective texts, clearly meant the subversion of divine order, which ultimately served as the basis of social order.

This idea is expressed in Philip Stubbes’ *Anatomie of Abuses*, in which he reflects on the ‘semantic gap’ between one’s sex and the subversive display of their gender:¹¹⁵

It is written in the 22 of Deuteronomie, that what man so euer weareth womans apparel is accursed, and what woman weareth mans apparel is accursed also. Now, whether they be within the bands and lymits of that course, let them see to it them selues. Our Apparell

¹¹³ CLARK 1985: 170–171; HOWARD 1988: 420–421.

¹¹⁴ DEUT 22:5. (KJV)

¹¹⁵ Stubbes aimed to give a more or less comprehensive analysis of the social problems of the period. It is argued that he noticed a great social change going on in England and his works can be considered as the articulation of this realisation. Therefore, in his synthetizing work he was able to analyse the problem of cross-dressing in the context of a much greater social crisis. Cf. LEWIS, C.S. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959. 397–399; DILLON, Janette. *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 189–190.

was giuen vs as a signe distinctiue to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therefore one to weare the Apparel of another sex is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde.¹¹⁶

From among the late Elizabethan polemicists, it was Thomas Beard, who pointed at, in his *The Theatre of God's Judgements*, the supposed interconnectedness of cross-dressing¹¹⁷ and moral looseness.

The *Hic-Mulier* pamphlet published in 1620 makes a more sophisticated distinction, which does not only refer to anatomical (and therefore social) distinction between men and women. On the one hand, it comments on the sumptuary legislation of the period (*coates of seuerall fashions*), and on the other hand, it highlights not only the anatomical differences between the sexes, but also their social functions. However, male and female are not defined by the same categories: whereas men are defined by their occupation, women are defined by their moral character. This means that, in the mirror of this account, the most important function of a woman was to have a strong moral character.

Remember how your Maker made for our first Parentes coates, not one coat, but a coat for the man, and a coat for the woman; *coates of seuerall fashions*, seuerall forms, and *for seuerall vses: the mans coat fit for his labour, the womans fit for her modestie*: and will you lose the model left by this great Work-master of Heauen?¹¹⁸

However, not only strong women could mean a danger to society: weak men were seen just as threatening and alarming. A strong man, able to control their wives and daughters, was just as desirable as a submissive and silent woman: in the context of order and gender hierarchy, an effeminate man was seen as a transgressor, too.¹¹⁹ This is illustrated well by Beard's examples of effeminate male rulers who lost control because of such an eccentric lifestyle:

¹¹⁶ STUBBES 1583: 73.

¹¹⁷ "An act as in nature monstrous, so very dishonest and ignominious" BEARD 1597: 280.

¹¹⁸ *Hic Mulier* 1620: n. p.

¹¹⁹ CRESSY 1996: 442–443.

Adranapalus King of Assyria was so lascivious and effeminate, that to the end to set forth his beauty, he shamed not to paint his face with ointments, and to attire his body with the habits and Ornaments of women [...] wherefore being though unworthy to beare rule over men, first Arbaces his lieutenant rebelled; then the Medes and Babylonians revolted, and jointly made war upon him, till they vanquished and put him to flight: and in his flight hee returned to a tower in his palace, which (moved with griefe and despaire) he set on fire, and was consumed therein.¹²⁰

This idea that men must control their women otherwise order would crumble, comes back in the polemic of 1620 between the anonymous authors of the *Hic Mulier*¹²¹ and *Haec Vir* as well. Partly men are blamed for their women becoming cross-dressers:

To you therefore that are Fathers, Husbands or Sustainers of these new Hermaphrodites, belongs the cure of this Impostume; it is you that giue fuell to the flames of their wilde indiscretion. You adde the oyle which makes their stinking Lamps defile the whole house with filthy smoke, and your purses purchase these deformities at rates, both deare and vnreasonable.¹²²

The main concern of the *Hic Mulier*-pamphlet was the behaviour of the female as a sexual being and the pursuit of concealing their 'faulty nature'. Women's clothes in the period aimed to emphasize modesty and constrain one's movement. However, if such garments were exchanged for male attire, sexual display and lasciviousness were to follow, which manifested in the loose morals of women – one of the greatest anxieties of the period in the light of these (mostly exaggerative) normative accounts:¹²³

¹²⁰ BEARD 1597: 280.

¹²¹ The expression *hic mulier* (man-woman) appears first in the sermons of Thomas Adams' *Mysticall Bedlam*, published in 1615. In the second sermon, he lists the types of madmen one might encounter in England, among them the 'proud man' who can be suspected of cross-dressing: "*The proud man? or rather the proud woman: or rather hao aquila, both he and shee. For if they had no more eident distinction of sexe, then they haue of shape, they would be all man, or rather all woman: for the Amazons beare away the Bell: as one wittily, Hic mulier will shortly bee good latine, if thus transmigration hold: For whether on horseback, or on foot, there is no great difference, but not discernible out of a Coach. If you prayse their beauty; you rayse their glory: if you commend them, command them. Admiration is a poison, that swelles them till they burst.*" ADAMS 1615: 51.

¹²² *Hic Mulier* 1620. n. p.

¹²³ CLARK 1985: 169–170.

From the other, you haue taken the monstrosnesse of your deformitie in apparell, exchanging the modest attire of the comely Hood, Cawle, Coyse, handsome dresse or Kerchiefe, to the cloudy Ruffianly broad-brim'd Hatte, and wanton Feather the modest vpper parts of a concealing straight gowne, to the loose, lasciuious ciuill embracement of a French doublet, being all vnbutton'd to entice, all of one shape to hide deformitie, and extreme short wasted to giue a most easie way to euery luxurious action: the glory of a faire large hayre, to the shame of most ruffianly short lockes.¹²⁴

This specific question is addressed in Middleton and Dekker's representation of Moll Cutpurse as well: in the second act Moll is courted by Laxton, who mistakes her manly attire for moral looseness and offends her by asking her to "*be merry and lye together*".¹²⁵

This supposed moral looseness and the bad reputation of Moll as a female in male garments creates the comic character and serves as the moving drive of Dekker and Middleton's play. Moll subverts the ideal order in a variety of possible ways (by being a rogue, a thief, an unmarried woman, by wearing male clothes and moving freely in diverse spaces, refusing to give up her freedom). The reflections and anxieties she evokes in her immediate surroundings reflect the normative tone of the previously cited moralising texts.

However, by the end of the play, she is portrayed as a rather positive character within the patriarchal context of early modern society: by presenting her as a morally strong 'female Robin Hood', Dekker and Middleton seem to be mocking and challenging the rather strict and prescriptive approaches to the problem. But, however positive their reading of Moll might be,¹²⁶ the context into which their semi-fictional character is embedded, serves the purpose of reading the play against the social and moral environment outlined by the Puritan texts and the *Hic*

¹²⁴ *Hic Mulier* 1620. n. p.

¹²⁵ DEKKER–MIDDLETON II.i. 252.

¹²⁶ Jane Baston in her article on the 'rehabilitation' of Moll argues that the vision displayed in the play is far more 'reactionary' than 'radical', meaning that the playwrights gradually staged the recuperation of Moll and her seemingly subversive acts. Cf. BASTON, Jean, "Rehabilitating Moll's Subversion in *The Roaring Girl*!" In: *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, Vol. 37., No. 2., Tudor and Stuart Drama (1997). 317–335; In my reading, this is a viable explanation, however, I would definitely argue that the social environment displayed by the two authors (especially the patriarchal values communicated by Sir Alexander and Sir Davy Dapper) reflects the contemporary moral climate and thus, can be read against the accounts of polemicists.

Mulier – Haec Vir polemic. Thus, in the subsequent analysis of the play, I will focus on the character as the others see and talk about her and through the respective discourses, reconstruct those possible transgressive acts through which her figure was constructed as perceived as “The Other” within the context of the social setting presented in the play.

3. 2. “*She flies with wings more lofty*”: *Moll Cutpurse and social disorder*

Mary Frith – commonly known as Moll Cutpurse or Mad Moll – was an existing historical person, one of the notorious thieves and cross-dressers of London at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There are several accounts of her in legal documents in the early seventeenth century: her name surfaces in the Middlesex Session Court Rolls three times between 1600 and 1608, and in 1610 in the Southwark Assizes as Mary Frythe.¹²⁷ Her operation is commented on by John Chamberlain (1553–1628), a famous letter writer of the period:

[...] this last Sondag Mall Cut-purse a notorious baggage (that used to go in mans apparel and challenged the field of divers gallants) was brought to ... (Paul’s Cross), where she wept bitterly and seemed very penitent, but yt is since doubted she was maudelin druncke, being discovered to have tiple of three quarts of sacke before she came to her penaunce.¹²⁸

Even the playwrights, Dekker and Middleton refer to her probable physical appearance on stage during the performance of *The Roaring Girl*: “*The Roaring Girle her selfe some few dayes hence, / Shall on this Stage, guie larger recompence*”.¹²⁹

Her popularity and sensationalised figure was reflected on and exploited by other playwrights, not only Dekker and Middleton. The first known play featuring Moll – the text of

¹²⁷ “On 8th September, 1609, she burgled the house of Alice Bayly at St Olave and stole £7 7 s in money, 2 gold angels, a gold 20 shilling piece, 2 gold half-crowns, a gold ring (6s) and 2 crystal stones set in silver (20d).” Qtd. in BASTON 1997: 318.

¹²⁸ Qtd. in SHAW, Patricia “Mad Moll and Merry Meg: The Roaring Girl as a Popular Heroine in Elizabethan and Jacobean Writings” In: *Sederi VII* (1996). 146; This was entered into the London Correction Book as well, and was confirmed by her pseudo-diary, *The Life and Death of Mrs Mary Frith*, a sensationalised account published three years after her death in 1662. This text will not form part of my analysis, as it was written and published after the Restoration (1660) and reflects on different tendencies in a different social environment. For further information on the text cf. MOWRY, Melissa M. “Thieves, Bawds, and Counterrevolutionary Fantasies: The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith” In: *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5., No. 1. (2005). 26–48.

¹²⁹ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1611: *Epilogus*, 35–36.

which was lost – was written by John Day (*The Madde Pranckes of Merry Mall of the Bankside*, 1610), and her figure was also featured in Nathan Field’s *Amends for Ladies*, which was written and performed in 1611, probably after, and as a response to *The Roaring Girl*. This play takes a rather conventional approach to women, showing them in generic roles, such as the wife, the widow and the maid, and when Moll appears in the play, entering a shop, she is ironically called *Mistris hic & haec*,¹³⁰ as a reference to her ambiguous sexuality and she is linked to other known viragoes, such as Long Meg.¹³¹

The tone and character of Dekker and Middleton’s play – a city comedy – is much ‘lighter’ than the text of either Nathan Field or the cited Puritan texts.¹³² This is partly explained by the genre and the approach the two playwrights took to the figure of Moll. They used the comic force of Moll’s character to highlight the mediocrity of her surroundings and one-sidedness of the patriarchal approach to social order. The basic conflict of the play stems from these values and the way the characters exploit Moll’s subversion of them for their own purposes. As my analysis will be organized around different points, which can be linked to the figure of Moll and all the possible subversive acts that enable her to be perceived as ‘The Other’ (the issues of freedom, appearance, marriage, male and female ideals – all interconnected, of course), I will briefly summarize the main turning points of the play.

The basic conflict revolves around the issue of marriage: the son of Sir Alexander Wengrave, Sebastian, wants to marry Mary Fitzallard, but she is an unacceptable choice, as her father cannot provide her with a dowry matching the expectations of Sir Alexander. Therefore, the young Sebastian works out a scheme to present Mary Fitzallard in a more advantageous light to his father. He claims that he wants to marry Moll Cutpurse, the notorious thief and

¹³⁰ DAWSON, Anthony B., “Mistris Hic & Haec: Representations of Moll Frith” In. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, Vol. 33., No. 2. Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1993), 385–386.

¹³¹ On Long Meg see for example: SHAW 1996: 129–139.

¹³² The playwrights even reflect on this in the Prologue to the play – their aim is to present the figure of Moll in a fashionable way: “*A Roaring Girle (whose notes till new neuer were) / Shall fill laughter with vast Theater, / That’s all which I dare promise: Tragick passion, / And such graue stoffe, is this day out of fashion.*” DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: *Prologus*, 9–12.

cross-dresser of London. However, when Sir Alexander finds this out, he hires a demimonde character, the so-called Trapdoor (speaking name!) ¹³³ to find a way to destroy Moll. Meanwhile, Moll is shown in her natural social surroundings, entering shops (most importantly, the tobacco shop) and encountering all the ‘shady’ characters of London, like Laxton, who wants to seduce her, mistaking her male attire for moral looseness (which she repays by fighting him in a duel), and eventually Trapdoor, whom she takes as a servant, ¹³⁴ despite her initial suspicion. Later in the play, she finds out his dishonourable intentions. They also meet a gang of rogues, who hit on them to rob them, however, Moll is able to intimidate them with her knowledge of the underworld and her higher moral standards (here, she is presented as a ‘female Robin Hood’). Finally, the scheme of Sebastian Wengrave plays out and he is able to present Mary Fitzallard as a desirable option as compared to Moll, and finally the very apologetic Sir Alexander allows them to get married. What is more, she apologises to Moll for mistaking her to be a disreputable character ¹³⁵ – but he cannot deny that it was Moll’s undesirability that made him change his mind about the marriage of Mary and Sebastian.

In my reading, the play outlines ideals – male, female and behavioural – and constantly relies on them to reinforce the opinion formulated by Sir Alexander and Sir Davy Dapper, the ‘voices of patriarchy’, as authority and father figures, to create the context Moll’s figure is opposed to. The figure of Moll is constructed to be the complete opposite of Mary’s: they represent two opposing female ideals. When Sir Alexander finds out that Sebastian plans to marry Moll instead of Mary, he juxtaposes the two in his reasoning addressed to his son, by

¹³³ “*Trapdore, be like thy name, a dangerous step for her to venture on*” DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611] II.ii. 245–246.

¹³⁴ The way Trapdoor offers his services to Moll seems to be the mockery of her, not to mention that the relations he imagines between them (him serving Moll) would be subversive as well. Offering her to be submissive and fulfilling her wishes would only be acceptable if there were uneven power-relations between the two, namely, Moll would be a gentlewoman and Trapdoor a common servant. However, this is not the case: Moll is a common rogue/thief and a woman, thus he should submit herself to a man and not the other way round. As we have seen in the case of rogue literature, however subversive the world of rogues and thieves might be, their hierarchy is the mirrored version of the ‘normal’ social hierarchy. See: DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.i. 315–362.

¹³⁵ “*Thou art a madd girle, and yet I cannot now / Condemne thee.*” DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: V.ii. 207–208.

saying that the son's current wish to marry Moll is "*most wicked, most unnatural*"¹³⁶, while he thinks of Mary as a "*vertuous maiden*".¹³⁷ The possibility of Moll marrying Sebastian transforms his opinion of Mary, who, at the beginning was only a poor maiden ("*he reckond vp what gold, / This marriage would draw from hit, at which he swore, / To loose much bloud, could not griue him more*"¹³⁸), by the end of the play becomes the most desirable choice for his son, thus Moll's 'monstrosity' relativizes even the worst characteristics of Mary (mainly her poverty) and sets her as an ideal:

Your loue makes my ioyes proud,
 Bring foorth those deeds of hand,
 my care layd already,
 And which, old knight, thy noblenesse may challenge,
 loyn'd with thy daughters vertues, whom I prise now,
 As deerly as that flesh, I call myne owne.
 Forgiue me worthy Gentlewoman, 'twas my blindnesse
 When I reiected thee, I saw thee not,
 Sorrow and wilfull rashnesse grew like filmes
 Ouer the eyes of iudgement, now so cleere
 I see the brightnesse of thy worth appeare.¹³⁹

And even when Sebastian talks about her as an 'ideal bride', one must not mistake it for an honest opinion, as his intentions are clear: he wants to upset his father by praising, and at the same time using Moll,¹⁴⁰ and this usefulness is even commented upon: "*Twixt louers heart, shee's a fit instrument*".¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 165.

¹³⁷ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 167.

¹³⁸ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: I.i. 78–80.

¹³⁹ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: V.ii. 187–195.

¹⁴⁰ "*Pronounce Moll loathsome: if before my loue / Shee appeare faire, what iniury haue I, / I haue the thing I like in all things else / Mine owne eye guides me.*" DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 11–13.

¹⁴¹ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 191.

What is more, the two names – Mary Fitzallard and Moll Cutpurse – highlight the juxtaposition of the ideal and the monstrous (the Virgin Mary and the sinful Eve): while Moll is a variant of or nickname for Mary,¹⁴² whose ‘vertuous’ nature probably enables us to draw a parallel between her and the Virgin Mary, *Moll/Mol/Mal* and the common name *moll* in the early modern period referred to a woman of loose morals, a prostitute or even a rogue.¹⁴³ The connotations the name evoke are reflected on explicitly by Sir Alexander: “*For seeke all London from one end to t’other, / More whoores of that name, then of any other.*”¹⁴⁴ What is more, even her ‘surname’ – Cutpurse – links her to an illegal, underworldly occupation, whereas the *Fitz* prefix in Mary Fitzallard’s surname refers to her supposed noble origin, though probably from the lower circles, as they could not provide a dowry high enough to marry Sebastian Wengrave.

Even the nickname given to Moll in the title of the play refers to her otherness and ambiguous character: she is named after one of the demimonde of figures of early modern England – the roaring boy –, the female counterpart of which is rarely used in contemporary texts (hence the ambiguity – Moll is on the borderline between a male and a female). A *roarer* in contemporary cant meant a boy, who was behaving in a noisy and riotous manner, often took part in street fights and was characterized by a violent defence of his honour¹⁴⁵ – this is a chief characteristic of Moll in the play as well and becomes apparent in several cases, for example, when she defends her honour to Laxton, fighting and overpowering him in a duel, because he thought of her in a base manner:

To teach thy base thoughts manners: th’art one of those

¹⁴² This play with the names is reflected on in the play: “*This much sweete Moll, I must thy company shun, / I court another Moll.*” DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: I.i. 65–66.

¹⁴³ DIONNE, Craig – MENTZ, Steve, “Introduction: Rogues in Early Modern English Culture” In. DIONNE, Craig – MENTZ, Steve (Eds.), *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007. 1.

¹⁴⁴ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II. ii. 147–148.

¹⁴⁵ GATES, Daniel, “The Roaring Boy: Contested Masculinity on the Early Modern Stage” In. *The Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 46., No. 1. (2013), 44–45.

That thinkes each woman thy fond flexable whore,
If she but cast a liberall eye vpon thee”.¹⁴⁶

This idea of moral looseness is strongly connected in the play to Moll’s appearance and is echoed at several occasions. As noted earlier, her disguise is ambiguous: her identity as a woman is not concealed, whereas she dresses in male attire (breeches, a freese jerkin¹⁴⁷) – thus the congruence of display and reality prevails here.¹⁴⁸ This clearly diverges from the figure of the ideal female and is often commented on in the play, usually highlighting her monstrosity:

Alex. A Scuruy woman,
On whom the passionate old man swore he doated:
A creature (saith her) nature hath brought forth
To mocke the sex of woman. – It is a thing
One knowes not how to name, her birth began
Ere she was all made. Tis woman more then man,
Man more then woman, and (which to none can hap)
The Sune giues her two shadowes to one shape
Nay more, let this strange thin, walke, stand, or sit,
No blazing starre drawes more eyes after it.
Dauy. A Monster, this some Monster.¹⁴⁹

Connected to this, the idea of the ‘world upside down’ surfaces as well: when the tailor enters to measure Moll’s size for the wedding, an occasion is given to Sir Alexander to express his opinion once again, referring to the subverted male–female roles that stem from Moll’s appearance: “*if the wife go in breeches, the man must weare long coates like a foole*”.¹⁵⁰ Here, I would like to refer to the theory of Natalie Zemon Davis, cited earlier. She claimed¹⁵¹ that

¹⁴⁶ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: III.i. 67–69.

¹⁴⁷ A jerkin is a short-fitting jacket usually of light-coloured leather, with no sleeves and worn over a doublet in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

¹⁴⁸ As in Mistress Gallipot’s perception of her: “*Some will not sticke to say shees a man and some both / man and woman.*” DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.i. 186–187.

¹⁴⁹ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 128–134.

¹⁵⁰ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 73–74.

¹⁵¹ DAVIS 1987: 124–151.

subversion could work as a ‘double-edged sword’: it could indeed strengthen the existing order of society (as during the time of the carnival cross-dressing could have this impact), but within the context of the everyday and ordinary, subversion could promote social change. I would argue, that in the play, this ‘double-edged sword’ works on two levels: if we consider the interpretation of Sir Alexander and Davy Dapper, cross-dressing and subversion are feared because they could lead to a negative transformation of society, whereas in the other context, in which Moll appears as a positive figure, subversion actually adds to the maintaining of the existing (imperfect) social relations – which have probably more to do with the social reality of early modern England and of womanhood.

Besides the female ideal – chaste, submissive, virtuous both in her behaviour and her appearance – the patriarchal male ideal is commented on through the reflections on the two sons (Sebastian Wengrave and Jack Dapper) by the ‘voices of patriarchy’. According to these voices, a man’s task would be to keep up order and serve as a strong foundation to the family (the basic unit of society), which, if it falters, could cause social disorder:

This sonne (saith he) that should be
The columnne and maine arch vnto my house,
The crutch vnto my age, becomes a whirlwind
Shaking the firme foundation.¹⁵²

As mentioned earlier, for men, it was perceived to be just as transgressive to be weak and irresponsible as for women to be strong and possess a free will. This could manifest in a variety of ways. For instance, disobedience to a father and marrying ‘the wrong kind’ could mean transgression on the part of the son, as it is reflected on by Sir Alexander:

Oh thou cruell boy,
Thou wouldst with lust an old mans life destroy,
Because thou seest I’m halfe way in my graue,

¹⁵² DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 115–119.

Thou shouldest dust vpon me: wod thou mightest haue
Thy wish, most wicked, and most unnatural.¹⁵³

An expected code of behaviour is revealed in the conversation between Sir Adam Appleton, Sir Alexander and Davy Dapper, who by seeking advice and discussing the ‘wild’ nature of their sons reflect on the problem of crumbling order and the ways to restore it. According to the ‘voices of patriarchy’, smoking, drinking and whoremongering cannot fill the days and nights of a proper and obedient gentleman:

A noyse of fiddlers, Tobacco, wine and a whoore,
A Mercer that will let him take vp more,
dyce, and a water spaniel with a Ducke: oh,
Bring him a bed with these: when his purse gingles,
(Beasts Adam nere gaue name to) these horse-leeches sucke
My sonne, he being drawne dry, they all liue on smoake.¹⁵⁴

Their solution to the problem of this divergence from the ideals would be to throw Jack in the debtor’s prison (the so-called *counter*) where he would learn discipline and find the right path to order. Here, Dekker and Middleton probably reflect on the phenomenon of the rise of disciplinary institutions, created with the aim of restoring order as part of the pursuit of stability. However, the criticism of such institutions – along with the false ideal Sir Alexander and Davy Dapper embodied – is given through the figure of Moll: she tells Jack about the plan which enables him to flee. Later in Act V Jack reflects on the unnecessariness of a prison sentence and the ineffectiveness, or even counter-productiveness of such institutions:

As though a Counter, which is a parke,
in which all the wilde beasts of the Citty run head
by head could tame mee.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 160–165.

¹⁵⁴ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: III.iii. 60–68.

¹⁵⁵ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: V.i. 39–41.

All these, cross-dressing and the faltering male–female ideals point in one direction which could be seen as the ‘ultimate problem’ in the play and in a broader sense, in society as well: the transgression of the rules and hierarchy of marriage. Moll in the play is depicted as a free person, who has a great knowledge of people (like the characters of the underworld, as shown in Act IV) and of London. The other characters, among them Laxton, reflect on her figure as ‘slippery’ and elusive: “*She slips from one company to another, like a fat Eele / between a Dutchman’s fingers*”¹⁵⁶, whereas Sebastian reflects on her as “*a creature / so strange in quality*”,¹⁵⁷ probably referring to the same elusiveness and the aura of ambiguity that Laxton spotted.

This freedom manifests most explicitly in her refusal to get married twice during the play, first when Sebastian courts her, and finally in Act V when she is asked whether she will ever get married. Freedom and the refusal to get married – along with the refusal of obedience, a core characteristic of a good and ideal wife according to the social theorists of the period – are intertwined in her character:

I haue no humor to marry, I loue to lye aboth
sides ath bed my selfe; and againe ath’other side; a wife you know
ought to be obedient, but I feare me I am too headstrong to obey,
therefore Ile nere go about it.¹⁵⁸

By the end of the play – when her acts of subversion and transgression are partly recuperated – even the comic force of her ‘headstrong nature’ is exploited, and she is even allowed to (try and) challenge the rigid rules and order patriarchy. When Lord Noland inquires whether she will ever marry, she answers:

Moll. Who I my lord, I’le tell you when ifaith,

¹⁵⁶ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.i. 184–185.

¹⁵⁷ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: I.i. 94–95.

¹⁵⁸ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: II.ii. 35–38.

When you shall heare,
Gallants voyd from Serieants feare,
Honesty and truth vnslanred,
Woman man'd but neuer pandred,
Cheaters booted, but not coacht,
Vessels older e're they broach
If my minde be then not varied,
Next day following, I'l be married.
L. Nol. This sounds like domes-day.
Moll. Then were marriage best,
For if I should repent, I were soone at rest.¹⁵⁹

However, allowing Moll to speak her mind in the final dialogue of the play does not mean that her subversion is completely recuperated: we must also see her transformation which then enables her to form a more accentuated opinion and also be accepted in the social context of the play. In the first two acts, she is depicted as a threatening and dangerous figure (see her speech on prostitution or the previously quoted opinion on marriage),¹⁶⁰ whereas by the end of the play she becomes a more benevolent figure, who, for example uses her knowledge of the underworld to teach a lesson to the rogues, and also to unveil Trapdoor's deceit. But this is only allowed in a context when the ruling elite wins and the order of patriarchy prevails: with the union of Mary and Sebastian order is finally restored and in this context, Moll is shown in a more positive light. Furthermore, her unnaturalness and monstrosity enable the reinforcement of the values and rules of patriarchal order, thus, by the end of the play there is no radical change in the perception of social values.

¹⁵⁹ DEKKER–MIDDLETON 1958 [1611]: V.ii. 216–227.

¹⁶⁰ BASTON 1997: 330–331.

Conclusion

The pursuit of stability must have been a fundamental experience for social thinkers, of polemicists and writers of ballads or rogue literature in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The texts analysed in this thesis do not reflect on the ‘social reality’ of early modern England, but reveal some of the tendencies that concerned contemporaries. In this context, the problem of women and the crisis in gender relations seem to be symptomatic of the anxieties and fundamental fears of the age, as well as of the greater political, social, religious and demographic transformation characterising England in this turbulent period.

It is generally argued in scholarly literature that the destabilization of social order – in the most differing social and temporal contexts – often leads to the marginalization of certain groups, as well as to scapegoating and the increasing focus on the deviant elements of society. In early modern England – besides other groups, such as criminals, rogues or the mentally ill – the control over women’s social relations and activities seems to be a fundamental pursuit of authorities and social thinkers/reformers. What is more, they were one of the most important groups to focus on: as the most basic unit of society was the family, the union of man and woman and the right order of patriarchy were of utmost importance. This, underlined with a biblically-based argumentation, could easily result in strengthening control over women’s activities and strict punishment in cases of transgression.

This phenomenon, in my opinion, is well noticeable in the texts examined in this thesis: the texts of the Puritan polemicists, like Thomas Beard and Philipp Stubbes, with their strong reliance on the Biblical tradition, aimed to reinforce ideals – which, probably, never existed in their pure form in early modern England, or as a matter of fact, in any other society. However, the vehemence of their argumentation and their perception of the most alarming tendencies in contemporary society, along with the number of such texts printed in the period, all point in the direction of underlying anxieties.

As for the literary representations of the gender-problem between roughly the 1580s and the 1620s, all the analysed texts of rogue literature, broadside ballads and the city comedy of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton support this. Their preoccupation with this issue highlights the problems of marriage, male–female relations (hierarchy being of great importance) and also clarifies the ideals of the age, women being submissive and obedient, and – using the previously cited tortoise-metaphor – ‘never peeping out of their shells’ (their homes). Whereas men serve as the foundation of their families and ultimately their society, by controlling and taking care of their wives and daughters. However, these ideas are only seemingly challenged. The topsy-turvy world of rogue literature mirrors the hierarchy of ‘normal’ social relations, and in Dekker and Middleton’s play, the final solution and the context, in which the apology of the protagonist, Moll, should be understood, all point in one direction: the pursuit of stability and the maintaining of social–patriarchal order.

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Appendix



Geoffrey Whitney: *A Choice of Emblemes*, 1586. 93b.