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978-0-521-10300-8 - Cyrus Hoy: Introductions, Notes, and Commentaries to texts in 'The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker', Volume III

Edited by Fredson Bowers

Excerpt

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## THE ROARING GIRL

## INTRODUCTION

UNDER date of 27 January 1611/12, the *Consistory of London Correction Book* contains the following record concerning Mary Frith, the heroine of *The Roaring Girl*, who had been summoned to appear before the Bishop of London and his Ecclesiastical Court in his episcopal palace.

Officiu[m] D[omi]ni contra Mariam ffrithe

This day & place the sayd Mary appeared p[er]sonally & then & there voluntarily confessed y<sup>t</sup> she had long frequented all or most of the disorderly & licentious plac[e]s in this Cittie as namely she hath vsually in the habite of a man resorted to alehowses Tavernes ⁊ Tobacco shops<sup>1</sup> & also to play howses there to see plaies & pryses & namely being at a playe about 3 quarters of a yeare since at y<sup>e</sup> ffortune in mans apparell & in her boots & w<sup>th</sup> a sword by her syde, she told the company there p[re]sent y<sup>t</sup> she thought many of them were of opinion y<sup>t</sup> she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should finde that she is a woman & some other immodest & lascivious speaches she also vsed at y<sup>t</sup> time And also sat there vpon the stage in the publike viewe of all the people there p[re]sente in mans apparrell & playd vpon her lute & sange a songe. And she further confessed y<sup>t</sup> she hath for this longe time past vsually blasphemed & dishonored the name of God by swearing & cursing & by tearing God out of his kingdome yf it were possible, & hath also vsually associated her selfe w<sup>th</sup> Ruffinly swaggering & lewd company as namely w<sup>th</sup> cut purses blasphemous drunkards & others of bad note & of most dissolute behaviour w<sup>th</sup> whom she hath to the great shame of her sexe often tymes ⁊ (as she sayd) drunke hard & distempered her heade with drinke<sup>1</sup> And further confesseth y<sup>t</sup> since she was punished for the misdemeanors afore mentioned in Bridewell she was since ⁊ vpon Christmas day at night<sup>1</sup> taken in Powles Church w<sup>th</sup> her peticoate tucked vp about her in the fashion of a man ⁊ w<sup>th</sup> a mans cloake on her<sup>1</sup> to the great scandall of diu[er]s p[er]sons who vnderstood the same & to the disgrace of all womanhood And she sayeth & p[ro]testeth y<sup>t</sup> she is heartely sory for her foresayd licentious & dissolute lyfe & giveth her earnest p[ro]mise to carry & behave her selfe ever from hence forwarde honestly soberly & woma(n)ly & resteth ready to vndergo any censure or punishem<sup>t</sup> for her misdemeanors afor(e) sayd in suche mann[er] & forme as shalbe assigned her by the Lo: B<sup>p</sup> or

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London her Ordinary. And then ⁊ she being pressed to declare whether she had not byn dishonest of her body & hath not also drawne other women to lewdnes by her p[er]swasions & by carrying her selfe lyke a bawde, she absolutly denied y<sup>e</sup> she was chargeable w<sup>th</sup> eyther of these imputac[i]ons And therevpon his Lo<sup>p</sup>. thought fit to remand her to Bridewell from whence she ⁊ now came vntill he might further examine the truth of the misdemeanors inforced against her w<sup>th</sup>out laying as yet any further censure vpon her.<sup>1</sup>

Though the play that Mary Frith attended at the Fortune is not named in the *Correction Book*, there seems no doubt at all that it was *The Roaring Girl* ('lately . . . Acted on the Fortune-stage by *the Prince his Players*' according to the titlepage of the 1611 quarto edition), and that indeed the *Correction Book* records what happened when Moll made the personal appearance promised in the play's epilogue, where the audience is assured that if what both the authors and the actors

haue done,  
Cannot full pay your expectation,  
The *Roring Girle* her selfe some few dayes hence,  
Shall on this Stage, giue larger recompence.

(lines 33–36)

Just what form this 'larger recompence' took is uncertain. P. A. Mulholland has noted the accordance of Mary Frith's dress as described in the *Correction Book* with that of the stage Moll in *The Roaring Girl*, and has suggested that the woodcut of Moll on the 1611 quarto titlepage 'agrees faithfully with the description given in Mary Frith's confession and may, indeed, accurately represent her as she appeared on the stage on the occasion recorded'. He thinks there is 'a reasonable chance that Mary Frith may have stood

<sup>1</sup> First published by Francis W. X. Fincham, 'Notes from the Ecclesiastical Court Records at Somerset House', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, vol. IV (London, 1921), pp. 112–113. Fincham dated the record 1605, an error that has complicated efforts to date the play. E. K. Chambers, who in *The Elizabethan Stage*, III, 296, had conjectured a date c. 1610, reversed himself and accepted a date of 1604/5 (as Fleay, I, 132, had earlier proposed) when the *Correction Book* record concerning Mary Frith came to his attention; Chambers reprinted it in his 'Elizabethan Stage Gleanings', *RES*, I (1925), 77–78. P. A. Mulholland reported the error and pronounced 1612 as the correct date in 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', *RES*, new series, 28 (1977), 18–31. The text of the *Correction Book* record as given above is based on the transcript which Mulholland provides at the end of his article (p. 31). The *Correction Book* was transferred in 1957 from Somerset House to the Greater London Record Office, County Hall, London (*ibid.*, p. 30).

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in for the actors impersonating her, if not for an entire performance, perhaps for Act IV, scene 1', where Moll sings a song and accompanies herself on a viol. If she appeared in the play itself, she may have spiced the dialogue with impromptu jests such as the invitation to the audience to accompany her to her lodging to verify her sex, which the *Correction Book* records. But noting the Fortune Theatre's unsavoury reputation at just this time 'for the presentation of jigs at the end of performances', Mulholland notes the 'alternative possibility' that the 'larger recompense' promised in the epilogue to *The Roaring Girl* may have consisted in Moll's contribution of a song or dance in a jig or after-piece concluding a performance of Middleton and Dekker's comedy. 'Backdating about three-quarters of a year from 27 January 1611/12, the date of the *Correction Book* entry, places Moll's appearance at the Fortune, and hence the approximate date of performance, in late April or early May 1611.'<sup>1</sup>

As Mulholland has pointed out, the record in the *Correction Book* details two distinct cases involving Mary Frith: the immediate instance in which she has been brought before the court on 27 January 1611/12 to answer for misdemeanours committed at St. Paul's on the recent Christmas Day 1611, and another concerning the particular occasion of her appearance at the Fortune Theatre about nine months earlier (together with more general charges of immodest behaviour), for which she was punished at Bridewell.<sup>2</sup>

He finds a reference to Moll's 'earlier legal predicament' in Middleton's epistle 'To the Comicke Play-readers', prefixed to the 1611 quarto, 'where there is a suggestion that the outcome is as yet undecided':<sup>3</sup> 'For *Venus* being a woman passes through the play in doublet and breeches, a braue disguise and a safe one, if the Statute vnty not her cod-peice point' (lines 13–15). While acknowledging that 'the duration of the legal process' in which Mary Frith found herself involved following her guest appearance at the Fortune in the late spring of 1611 'is difficult to determine in the absence of official records', Mulholland is of the opinion 'that the appearance of the play in printed form was designed to exploit Moll's celebrity – at a high point during the legal process – while at the same time,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

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through the favourable dramatic representation of her, to help her damaged reputation.<sup>1</sup> And he cites the passage in Middleton's address 'To the Comicke Play-readers' to the effect that while the world has taxed the play's heroine for worse things 'then has beene written of her', it is 'the excellency of a Writer, to leaue things better then he finds 'em' (lines 18–20).

According to the *Correction Book*, Moll was incarcerated in Bridewell for the 'misdemeanours' that included the escapade at the Fortune, and this gives point to the quotation printed beside her picture on the quarto titlepage: 'My case is alter'd, I must worke for my liuing'. At the time of the publication of the play, Mary Frith apparently was beating hemp in Bridewell, in the manner of the loose women whom Dekker had shown undergoing correction in that place some half-a-dozen years before, in the final scene of *The Honest Whore*, Part Two. There is a passage in Dekker's *If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil Is In It* (written some time after mid-January 1611) which almost certainly has reference to Moll's troubles with the law in the summer of 1611. The scene (*I.T.B.N.*, V.iv.105ff.) is hell, and to the assembly of devils, Pluto puts the question: '*Mall Cutpurse* is she come?' They answer with one voice 'No', and the devil Shacklesoule explains:

*Shac.* Tis not yet fit *Mall Cutpurse* here should houle,  
Shee has bin too late a sore-tormented soule.

*Pluto.* Where is our daughter? ha? Is shee ydle?

*Omn.* No.

Shee was beating hemp in bridewell to choke theeues,  
Therefore to spare this shee-ramp shee beseeches,  
Till like her selfe all women weare the breeches.

*Lurch.* *Mall Cutpurse* plyes her taske and cannot come.

Further internal evidence supporting a date of spring 1611 for *The Roaring Girl* has been cited by Mulholland. The words of the page Gull to his master, Jack Dapper: 'why 'tis as I saw a great fellow vsed t'other day, he had a faire sword and buckler, and yet a butcher dry beate him with a cudgell' (III.iii.197–199) may contain an allusion to an affray of February 1611 involving two butchers, Ralph Brewin of St Clement's Eastcheap and John Lynsey of

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

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St Andrew's Undershafte, accused of 'abusing certen gentlemen at the Play House called The Fortune'.<sup>1</sup> Then there is the passage (V.i.304ff.) in which Moll defends her knowledge of the London underworld by citing the analogy of the gentleman returned from Venice who has been advised by 'some Italian pander' of 'All the close trickes of curtizans', and who instructs a friend about to travel there 'in those villanies' to save him 'from their quicke danger': Mulholland finds this 'strongly reminiscent' of Coryate's description of the courtesans of Venice in the *Crudities* (entered in the Stationers' Register on 26 November 1610; dated 1611 on the titlepage). Coryate, Mulholland points out, 'himself showed an awareness of the controversial nature of his material by expressing caution at its inclusion and also by concluding the discussion with a defence'. However, Mulholland finds 'the link of particular interest here' to be 'Prince Henry, who was at once Coryate's benefactor, having financed the publication of the *Crudities*, and also the patron of the company at the Fortune Theatre', where *The Roaring Girl* was acted. The play's allusion, he suggests, could be explained either 'as a token of support for the beleaguered Coryate' or as a form of advertisement.<sup>2</sup> Finally, noting that in 1611 Mary Frith would have been about twenty-six years old, Mulholland comments on 'the generally consistent maturity of the stage character': 'many of her statements . . . are incompatible with a younger person', he declares, and cites in particular her defence at V.i.286ff. (beginning 'In younger dayes, when I was apt to stray').<sup>3</sup>

Of particular relevance to a 1611 date for *The Roaring Girl* is the reference (at V.i.275) to the Swan Theatre as being the scene of a new play. Previous arguments for a date of either 1604/5 or 1607/8 for *The Roaring Girl* have had to cope with the evidence that suggests that from the late 1590s until 1611 no plays were produced

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28 (quoting Bentley, vi, 146).

<sup>2</sup> Mulholland, 'Date of *The Roaring Girl*', p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29. The year of Moll's birth is given as 1589 in *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith. Commonly called Mal Cutpurse. Exactly Collected and now Published for the Delight and Recreation of all Merry disposed Persons* (London, 1662), p. 3, but elsewhere (p. 169) the memoir – which as Bullen declared (*Works of Middleton*, iv, 4) 'shows Herodotus' disregard for dates' – reports that she died in or before 1661 in her 'threescore and fourteenth year'. Bullen (*ibid.*, iv, 3, n. 1) suggested 1584/5 as the probable date of her birth.

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in that theatre, which was used for acrobatic performances and sports contests. The fact (reported by C. W. Wallace<sup>1</sup>) that from 1611 to 1615 inclusive the Swan was in use again as a theatre accords with the allusion in *The Roaring Girl*.

The second of Mary Frith's encounters with the law which the *Correction Book* records, the consequence of her misbehaviour in St Paul's on Christmas night, 1611, issued in her doing public penance some two weeks after her appearance in the Consistory Court. The occasion has been memorialized in a famous letter of John Chamberlain's to Dudley Carleton dated 12 February 1611/12 (a Wednesday):

this last Soday Mall Cut-purse a notorious bagage (that used to go in mans apparell and challenged the feild of divers gallants) was brought to the same place [Paul's Cross], where she wept bitterly and seemed very penitent, but yt is since doubted that she was maudelin druncke, beeing discovered to have tipled of three quarts of sacke before she came to her penance: she had the daintiest preacher or ghostly father that ever I saw in pulpit, one Ratcliffe of Brazen Nose in Oxford, a likelier man to have led the revells in some ynne of court then to be where he was, but the best is he did extreem badly, and so wearied the audience that the best part went away, and the rest taried rather to heare Mall Cut-purse then him.<sup>2</sup>

The notoriety occasioned by this public display seems to have prompted the entry by Ambrose Garbrand in the Stationers' Register of 'a booke concerninge Mall Cutpurse' on 18 February 1611/12. 'Moll Cutpurse' (the name is also used by Chamberlain in his letter to Carleton) is of course the subtitle of Dekker and Middleton's play, as Mulholland has noted, and his discovery of an entry in the *Records of the Court of Stationers' Company* 1602-1640<sup>3</sup> recording Garbrand's payment of a fine of 7d. (also on 18 February) 'for printinge the booke of Moll Curpurse w<sup>th</sup>out entring it' strongly suggests what Mulholland would argue: that the book of Moll Cutpurse is in fact *The Roaring Girl*, and thus that the

<sup>1</sup> 'The Swan Theatre and the Earl of Pembroke's Servants', *Englische Studien*, 43 (1910-1911), 390 (noted by Mulholland, 'Date of *The Roaring Girl*', p. 27). See the Commentary on V.i.275.

<sup>2</sup> *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman Egbert McClure (Philadelphia, 1939), I, 334.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. W. A. Jackson (London, 1957), p. 449 (noted by Mulholland, 'Date of *The Roaring Girl*', p. 25).

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play was already in print by February 1612 (the 1611 date on the title page of the play's quarto text might still, of course, have been used at any time between 1 January and the middle of March 1612). In fact, by February 1612, the play had probably been in print for some six months or so.

The epilogue to the play contains a passage that has been much discussed, both for the obscurity of its reference, and for its possible bearing on the play's date. Reviewing various expectations which the audience may have brought to the play and which have not been satisfied, the author states:

others looke  
For all those base trickes publish'd in a booke,  
(Foule as his braines they flow'd from) of Cut-purses,  
Of Nips and Foysts, nastie, obscene discourses,  
As full of lies, as emptie of worth or wit,  
For any honest eare, or eye vnfit.

(lines 21–26)

The passage was long interpreted as a reference to 'A Booke called the Madde Pranccks of Merry Mall of the Bankside, with her Walks in Man's Apparel and to what Purpose. Written by John Day', entered in the Stationers' Register on 7 August 1610. No copy of this work is known, and in any case a more satisfactory explanation of the passage has been advanced by R. C. Bald,<sup>1</sup> who identified the foul book as a pamphlet (now lost) by S. R. whose *Martin Mark-All Beadle of Bridewell; His defence and Answere to the Belman of London* (entered in the Stationers' Register on 31 March 1610) derided Dekker's recent efforts to write of roguery and questioned his knowledge of the language of cant.<sup>2</sup> This was not S. R.'s first attack on Dekker, who in the preface 'To my owne Nation' in *Lanthorne and Candle-light* had denounced 'an *Vsurper*' who 'will bee taken for a Beadle of *Bridewell*'. No copy is known of this earlier production of the Beadle of Bridewell – which must have appeared soon after the publication of Dekker's *Belman of London* (Stationers' Register, 14 March 1608) and before 25 October

<sup>1</sup> 'The Chronology of Middleton's Plays', *MLR*, 32 (1937), 37–39.

<sup>2</sup> S. R. has been identified as Samuel Rid by Frank Aydelotte in *Elizabethan Rogues and Vagabonds* (Oxford, 1913), pp. 134–136.

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1608 when *Lanthorne and Candle-light* was entered for publication. Bald dated *The Roaring Girl* in 1607/8 and assumed the foul book of the epilogue to be a reference to S. R.'s earlier (and now lost) attack. By 1611, a more recent insult had been offered Dekker in S. R.'s *Martin Mark-All*, with its notice of the indebtedness of Dekker's *Belman* to Thomas Harman's *A Caueat or Warening for Commen Cursetors Vulgarely Called Vagabones* (1566), and its list of canting terms aimed at supplementing and correcting 'The Canters Dictionarie' contained in Dekker's *Lanthorne and Candle-light*.<sup>1</sup> The resentment caused by these repeated attacks is apparent in the virulence of the rejoinder contained in the epilogue, which must surely be Dekker's.

Bald proposed 1607/8 as a date for *The Roaring Girl* as an alternative to the 1604/5 date put forth by E. K. Chambers and others, who were misled by the erroneous date (1605) originally attached to the *Correction Book* record concerning Mary Frith. This early date prevented scholars such as Bald and R. H. Barker<sup>2</sup> from identifying the play which Mary Frith attended at the Fortune with Middleton and Dekker's comedy. Now that the true date of the *Correction Book* record has been established, the identification poses

<sup>1</sup> Dekker's indebtedness to those who had gone before him in the literature of roguery must have been a delicate matter for the author. In addition to Harman's *Caueat*, he borrowed freely from Robert Greene's *A Notable Discouery of Coosnage* (1591), his *Second Part of Conny-catching* (1591), his *Thirde and Last Part of Conny-catching* (1592); from the pamphlet titled *Mihil Mumchance, His Discouerie of the Art of Cheating in false Dyceplay* (1597, itself a virtually word-for-word copy of *A manifest detection of the most vyle and detestable vse of Diceplay* (1552), attributed to Gilbert Walker); and from *Greenes Ghost Haunting Conie-catchers*, by S. R. (1602, attributed to Samuel Rowlands). Materials gleaned from these sources had gone into the making of *The Belman of London* and *Lanthorne and Candle-light*, and Dekker would use them again in V.i of *The Roaring Girl*. His borrowings have been described by Aydelotte, *Rogues and Vagabonds*, pp. 129–131, 175–176; Frank W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery* (Boston and New York, 1907), I, 105–107; E. H. Miller, 'Thomas Dekker, Hack Writer', *Notes and Queries*, 200 (1955), 145–150; James A. S. McPeck, *The Black Book of Knaves and Unthrifits* (Storrs, Connecticut, 1969), pp. 145ff.

<sup>2</sup> Barker, *Thomas Middleton* (New York, 1958), p. 169, accepted Bald's argument for a 1607/8 date, as more recently has A. Gomme in his New Mermaid edition of *The Roaring Girl* (London, 1976), pp. xvii–xix. Price, p. 167, n. 15, thought the play to have been 'originally composed about 1605' with the canting scene (V.i) added c. 1508 as a consequence of the popularity of 'The Canters Dictionarie' in chapter 1 of *Lanthorne and Candle-light*.



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no problem, and indeed sheds light on a number of points that have hitherto been doubtful: the reference to a new play at the Swan Theatre; the reason why Moll, on the titlepage, is quoted as saying she must now work for her living (and why, in *If This Be Not a Good Play, the Devil Is In It*, she is said to have 'bin too late a sore-tormented soule'); the implications attached to the foul book denounced in the epilogue. The external evidence of Mary Frith's testimony before the Consistory Court joins with a number of items of internal evidence to place the date of *The Roaring Girl* securely in the late spring of 1611.

Resuming their collaboration in the theatre some seven years after jointly writing *The Honest Whore*, Part One, Middleton and Dekker chose a subject that bears continued witness to their shrewd professionalism. If anything more droll could be conceived than to dramatize the repentance of a courtesan, Dekker and Middleton must have considered it to be the stage representation of the scandalous Mary Frith as an honest, generous and courageous young woman, leading a fiercely independent and self-sufficient life on the edges of the London underworld where her every act is true to herself in her unconventional fashion.

The dramatists' characterization of their heroine is bold and often brilliantly original, but the play in which they have placed her is a conventional enough affair, with its seemingly compliant citizens' wives and the impecunious gallants who would like to seduce them or live off them. In the end, the wives of the subplot affirm their virtue, appearances notwithstanding, and their affirmations go unchallenged. It is all very like the sort of plot materials Dekker (in collaboration with Webster) manipulated in *Westward Ho*. It is also like materials to be found in Middleton's work elsewhere. Bullen noted that the complication concerning the feigned precontract between Laxton and Mistress Gallipot 'is a repetition of the device in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*', and that 'the conduct of Laxton and Gallipot is precisely the same as that of Witgood and Hoard'. Bullen drew attention as well to the Middletonian quality of some of the characters: 'Mistress Gallipot may be compared with Mistress Purge in *The Family of Love* or with Falso's Daughter in *The*

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*Phoenix*; and Mistress Openwork, the jealous scold, is a repetition of Mistress Glister in *The Family of Love*.<sup>1</sup> The main plot of *The Roaring Girl*, which concerns the efforts of Sir Alexander Wengrave to oppose his son Sebastian's love for the impoverished Mary Fitzallard, is the standard stuff of romantic comedy. Dekker had already produced a version of it in the parental opposition to the love of Rose and Lacy in *The Shoemakers' Holiday*; and Middleton had contributed an exuberant parody of it in the Maria-Gerardine plot of *The Family of Love*.

All the plot materials of *The Roaring Girl* are designed to provide a show-case at one point or another for Moll's various talents. She trades lively insults with the hypocritical Mistress Openwork, whose measure she easily takes (in II.i); she forces Laxton at sword-point to repent of his ill thoughts concerning her (in III.i); she rescues Jack Dapper from arrest (in III.iii); she co-operates with Sebastian in his witty design to pretend love to her, thereby reducing his father to a state of despair in which opposition to Mary Fitzallard will vanish (in IV.i); in the same scene she sings bawdy songs to her own accompaniment on the viola da gamba, and she eludes the efforts of old Wengrave to tempt her into theft by placing an expensive watch and a gold chain in her way. At the beginning of V.i we see her moving on easy terms with the gentry, Sir Beautious Ganymed and Sir Thomas Long, shortly joined by Lord Noland. Then follows the elaborate scene in which Moll displays her ability to converse in the canting language of thieves, thereby demonstrating her acquaintance with the other end of the social scale.

The work of transforming the real-life Moll into the lively, resourceful and superbly independent heroine of their play must have been one of the most gratifying tasks that either Middleton or Dekker ever attempted. Something of the wit with which they approached their work is apparent in Middleton's address 'To the Comicke Play-readers' that prefaces the quarto. He acknowledges a discrepancy between Moll's public reputation and the figure she cuts

<sup>1</sup> *Works of Middleton*, I, xxxvii. The fact that *The Family of Love* may well be a Middleton-Dekker collaboration does not affect the point under discussion here, the point being the derivative nature of the characters in the subplot of Middleton and Dekker's *Roaring Girl*.