

Mad Moll and Merry Meg: the roaring girl as popular heroine in Elizabethan and Jacobean writings

Patricia Shaw

UNIVERSITY OF OVIEDO

The “Mad Moll” and “Merry Meg” of my title refer, respectively, to Mary Frith, likewise known as “Moll Cutpurse”, and a tall, strapping Lancashire lass, known since her arrival in London, as “Long Meg of Westminster”, who are the protagonists of a series of late sixteenth and seventeenth century writings, two of which I should like to analyse in some detail, in order to explore, and, if possible, to account for, the attraction which these “roaring” cross-dressing girls obviously exercised over the Renaissance imagination and over the male authors who, basing themselves perhaps on popular legends concerning these probably real-life characters, endowed them with such enduring and endearing vitality both in fiction and in drama. The works which we shall be principally concerned with here are: the anonymous jest-biography, *The life of Long Meg of Westminster*, first entered into the Stationers’ Register in 1590¹; and Middleton and Dekker’s play, *The Roaring Girl*, first performed in about 1605. It is interesting to note, however, that Moll likewise appears in fiction, protagonising her “autobiography”, *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith*, published in 1662, and, conversely, that Meg is “the heroine of a play, noticed in Henslowe’s *Diary*, under the date February 14th, 1594” (Hindley, 1872: xxvi), but no longer extant. In the Renaissance period, the adjective “roaring” was applied to anyone “behaving or living in a noisy, riotous manner”², and was used particularly in combination with *boy*: “a roaring boy”; the word is, therefore, gendered, and hence its use with *girl* was obviously meant to evoke a hoyden, or tom-boy, who behaves in what is traditionally considered to be a masculine way.

Before commenting on the works mentioned, it would not, perhaps, be otiose to summarise briefly what is known about the real-life existence of these two interesting protagonists of, in Middleton’s words, “heroicke spirit and masculine womanhood” (*The Roaring Girl*, II.i.320-21). For chronological reasons, Long Meg should be considered first: her “actual existence as a real person has been both asserted and denied, but though in the nineteenth century the question was hotly debated by ... antiquarians ... in the pages of the early volumes of *Notes and Queries*, it remains unsolved”³ (Mish, 1963: 82). In the opinion, however, of Meg’s modern editor, Charles C. Mish: “... there must have been some living prototype for our heroine, and if she did not do everything ... recorded of her, the stories which clustered around her name have nothing inherently improbable or inconsistent.” (Mish, 1963: 82).

It is interesting to note in this context that the poet, John Skelton, and Henry VIII’s jester, Will Summers, who actually feature as characters in *The Life of Long Meg ...*, and who certainly *did* exist, were the supposed begetters of, respectively, a jest-book: *The Merry Tales of Skelton*, registered in 1566-67, and a jest-biography: *A Pleasant History of the Life and Death of Will*

¹ For the bibliographical history of *Long Meg*, see F. P. Wilson (1939: 155). The text used here is that to be found in Charles C. Mish (1963: 81-113).

² *The Oxford English Dictionary ...*, sub vocem. “roaring”.

³ “... notably by ... Edwin F. Rimbault and Peter Cunningham”.

Summers, 1637. The “living prototype” of Meg, hypothesized by Mish is not, therefore, as he says, at all improbable, and the reference in the opening pages of the book to her being “a Lancashire lass” determined to go to London “to serve and to learn City fashions”, together with “three or four lasses more” rings true, and the rhyming couplet with which one of the last chapters (Ch. 15) closes: “If any man ask who brought this to pass, / Say it was done by a Lancashire lass.” suggests that her northern origins were not a purely introductory convention. Significant, too, is the affirmation made in the preface to the book that “A woman she was of late memory and well beloved, spoken on of all and known of many: therefore there is hope of better acceptance”, i.e. people who had actually *known* her would be more interested in reading about her! It should, however, be remembered that *Meg*, according to the OED¹, is used dialectally “to indicate a hoyden, coarse woman, etc.”, and that in Edinburgh Castle there is a large 15th century cannon, known as Mons Meg (because it was cast in Mons), and also *Roaring Meg*, “so called from the loudness of her report”².

Of the real-life existence of Mary Frith there is no doubt: according to the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, she was “a notorious thief, fortune-teller and forger, who lived about 1584-1659. She did penance at St. Paul’s Cross in 1612”³, a fact borne out by John Chamberlain (McClure, 1939: 334), who writes in one of his contemporary letters that:

... this last Sunday Mall Cut-purse a notorious bagage (that used to go in mans apparell and challenged the feild 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 penance.

According to Paul Salzman, “the redoubtable Mrs. Mary Frith ... was a well-known figure in the early part of the (17th) century. She dressed in male attire and led a sternly independent life” (Salzman, 1985: 213).⁴ For Havelock Ellis, “Mary Frith ... was a noted character of the period, and her reputation was none of the best” (Ellis, 1887: vii); however, according to her 17th century biographer, by “her heroick impudence (she) hath quite undone every Romance” (1662: 17).

As will be seen, the most outstanding characteristic shared by these two young women (Meg is eighteen when she comes to London, and Moll about twenty-five when the events described in the play occur), is their *afición* for dressing up as men, above all, as swaggering, fighting men, in other words, as “roaring boys”, and that this tendency is not a purely literary invention, but, in fact, reflects a real-life vogue, is witnessed by a number of contemporary documents and references, dating from the 1580’s and continuing well into the 1620’s: thus we find such observations as the following by William Harrison in 1577: “I have met with some of these trulls in London so disguised, that it passed my skill to discern, whether they were men or women.” Philip Stubbes, in his *Anatomy of Abuses*, 1583, inveighs against women wearing doublets and jerkins, affirming that:

... though this be a kind of attire appropriate only to man, yet they blush not to wear it; and if they could as well chaunge their sex, and put on the kinde of man, as they can weare apparel assigned only to man, I think they would as verely become men indeed, ...

For another commentator, such women are monstrous who are disguised as men, and are: “... like *Androgini*, who counterfaying the shape of either kind, are in deede neither, so while they are in condition women, and would seeme in apparell men, they are neither men nor women, but

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary* ..., sub vocem, “Meg”.

² *Ibid.* See also: *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, under “Mons Meg”.

³ *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, under “Moll Cutpurse”.

⁴ See also Singleton (1970: 77-78).

plaine Monsters.”¹ Middleton is obviously reflecting such opinions when he has Old Wengrave say of Moll:

A creature ... nature hath brought forth
 To mocke the sex of women. - 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, ...
 Davy. A Monster, tis some Monster. (RG, l.i.129-38)

Middleton and Dekker themselves classify various types of “Roaring girls” in the *Prologus* to their play, for, they affirm, “of that Tribe are many”, in order to distinguish *their* girl from the others, and it is likewise worth noting that, although no longer extant, there was entered into the Stationers’ register a work by John Day, probably a play, entitled: *The Mad Pranks of Merry Moll of the Bankside, with Her Walks in Man’s Apparel* (August 7th., 1610), presumably referring to Mary Frith.

By 1606, even Dekker “that tender-hearted poet” to whom, according to Havelock Ellis (1887: vii), “we probably owe much of the charity shed over the central figure” in *The Roaring Girl*, was accusing women of being “men’s Shee Apes” (Grosart, 1963: 59), and by 1620, we learn from that well-informed commentator of contemporary affairs, John Chamberlain (Shepherd, 1981: 68), that the king himself had taken up the cudgels against such unnatural behaviour on the part of women:

Yesterday the bishop of London called together all his Clergie about this towne, and told them he had expresse commaundment from the king to will them to inveigh vehemently and bitterly in theyre sermons against the insolence of our women, and theyre wearing of brode brimd hats, pointed doublets, theyre hair cut short or shorne, and some of them stillettaes or poinards, and such other trinckets of like moment, adding withall that yf pulpit admonitions will not reforme them he wold proceed by another course.

Such indignant criticism of women’s “insolent” cross-dressing and hair-cutting makes the sympathetic treatment meted out to the literary Meg and Moll by their authors particularly striking: in the case of Meg, it must be said, however, that in spite of all her derring-do, she still preserves her essential femininity (symbolised, perhaps, by the letting down of her hair after bouts of successful sword-play) in her willingness to be submissively married. There are more dimensions to the presentation of Moll Cutpurse in *The Roaring Girl*, since the authors allow us both to learn how the world judges her, and to see her, as, according to them, she really is, it being significant in this context that it is the despicable characters who disparage her most. Not the least suggestive aspect of this fascinating play then, is the fact that Middleton and Dekker chose to convert Chamberlain’s “notorious baggage” into a “goodly, personable creature”, strong, courageous, intelligent and virtuous, and morally soaring above the vicious and mediocre characters by whom she is surrounded.

Essentially, what these two “roaring girls” manage to do is give a number of unworthy men their “come uppance”, in a series of episodes which are comic precisely because the victors are women: such episodes protagonised by men would not, of course, be funny, the essence of humour being, precisely, topsy-turvydom, and in a patriarchal society, that a woman should physically overmaster a man, is topsy-turvydom with a vengeance! These “roaring girls”, then, proved to be attractive both to the authors who used them for copy, and to the readers and audience who could read about, or witness, and enjoy, their activity, because of their comic potential. In this sense, the preface to *Long Meg*, and Middleton’s preface to the printed edition and his *Prologus* to the play, are significant, all three texts insisting on the amusement in store for their readers/audience. Thus the anonymous author of *Long Meg*, the complete title of which is:

¹ These three texts are all reproduced in Shepherd (1981: 67-68).

The Life of Long Meg of Westminster: Containing the mad, merry pranks Shee played in her life time, not onely in performing sundry Quarrels with divers Ruffians about LONDON: But also how Valiantly she behaved her selfe in the Warres of Bolloigne,

after affirming that many have written of the jests of Robin Hood and Bevis of Southampton (i.e. *men*) “to procure mirth and drive away melancholy”, informs the reader that he bethought himself of the merry pranks of Long Meg, which are “as pleasant as the merriest jest that ever passed the press”, and will serve as the “whetstone to mirth” after his readers’ “serious business”. “If”, he adds, “she have any gross faults, bear with them the more patiently for that she was a woman”, a characteristic male rider, to shift the blame on to his subject, should the book prove unsatisfactory! The emblematic words here are *merry* and *mirth*!

As regards Moll, Middleton and Dekker affirm in the *Prologus* to their play that: “A Roaring Girle (whose notes till now never were) / Shall fill with laughter our vast Theater / That’s all which I dare promise.” revealing in the last line, that she is called “madde Moll”, the emphasis again being laid on merriment and, indeed, “midsummer madness”, for, says Middleton in the preface to the printed version of the play, “this published Comedy” is a “kind of light-colour Summer stuffe”. It is, then, the merriness of these madcap girls, and their potential for comedy which constitutes one of their principal attractions.

Another may well be their originality as subjects for literary exploitation: jest-biographies, that is to say, jest books “to which some semblance of unity has been given by grouping them round the figure of some popular hero” (Wilson, 1939: 133) do generally correspond precisely to this definition, i.e. they centre on “popular heroes”: Scoggin, Tarlton, Old Hobson, etc. Meg is unique in this sense as an examination of the relevant literature will reveal¹. Moll is similarly unique, as Middleton is quick to point out: “A Roaring Girle (whose notes till now *never were*)”, in the theatre, we are presumably to understand. For although Elizabethan drama, with Shakespeare at its head, is full of girls disguised as men, they are not counterfeit “roaring boys” engaged, sometimes aggressively, although always justifiably, in picking quarrels with unworthy men of all ages, nor do they possess the physique which would permit them so to do. Although the text of *Long Meg* is more forthright on the subject, there seems to be no doubt that both girls have physical attributes which facilitate their being transformed into honorary men (and, incidentally, would make it easy to find a suitable actor to play Moll’s part). In the case of Meg, it is her height which is her principal asset - not for nothing is she nicknamed “Long Meg” - for: “she did not only pass all the rest of her country in the length of her proportion but every limb was so fit to her tallness that she seemed the picture and shape of some tall man cast in a woman’s mold.” (Ch. 1). The poet, Dr. Skelton, composes some impromptu verses on first beholding Meg, which emphasize other physical advantages: “methinks she is of a large length, / Of a tall pitch and a good strength, / With strong arms and stiff bones.” (Ch. 2) and the Hostess of the inn where she will find employment sees her as “a good lusty wench”, who will be useful when it comes to obliging backsliding customers to pay their scores (as, indeed, she proves to be!).

Moll is less clearly evoked physically (much would depend on the actor in this case), although there are implicit allusions to her strength and robustness in speeches such as Laxton’s admiring: (that wench is) “as the Spirit of four great parishes, and a voyce that will drowne all the Citty, methinks a brave Captaine might get all his souldiers upon her ... if he could come on and come off quick enough.” (RG, II.i.166-69). There is an interesting parallelism here with Meg, which is hardly surprising since Middleton and Dekker do actually refer to her in their play², for in the second chapter of *Long Meg*, Will Summers, Henry VIII’s jester, likewise suggests she be married

¹ F. P. Wilson (1939: 154-57) registers: *Salomon and Markolf, The Parson of Kalenborow, Scoggin, Robin Goodfellow, Friar Rush, Tarlton, Dobson, George Peele, Old Hobson, Peter Fabell and Oliver Smug, George a Greene*, i.e. all *men*.

² At the beginning of Act V, Sc. 1, Jack Dapper asks: “But prethee Maister Captaine *Iacke* ... was it your *Megge* of Westmisters courage that rescued mee from the Poultry puttockes indeed?”

to “Long Sanders of the court, (for) they would bring forth none but soldiers”. Laxton calls Moll, his “sweete plumpe Moll” and compares her to a “fat Eele”, while one of his boon companions comments: “Tis the maddest fantasticalst girle: - I never knew so much flesh and so much nimbleness put together” (RG, II.i.182-83), so that one gets the impression that whereas Meg is strong and tall with it, Moll is strong and stout with it!¹ Their originality would, therefore, obviously contribute to their popularity as, above all, would the motives that lead them to engage in physical skirmishes and armed combat with masculine opponents. Although, as will be seen, Moll is portrayed in a far more subtle manner than Meg, drawing on her “wit” and intelligence as often as she draws her sword, there is a quixotic element perceptible in the behaviour of both these heroines, which makes them especially endearing, and, indeed, which undoubtedly endeared them to those readers who, a few years later, were to be likewise captivated by the immortal Don’s well-intentioned endeavours to right all that he saw as wrongs.²

Thus, Meg, for example, uses her physical advantages to defend the weak, to castigate masculine arrogance or deliberate rudeness (if it comes from a foreigner, even more so!) and to repel anything that smacks of abuse of authority, thus combining her quixotry with an admixture of Robin Hoodery! In Ch. 5. for example, we read: “... (Meg) was famoused amongst all estates, both rich and poor, but chiefly of them which wanted or were in distress, for whatsoever she got of the rich (as her gettings were great) she bestowed it liberally on them that had need;” tendencies illustrated in Ch. 9, in which after having defeated a couple of tall, swaggering thieves, she spares their lives “upon certain conditions”, these being:

1. First, that you never hurt woman, nor company that any woman is in;
2. Item, that you hurt no poor or impotent man;
3. Item, that you rob no children nor innocents;
4. Item, that you rob no packmen nor carriers, for their goods nor money is none of their own;
5. Item, no manner of distressed persons, but of this I grant you exceptions, that for every rich farmer and country chuff that hoard up and lets the poor want, such spare not, but let them feel your fingers.

Such conditions closely echo Robin Hood’s statutes of “robbing the rich ... suffering no woman to be molested, and sparing poor men’s goods”³. Like all her opponents, the thieves are “full of grief that a woman had given them a foil” (Ch. 9).

Similarly, Moll terrifies a group of cutpurses, even demanding of them some money stolen from a friend (RG, V.i.274-76) which they promise to do in their haste to get away from her, with, as one says literally, *pacus palabros!* This little episode serves, as happens in several occasions in *The Roaring Girl*, to trigger off one of Moll’s superb and profound tirades, the moral of which is that being acquainted with vice does not necessarily mean that one is vicious, and, indeed, that forewarned is forearmed! *Long Meg*, when all is said and done, is but a jest-book, in which one can hardly expect to find much rhetorical excellence, but Middleton, as we know from *The Changeling* and *Women Beware Women*, when writing at his best, writes very well indeed, and his espousal of Moll’s cause (perhaps at the instigation of Dekker, as Havelock Ellis suggests) means that she is endowed with some very powerful and very moving speeches. As T. S. Eliot (1976: 162) so aptly puts it: “In *The Roaring Girl*, we read with toil through a mass of cheap conventional intrigue, and suddenly realize that we are, and have been for some time without knowing it, observing a real and unique human being.”

Meg’s first martial enterprise is motivated by her natural indignation at the carrier in Ch. 1, who wants to extort more money than they possess from the Lancashire lasses he is taking to

¹ In the last chapter (Ch. 18), there is a reference to Meg’s “gross” and “fat body”, but the impression given in the rest of the book does not concur with this view of her.

² Thomas Shelton published his translation of the first part of *Don Quixote* in 1612.

³ *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, under “Robin Hood”.

London to look for work - a case of a worker trying to exploit his own class for financial gain, an ambition Meg soon puts paid to by dint of her "lambasts". It is, however, characteristic of her nobility, that, when, in another episode (Ch. 9), she finds this same carrier robbed and thrown in a ditch, she offers to do her best to help him make up his losses!

Of genuine sexual exploitation or harassment in *Long Meg* there is none: however, one of her most outstanding achievements occurs when, disguised as a man, she defeats in a duel her mistress's insistent but despised suitor, Sir James of Castile (Ch. 4). It will be remembered that the book was first registered in 1590, just two years after the Armada, so it is hardly surprising that, this being a jest book, some episode or other should, indeed, reflect the discomfiture of the arrogant Spaniards: exacerbated patriotism is a distinguishing feature of this type of popular literature, as we find, for example, in Deloney's episodic novels, and this would, undoubtedly, constitute another of the attractions of the text. As in some of Deloney's stories too, Meg's activities are situated in the reign of Henry VIII, and finally in that of Mary, which allows the author to introduce as regular customers at Meg's inn, *The Spread-Eagle in Westminster*, not only the fictional Sir James of Castile, but also such real-life characters as John Skelton, Will Summers and, even, Sir Thomas More. As has already been mentioned, the first two were sufficiently identified in the popular imagination with tricks and mirth, as to be the heroes of jest-biographies¹, and, indeed, in this text, Skelton is shown composing "in his mad, merry vein" a poem about Meg which is, in fact, an amusing parody of the real-life Skelton's characteristic poetic style. That Sir Thomas More was a "merry man" is a commonplace of contemporary writings: as F. P. Wilson (1939: 125) has pointed out, the first collection of jests in English: *A Hundred Merry Tales*, was published by More's brother-in law, John Rastell, and in the opinion of William Hazlitt, was compiled by John Heywood (Rastell's son-in-law) "possibly at the instigation of Sir Thomas More".

In fact, before this duel, Sir James has already had occasion to regret the doubts he has expressed concerning Meg's strength, for: "try her", quoth Skelton, "for I have heard that Spaniards are of wonderful strength" (Ch. 2); however, Meg fells Sir James at one blow, so that he collapses "at her feet" (defeated Spain prostrate before Elizabeth?), which allows Will Summers to deliver the punch-line: "By my faith ... she strikes a blow like an ox, for she hath struck down an ass!" The suggestion concerning Elizabeth and defeated Spain is not, I think, totally far-fetched, for after winning the *duel*, Meg obliges Sir James of Castile to serve her at dinner, which he accepts with a fairly good grace, thinking that he has been defeated by some valiant English *man*, only to discover, as Meg lets down her hair, that he must play "the proper page, (to) Meg sitting in her majesty" (Ch. 2). The 1620 edition of *Long Meg* would likewise have enchanted those Londoners who, in 1624, flocked in their thousands to see Middleton's anti-Spanish political drama, *A Game at Chesse*.

Spain, however, is not the only target of Meg's patriotic enterprises, for in Ch. 11, at the siege of Boulogne, where she is employed as a laundress, she takes the initiative of leading other "women-soldiers" to throw stones and boiling water over some intrepid French soldiers who are managing to enter into the town, being likewise "the foremost with her halberd" to chase them from the walls. Not content with this, she actually challenges an arrogant Frenchman to single combat, proving herself, of course, the victor and cutting off his head, before letting "her (own) hair fall about her ears". Such female prowess has the patriotic advantage of making the enemy seem even more contemptible, and must have contributed greatly to the popularity of this text. *The Roaring Girl*, being a City comedy, Moll has few opportunities to meet hostile foreigners, although on two occasions (II.i. and III.i.), she suggests her hypothetical willingness to measure herself against "high Germans"! Sexual harassment and adultery do, however, constitute an essential feature of *The Roaring Girl*, which, as we are suggesting, is a much more impressive piece of writing, and never more powerfully so as in Act II.i., and Act III.i., in which the philanderer, Laxton (deceived by her hail fellow well met manner) sees in Moll an easy prey, a

¹ According to the Rev. A. G. L'Estrange, Skelton, indeed, "was esteemed more fit for the stage than the pulpit" (L'Estrange, 1877: 198)

purchasable prey, as he explains by means of sexually charged military metaphors: “He lay hard siege to her, mony is that *Aqua Fortis*, that eats into many a maidenhead; where the wals are flesh and bloud, He ever pierce through with a golden auguer.” (RG, II.1.172-75). In accordance with his conviction that *aurum vincit omnia*, he offers her “ten Angels in faire gold” “to be merry and lye together” with him at Brainford, an offer she apparently accepts, but only, in fact, to then challenge him to a duel in Gray’s Inn Fields, the motive of which, she assures him is “To teach thy base thoughts manners”, this declaration leading into a superb “feminist” speech, which Middleton might well be proud of composing, both for its rhetorical power and for the liberality of the ideas expressed therein. The text deserves to be quoted in full:

th’art one of those
 That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore,
 If she but cast a liberall eye vpon thee,
 Turne backe her head, shees thine, or amongst company,
 By chance drinks first to thee: then shee’s quite gon,
 There’s no meanes to help her: nay for a need,
 Wilt sweare vunto thy credulous fellow letchers
 That th’art more in favour with a Lady
 At first sight then her monky all her life time,
 How many of our sex, by such as thou
 Haue their good thoughts paid with a blasted name
 That neuer deserued loosly or did trip
 In path of whooredom, beyond cup and lip.
 But for the staine of conscience and of soule,
 Better had women fall into the hands
 Of an act silent, then a bragging nothing,
 There’s no mercy in’t -- what durst moue you sir,
 To thinke me whoorish? a name which Ide tear out
 From the hye Germaines throat, if it lay ledger there
 To despatch priuy slanders against mee.
 In thee I defye all men, their worst hates,
 And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts,
 With which they intangle the poore spirits of fooles,
 Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallne wiuers.
 Fish that must needs bite, or themselues be bitten,
 Such hungry things as these may soone be tooke
 With a worme fastned on a golden hooke.
 Those are the letchers food, his prey, he watches
 For quarrelling wedlockes, and poore shifting sisters,
 Tis the best fish he takes: but why good fisherman,
 Am I thoughte meate for you, that neuer yet
 Had angling rod cast towards me? cause youl’e say
 I’m giuen to sport, I’m often mery, iest,
 Had mirth no kindred in the world but lust?
 O shame take all her friends then: but now ere
 Thou and the baser world censure my life,
 He send ‘em word by thee, and write so much
 Vpon thy breast, cause thou shalt bear’t in mind,
 Tell them ‘twere base to yeeld, where I haue conquer’d.

I scorn to prostitute my selfe to a man,
 I that can prostitute a man to mee,
 And so I greete thee. (RG, III.i.68-109)

This, of course, is rôle-reversing with a vengeance, rôle-reversing which is reflected physically for, like Meg's opponents, Laxton gets the worst of the ensuing duel, loses much blood, and is forced to beg her pardon and sue for his life. A triumphant Moll then celebrates the independence that her valour allows her to enjoy in a significantly worded speech: "... shee that has wit and spirit, / May scorn to live, beholding to her body for meate ... / [...] / My spirit shall be mistress of this house (i.e. *body*) / As long as I haue time in't." (RG, III.i.133-140). Moll is not, therefore, all brawn and no brains: she has wit, intelligence, intuition and imagination. Indeed, Long Meg is more characteristically the "roaring girl", defending the interests of the oppressed by dint of her strength, whilst Moll, for example, forwards the cause of the happiness of Sebastian Wengrave and Mary FitzAllard - the central plot of the play - by convincingly lending herself to the deception that she, Moll, is the object of the young man's affection, and hence, reconciling his mean and miserable old father to his marriage to Mary, as the decidedly lesser of two evils. Moll is, therefore, cast into the sympathetic rôle of the agent through whom true love eventually finds a way, albeit Mary FitzAllard, colourless and rather malicious, hardly seems worthy of such a good-hearted and disinterested ally. Moll likewise thus gets the chance to avenge herself on her most vicious detractor, there being no end to the insults which Old Wengrave is willing to heap upon her, nor to the lengths that he will go to discredit her, including the ignoble stratagem of ostentatiously leaving valuables within her reach, in the hope that she will steal them, and hence may be arrested. This trick "to catch the young one" of course fails abjectly, since, as Havelock Ellis (1887: viii) points out: "She is acquainted with the shapes of iniquity, but she moves among them uncontaminated, and uses her knowledge not to practise but to defeat vice."

We have seen Meg punishing the arrogance of foreigners, but, of course, these chivalrous girls are just as willing to put down specimens of home-grown male arrogance and presumption, as is made manifest in many a merry episode or scene: Sir James of Castile may be a *miles gloriosus*, but, then, so too is Huffing Dick who, in his arrogance, deliberately picks a quarrel with Meg (Ch. 17), who then "so beat him that she had almost killed him." She then obliges this *machista avant la lettre* to dress up in women's clothing, whilst she goes in man's attire, and not only attend her through the public streets, but also, again, wait on her like a page, at dinner. After this humiliation, Huffing Dick "for very shame went out of London". As may be seen, rôle-reversing is being played out here with all its consequences, but one has no sympathy for a victim who so obviously deserves what he gets! At a more light-hearted level, Moll has several skirmishes with the bragging Trapdore, who is invariably worsted by her, and punishes a rapier-wearing ruffian for having insulted her in a tavern (RG, II.i.), the *pundonor* of these "roaring girls" being as pronounced as that of any other City gallants. Thus Meg, who has liberally paid a waterman to take her across the Thames (Ch. 15), is insulted when he begins to hum behind her back (an outward sign of inward dissatisfaction!) and decides "to revenge (her) own wrong", by tying him to the stern of his boat and sculling him back and forth herself, to make him remember "how he misused an honest face".

Similarly, when, dressed one evening in man's attire, she is insulted by a nobleman (Ch. 8), she responds immediately by giving him "a good box on the ear", and drawing her sword as fast as he and his servant draw theirs: "Meg was ready as they, and together they go, but Meg housed them both in a chandler's shop", the fray finally being interrupted by the representatives of law and order. In this episode, it is interesting to note that the wearing of men's clothes on the part of Meg, is associated specifically with having *fun*: "It chanced in an evening that Meg would be pleasant, and so put on man's apparel, and with her sword and buckler walked the streets, looking how she might find some means to be merry, ..." the implication being that for Meg, as for Moll, cross-dressing gives her the opportunity and the liberty of enjoying herself in ways which she cannot do in the spheres of action conventionally assigned to women.

The quixotic vein which, as has already been mentioned, is characteristic of both Meg and Moll, is patent in their sympathetic treatment and support of such victims of society as cashiered

soldiers, and any who are the victims of what they see as an abuse of authority. Being in their own way “warrior-women”¹, they seem to feel a natural affinity with that most masculine of professions, soldiering. Thus, most of Ch. 5 of *Long Meg* is dedicated to narrating how Meg befriends an out-of-work soldier, after first putting his valour to the test by crossing swords with him whilst disguised as a man. When Trapdore pretends to be “a poore Souldier with a patch o’re one eie” in order to beg, Moll is momentarily taken in by him and by Teare-Cat “all tatters”, exclaiming: “Come, come, *Dapper*, lets give ‘em something, las poore men, what mony haue you? by my troth, I loue a souldier with my soule” (RG, V.i.70-72), a sentiment, indeed, echoed by Meg: “I reverence all soldiers and honour captains” (Ch. 10), so it is hardly surprising that when she decides to marry, she should choose “a proper tall man and a soldier”!

Any abuse of authority arouses the indignation of these girls, proud to be a law unto themselves: thus, a creditor and the bailey he sends to arrest one of Meg’s customers, find themselves paid only in blows and drenchings administered by Meg’s powerful hands, outraged as she is that such an action be attempted on her premises: “Arrested.” quoth Meg, “what in our house?”², a house which she conceives of as “a sanctuary for any gentleman and not for bailies and catchpolls” (Ch. 6). One cannot help being reminded here of Don Quixote’s releasing of the galley-slaves. Similarly, when Davy Dapper’s father, in Middleton’s play, has his son, whom he sees as a “roaring boy”, shadowed by a sergeant and his yeoman, in order to have him arrested on a false charge of debts concocted by himself, in the hope that a term in prison will cure him of his wild ways, Moll happens to walk by, and foils this new example of “a trick to catch the young one”, for she immediately scents the sergeant for what he is, and resolves to “spoyle (their) game”, by warning their intended victim. Insulted by the sergeant who calls her “a whore to hang upon any man”, she retorts: “Whores are like Seriants, so now hang you, draw rogue ...”, thus frightening him and his fellow away. Revelling in her success, she assures the audience that: “I’m glad I haue done perfect one good work to day, / If any Gentleman be in Scriveners bonds, / Send but for Moll, she’ll baile him by these hands.” (RG, III.iii.212-214). A similar and not unattractive self-confidence informs the speech in which she assures Old Wengrave that he could do far worse than have her as a daughter-in-law, enumerating the benefits (qua dowry) that she brings:

Now all the towne will take regard on you,
And all your enemies feare you for my sake,
You may passe where you list, through crowdes most thicke,
And come of brauely with your purse unpickt,
[...]
No cheate dare work upon you, with thumbe or knife,
While y’ aue a roaring girle to your sonnes wife. (RG, V.ii.155-161)

Abuse of parental authority is thus foiled twice by Moll in the course of the play, and it is in this skirmish with the sergeant that Moll’s valour earns the epithet of “Megge of Westminster’s courage” (RG, V.i. 1-3), courage which, indeed, *Meg* displays against the Constable of Westminster who is determined to press her ostler into the army: when all entreaties fail, she gives the Constable a sound box over the ears, thus bringing to his aid the Captain, before whom she displays her martial skills so convincingly that she is able to enlist in her man’s place (more rôle-reversing), and thus, as has been seen go to Boulogne. If civil and military authority do not impress her, it is unlikely that ecclesiastical authority will be able to do better, and in the last and anti-Catholic chapter (Ch. 18), situated in the reign of Mary Tudor, an hypocritical and corrupt friar gets his “come uppance”, thanks to her strength *and* her resourcefulness. On her recovery from a grave illness, Friar Oliver exhorts Meg to do the Penance imposed by the Church; if not, he says, he will “complain to the Ordinary, and so to the Bishop, and compel you to it by injunction”. Such words are, of course, like a red rag to a bull for Meg! The penance is not

¹ Cf. Simon Shepherd’s title, op. cit.: *Amazones and Warrior Women ...*

² One cannot help but be reminded of Lady Macbeth’s: “What! in our house?” (II.iii.97)!

dissimilar to that imposed on the real-life Mary Frith at Paul's Cross, for Meg is to go to Mass and "Kneel before the pulpit and declare to the people the vileness of (her) life", or, alternatively, "bestow five pound for five solemn masses". Meg apparently accepts this second alternative, but, of course, eventually gets her money back by a clever trick "which was such a disgrace" to Friar Oliver that "he was ashamed to show his face in the streets". The whole episode smacks very much of the popular anti-Catholicism of the 1590s.

There is, of course, another kind of authority, husbandly authority, and here the ways of the two "roaring girls" part: for Meg is willing to submit to the authority of the right husband, while Moll is incapable of being obedient to any man. In this context, it is interesting to note that when Thomas Deloney incorporated Meg into several chapters of Part II of *The Gentle Craft*, 1598, her pranks are all centred on her unsuccessful wooing of Richard Casteler, the shoemaker, and her rivalry in this connection with Gillian of the George. Thus, unlucky in love, she ends up badly in Deloney's version, becoming "common to the call of every man", though repenting in old age. However, in *Long Meg*, she marries her tall soldier, to whom she offers "great obedience" even when, on one occasion, curious to confirm the stories of her martial exploits, he tries to put her fighting skills to the test. She refuses, however, to be drawn, saying, on her knees (!):

Husband, ... whatsoever I have done to others,
it behooveth me to be obedient towards you,
and never shall it be said, though I can
swinge a kave that wrongs me, that Long Meg
shall be her husband's master, and therefore
use me as you please. (Ch. 3)

Moll's attitude to marital obedience is, in fact, similarly conventional - these works were, after all written by men! - deprecating the idea that a man should stand in awe of his wife (RG, III.i.138), and admitting that "a wife you know ought to be obedient" (RG, II.ii.36-37). Precisely for this reason, she herself prefers to stay single, an attitude explained in a lively speech very much in the spirit of Shakespeare's Beatrice making *her* declaration of independence! However, there is perhaps no such telling illustration of Moll's innate sense of fair play as in the speech, in the same scene (II.ii.) in which she advises young Sebastian not to "take a wife running", and warns him against the craftiness of "old cozoning widdowes, that ... make (a) poore Gentleman worke hard for a pension ...". Her anti-marriage speech deserves to be quoted in full:

I haue no humor to marry, I loue to lye aboth sides ath bed myselfe; 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, I loue you so well sir for your good will I'de be loath you should repent your bargaine after, and therefore weele nere come together at first, I haue the head now of my selfe, and am man enough for a woman, marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden looses one head, and has a worse ith place. (RG, II.ii. 34-43)

Equally amusing are her "only in a blue moon" verses at the end of the play (RG, V.ii.) which culminate in her affirmation that doomsday would be the best day for marriage: "For if I should repent, I were soone at rest"!

I think it may be said, therefore, with some justification that mad Moll and merry Meg owe their popularity not only to their inherent potential for comedy, but also to the fact that they reflect a contemporary vogue, that they embody dramatically the adventures of real-life characters, as also to the fact that their quixotic traits are endearing, as such traits always are (it being a natural human tendency to delight in seeing the underdog defended, and authority, arrogance and vanity taken down a peg or two), and, probably, to the fact that contemporary women would enjoy and identify with, the feminist tendencies featured in these stories. At a purely literary level, it should perhaps be pointed out that because their supporting casts are made up of either colourless or anodyne characters, or downright disagreeable, not to say vicious and corrupt ones, these honourable girls soar above them morally, and hence can depend on their readers' full approval. Meg's story is lively and entertaining, and the miscellaneous episodes do endow her with an

attractive, well-defined outline, but the work does not display the subtlety nor the unexpected depth which Middleton and Dekker were capable of bestowing on a character who has, obviously, been deliberately moved far away from her disreputable original. Middleton, indeed, confirms this in his *Prologus: his "Roaring Girl"*, he says, "flies / With wings more lofty" than others "of that Tribe", and these "lofty wings" have gained her many admirers: for T. S. Eliot, as has been mentioned, "she is a real and unique human being", whilst for Havelock Ellis (1887: vii-viii):

She is strong and courageous ... and her sword is the match of any man's, but it is never drawn save in a good cause. She is frank and free-spoken; when among friends the mood takes her, she can even sing a wanton song, and accompany it on the viol; but she is modest for all that, and woe to the man who attempts to take liberties! She is acquainted with the shapes of iniquity, but she moves among them uncontaminated, and uses her knowledge not to practise but to defeat vice. She is a knight-errant who goes about succouring distressed lovers in the way of honesty, and she would like in her own person to avenge all the wrongs of women.

Ellis's reference to knight-errantry brings to mind again the quixotic elements in the behaviour of these two honorary and honourable men, elements which were not lost on later commentators by then familiar with Cervantes' immortal work through Shelton's translation (1612): thus, at the level of burlesque, Edmund Gayton, in his *Festivous Notes on the History of the renowned Don Quixote*, 1654, bestows on Meg some verses entitled *Long Meg of Westminster to Dulcinea of Toboso* (a parody of the verses prefixed to Cervantes' novel), in which she welcomes Dulcinea to share her lonely tomb in Westminster Abbey:

Indeed, untill this time, ne'r any one
Was worthy to be Meg's companion.
But since Toboso hath so fruitfull been,
To bring forth one might be my sister Twinne,
Alike in breadth of face; no Margeries
Had ever wider cheeks or larger eyes;
Alike in shoulders, belly and in flanks,
Alike in legs too, for we had no shanks,
And for our feet, alike from heel to toe,
The shoemakers the length did never know.
Lye thou by me ... (Hindley, 1872: xxiv-xxv)

Eight years later, and at a more romantic level, as is fitting, Moll was awarded "an accomplished interior monologue" in the fictional autobiography, *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith*, 1662, a monologue in which she sees herself, dressed as she is in man's apparel, as a character in the Spanish book:

In my own thoughts I was quite another thing: I was Squiresse to *Dulcinea of Toboso*, the most incomparably beloved Lady of *Don Quixote*, and was sent of a message to him from my Mistress in the Formalities of *Knight-Errantry*, that I might not offend against any *punctilio* thereof which he so strictly required; and also to be the more acceptable to my lovely *Sancho Pancha*, that was trained up by this time in Chivalry, whom I would surprise in this disguise. (Salzman, 1985: 213)

Indeed, as I hope to have suggested, in or out of such disguises, these "roaring girls" are never less than surprising!

REFERENCES

Eliot, T. S. 1976 (1932): Thomas Middleton. *Selected Essays*. London, Faber.

- Ellis, H. 1887: Preface to Vol. II. *Thomas Middleton, The Best Plays of the Old Dramatists*. London, The Mermaid Series.
- Grosart, A. B. ed. 1963: *Thomas Dekker: Non-Dramatic Works*. 2nd. ed., 5 vols. London, Russell.
- Harvey, Sir P. ed. 1965 (1946): *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 3rd edit. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Hindley, C. 1872: Preface to Vol. II. *Old Book-Collector's Miscellany*. London.
- L'Estrange. A. G. (Rev.). 1877: *History of English Humour, with an Introduction upon Ancient Humour*. London. > Franklin, B. ed. 1970: *Research and Source Works Series 415. Essays in Literature and Criticism*. 46. New York.
- Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, The*. 1662. London.
- McClure, N. E. ed. 1939: John Chamberlain, *The Letters*. 2 vols. *American Philosophical Society*, I. Philadelphia.
- Mish, C. C. ed. 1963: *The Anchor Anthology of Short Fiction of the Seventeenth Century, Selected and Edited by Charles C. Mish*. New York, Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Salzman, P. 1985: *English Prose Fiction 1558-1700, A Critical History*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Shepherd, S. 1981: *Amazons and Warrior Women, Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama*. New York, St. Martin's Press.
- Singleton, R. R. 1970: English Criminal Biography, 1651-1722. *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 18: 77-78.
- Wilson, F. P. 1939: The English Jestbooks of the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century. *Huntington Library Quarterly* II.

DICTIONARIES:

- The Philological Society 1961 (1933): *The Oxford English Dictionary, Corrected Re-Issue with an Introduction, Supplement, and Bibliography of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by The Philological Society*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

* * *