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“Father and son, I ha’ done you simple service here”:
The (Interrupted) Circulation of Money in
Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*

Rahel Orgis

Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* features a surprising number of money transactions considering the historical and economic context of the period where hard currency was scarce and trade based on pervasive debt and credit networks. The circulation of money thus emerges as one of the themes of the play, with the protagonist Moll Frith determining the failure or success and, by extension, the acceptability of many of the financial transactions. Through Moll’s character and actions the play engages in a critique of self-interested money transactions that may damage or even destroy others and their social standing. This critique is further sustained by parallel episodes on different plot levels and characters that contrast with or mirror Moll and her actions. The occasionally cross-dressed figure of Moll has been analysed as a subversive proto-feminist character, as a projection of cultural and economic fears and fantasies or as an ultimately conservative figure who is reintegrated into patriarchal society. My own reading proposes that Moll stands for an idealistic society and economy but that the ending of the play leaves it open whether Moll is finally assimilated into a society where “simple,” disinterested, service is superseded by self-interested financial transactions.

“[M]oney,” as Richard Waswo points out in his discussion of “Monetary and Erotic Economies in the Jacobean Theatre,” “was in endemically short supply . . . in Britain throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries” (57).¹ Yet, this does not seem to be the case in Tho-

¹ Waswo’s assertion is based on Craig Muldrew’s influential study *Economy of Obligation*; see especially the section “Money and Credit” (98-103).

mas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's city comedy *The Roaring Girl*, which refers to or stages more than a dozen money transactions. This is a surprisingly high number given that at the time "full and direct payment in cash was unusual except in the smallest transactions, or in cases where the buyer's credit was weak or unknown," as Craig Muldrew notes ("Interpreting" 171). Interestingly, however, many of these transactions fail to achieve their purpose, and this is often due to the eccentric heroine of the play, Mary or Moll Frith, the roaring girl of the title. Thus, while some of the more obvious themes of *The Roaring Girl* are reputation and slander, marriage, cross-dressing and propriety, the circulation of money emerges as a further concern. Indeed, the play investigates the acceptability of different types of money transactions and repeatedly brings to the fore how these underpin issues of reputation, propriety and marriage negotiations. Through the figure of Moll and her actions, I would argue, the play engages in a critique of self-interested financial transactions that may damage or even destroy others and their social standing and that undermine the prevalent "market relations" in early modern England based, according to Muldrew, "on trust, or credit" ("Interpreting" 169). This critique is further sustained by parallel episodes on different plot levels and characters that contrast with or mirror Moll and her interventions. Hence, Moll gradually comes to stand for an idealistic and utopian social and economic code of conduct. Furthermore, the question of whether Moll loses her potentially subversive exceptionality at the end of the play and becomes assimilated into society depends not solely on her attitude towards marriage and gender roles,² but essentially hinges, I contend, on how her reaction to the money transaction proposed in Sir Alexander's very last speech is staged.

The play opens with a thwarted financial transaction: because the "covetous" Sir Alexander is unwilling to pay his part, that is, sign over part of his lands to his son, he prevents the marriage between his son Sebastian and Mary Fitz-Allard despite Mary's substantial dowry (I.i.80-

² See, for instance, Jane Baston or Mary Beth Rose, as discussed below. Natasha Korda challenges the idea of Moll as an exceptional figure, qualifying her "status as a worker within the networks of commerce surrounding early modern London's public theaters" as "unexceptional," given that "women appear to have worked within these networks in significant numbers" (71). My use of the term exceptional refers primarily to the perception suggested by the play itself of Moll as markedly different and therefore potentially threatening to the established social order.

92).³ Contrary to many of the following money transactions, this bargain finally comes to fruition in the last scene of the play thanks to Moll's support of the young couple. While Jane Baston has pointed out the contradiction between Moll's refusal of marriage for herself and her support of the marriage plot (328),⁴ Moll's actions can also be interpreted as supporting a certain type of financial transaction, i.e. legal inheritance, the passing on of capital and land from fathers to children. In other words, Moll's intervention might be interpreted not so much as condoning the subjection of women in marriage, but as upholding children's right to the financial support of their parents.

In this respect, Moll's rescue of the simple-minded but harmless prodigal Jack Dapper from his father's scheme to have him imprisoned on false charges in order to teach him a lesson can be seen as a parallel to her intervention on behalf of the young couple.⁵ Jack Dapper certainly has "profligate habits" (181), as Jonathan Gil Harris puts it, buying extravagant feathers (II.i) and spending money on food (II.i, V.i), drink and dice (III.iii). Yet, unlike the gallants Laxton or Goshawk, Jack Dapper does not seem capable of intentionally harming someone – losing his money at dice even when he has "false dice of [his] own" (III.iii.203-4). This prodigality of Jack's, which profits others more than himself, is what seems to infuriate his father most, as the following outburst indicates:

SIR DAVY DAPPER

... your Sebastian

Doats but on one drab, mine on a thousand,
A noise of fiddlers, tobacco, wine, and a whore,
A mercer that will let him take up more,
Dice, and a water-spaniel with a duck: oh,
Bring him abed with these, when his purse jingles,
Roaring boys follow at's tail, fencers and ningles

³ All references to the text of *The Roaring Girl* are to the New Mermaids edition edited by Elizabeth Cook.

⁴ See also Stephen Orgel, who terms Moll "at heart a good bourgeoisie" (24), or Anthony B. Dawson, who remarks that "As a social critic, Moll remains rather more ambivalent than those searching for protofeminist sentiment might wish" (394). For a reading of Moll as "perpetuating the status quo" (78), see Deborah Jacobs.

⁵ Viviana Comensoli calls Jack Dapper "Moll's double" (261), as neither of them repents their actions and Moll is also called "Jack" by her companions. However, this interpretation disregards Jack Dapper's naivety and vanity, which are clearly mocked in the play and also commented on by Moll, who compares him "to a nobleman's bedpost" on account of his "spangled feathers" (II.i.294-295).

(Beasts Adam ne'er gave name to), these horse-leeches suck
My son: he being drawn dry, they all live on smoke. (III.iii.57-64)

While Sir Davy Dapper clearly disapproves of his son's pastimes, the most sexualised accusations alluding to sodomy and oral sex are reserved for the circumstance that Jack lets himself be used by others. These allusions to homosexuality arguably express Sir Davy's disgust at what he perceives as unnatural and emasculating economic behaviour. The portrait of Jack is followed in the same scene by a no less damning portrait of Sir Davy Dapper, unwittingly addressed to Sir Davy himself by the Sergeant hired to arrest Jack:

SIR DAVY

And you know his father too, Sir Davy Dapper?

[Sergeant] CURTILAX

As damned a usurer as ever was among Jews; if he were sure his father's skin would yield him any money, he would when he dies flay it off, and sell it to cover drums for children at Bartholomew Fair. (III.iii.154-158)

The Sergeant's description casts Sir Davy as a "grasping usurer," a commonly stigmatised figure in early modern theatre, as Peter Grav notes (13). Hence, although the play holds up the simpleton and spend-thrift Jack Dapper for mockery, his shortcomings, which are accompanied by liberal companionship and which profit the national economy, are clearly presented as more forgivable than Sir Davy's avarice.⁶ Moreover, Sir Davy's scheme of having his son arrested seems an extreme and even counterproductive measure. As Muldrew remarks, public arrest constituted an ignominy in early modern society that had serious repercussions on the creditworthiness of both the arrested individual and her or his entire household and was therefore used as a last resort to collect outstanding debts (*Economy* 275-276, 279). Nonetheless, when Sir Davy shares his plan with Sir Alexander, he is encouraged by him (III.iii.55-111). The subplot of Jack's failed arrest thus expressly aligns

⁶ The play seems to share the period's general attitude towards prodigality and avarice based on Aristotle's *Politics*: "prodigality . . . was still better than illiberality because through his spending the prodigal still benefited others as well as himself, whereas meanness benefited no one, because it was at root anti-social and concerned only with gain and not with giving and taking as reciprocal or generous acts" (Muldrew, *Economy* 159).

the two father figures and reflects on Sir Alexander's meanness.⁷ Both fathers put their own present financial profit above their son's welfare and, consequently, their household's future potential for success. Moll's interventions on behalf of the sons on both plot levels reinforce the play's condemnation of such fathers. Even if prodigal sons use their inheritance like Jack for outings "to that nappy land of spice-cakes" (V.i.54), this is nevertheless more acceptable, it seems, than fathers trying to stymie their sons by withholding financial support.

In contrast to filial inheritance, other money transactions in the play do not find Moll's sanction. This becomes most obvious in two instances when Moll short-circuits the flow of money. In the first instance, the gallant Laxton tries to seduce Moll. He gives her ten angels that he has himself received from the apothecary's wife, Mistress Gallipot, for amorous services that he continually defers. Moll takes the money and agrees to a rendez-vous with Laxton. Instead of spending the money, however, she adds ten angels of her own to the sum and transforms the bribe into prize money for the winner of the duel to which she challenges Laxton at their meeting. Thus, Moll actively gains the money with which Laxton thought to transform her into a prostitute.⁸ Furthermore, she criticises the use of bribes for seduction not only through her actions but also her speech, famously observing that

Distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives,
Fish that must needs bite or themselves be bitten,
Such hungry things as these may soon be took
With a worm fastened on a golden Hook:
Those are the lecher's food, his prey[.] (III.i.94-98)

The second instance in which Moll interrupts the circulation of money is when Sir Alexander pretends not to see through her disguise as a musician. He gives his son four hollow-hearted angels to pay for her musical entertainment in order to get her into trouble for possessing spoiled

⁷ For an analysis of the relations between the different plotlines in *The Roaring Girl* see Comensoli's article, which insists especially on how the citizen-plot's "realistic treatment of conjugal malaise" (251) undermines the romantic comedy ending.

⁸ Valerie Forman notes that "Prostitutes were often referred to ironically and punningly as 'angels'" (1549) due to the cost of their services. Jean Howard foregrounds the "punning association" of angels with Jack's "ningles" or ingles, that is, boy-favourites or catamites, and argues that the text suggests the possibility that "Laxton may want from her [Moll] a variety of sexual pleasures, those associated with the ingle as well as with the woman as vessel of reproduction" ("Sex" 182).

or marked coins. Sebastian's and Moll's reactions indicate that neither of them is aware of the trick:

SEBASTIAN

Faith thou shalt have 'em [the hollow-hearted angels], 'tis my father's gift,
Never was man beguiled with better shift.

MOLL

He that can take me for a male musician,
I cannot choose but make him my instrument
And play upon him. (IV.i.209-13)

Again Moll does not try to spend the money and can thus return the four hollow-hearted angels when Sir Alexander confesses to his treachery at the end of the play. Hence, in both instances Moll actively interrupts the circulation of money. She thereby gains control and avoids being put into a position of dependence,⁹ enabling her to thwart plots motivated by self-interest.

This interpretation is again supported by what happens in the citizen plot, in which Mistress Gallipot functions as a foil for Moll. Unlike Moll, Mistress Gallipot is seduced by Laxton's advances and actively participates in the circulation of money, smuggling sums of her husband's money to Laxton. After the ten angels, which she disguises as tobacco (II.i.94-95), she receives another plea for money from Laxton, this time for thirty pounds. To satisfy his demand she invents a *de praesenti* marriage contract to Laxton that allegedly precedes her marriage to Master Gallipot. Thus she manipulates her doting husband into paying Laxton to make him abandon his supposedly prior claims on her (III.ii.115-152). Moreover, Mistress Gallipot comments, "Thirty pound?/'Tis thirty sure, a 3 before an 0,/I know his threes too well" (III.ii.65-67), which suggests that this is not merely the second time Laxton has asked for money. In contrast to Moll, Mistress Gallipot finds herself trapped by her expenses on Laxton's behalf, as she realises when musing on how to procure the thirty pounds:

My childbed linen?

Shall I pawn that for him? Then if my mark
Be known I am undone; it may be thought
My husband's bankrupt: which way shall I turn?

⁹ Howard touches on this point when commenting that "both Laxton and old Wengrave try to control the subversiveness of Moll, to subordinate her to them, by economic means" ("Sex" 182).

Laxton, what with my own fears, and thy wants,
I'm like a needle 'twixt two adamants. (III.ii.67-72)

In contrast to her earlier admonition to Laxton, "Be not forgetful; respect my credit, seem strange: . . . pray be wary" (II.i.50-52), Mistress Gallipot here does not explicitly dwell on the danger to her personal reputation but focuses on the possible financial repercussions of being known to pawn her linen. Laxton, however, is perfectly aware of the hold he has over Mistress Gallipot's marital reputation thanks to the sums already received from her.¹⁰ Thus, when Mistress Gallipot tries to put him off because she has realised that Laxton is only interested in money (IV.ii.40-41), he gets back at her with the extravagant demand of upping the thirty to a hundred pounds in front of her husband – knowing full well that she can only deny him the money by damaging her own reputation. This is spelt out when Mistress Gallipot finally makes her confession after a bout of haggling, during which she asks Laxton, "Do you seek my undoing?" (IV.ii.257), and pleads with him to be content with "threescore" (IV.ii.256) or "fourscore" (IV.ii.259) instead of "a hundred pound" (IV.ii.249). When Laxton denies her request – "I'll not bate one sixpence, –/I'll maul you, puss, for spitting" (IV.ii.257-258) – Mistress Gallipot makes a clean breast of it in order to stop her husband from paying:

Husband, I plucked—
When he had tempted me to think well of him—
Got feathers from thy wings, to make him fly
More lofty.
...
He having wasted them, comes now for more,
Using me as a ruffian doth his whore,
Whose sin keeps him in breath: by heaven I vow
Thy bed he never wronged, more than he does now. (IV.ii.274-281)

¹⁰ Mistress Gallipot fears that pawning her linen might have disastrous consequences for her husband's business. This bears out Muldrew's observation that "The reputation of all members of households became so important because it was what determined whether a household could obtain credit, and a business could not prosper nor a household increase its level of consumption without it" (*Economy* 149). Hence, as Muldrew puts it, "making a distinction between economically rational transactions and other social transactions, such as courtship, sex, patronage or parenthood, does not make sense" (*Economy* 149). This conflation between the social reputation of an individual and the economic reputation of the household is also signified by Mistress Gallipot's use of the words "undone" and "credit," which can be understood both socially and economically.

Interrupting the flow of money is Mistress Gallipot's only option to regain some control over Laxton and the situation, but this comes at the price of losing the trust of her doting husband and tarnishing her reputation.¹¹ Hence, Mistress Gallipot finds herself transformed into a "whore" through the circulation of money that she encouraged, even though her adulterous desires remain unsatisfied. This, in turn, underlines the integrity of Moll, whose reputation follows an inverted trajectory compared to Mistress Gallipot's: from seeming looseness to an assertion of chastity.

The use of money by Laxton, Sir Alexander and also Mistress Gallipot – who attempt to reach their ends through money without regard for others or even with the express intention of harming others – is governed by what is commonly termed self-interest.¹² As Amelia Zurcher puts it:

According to the conventional humanist ideology of the late sixteenth century, self-interest was a form of passion, perhaps even the primary passion, manifested in a simple, self-serving urge to possess that in civil societies was curbed by the more communally oriented calculus of reason. (19-20)

The potential conflict between individual self-interest and the common good that Zurcher's definition implies is, for example, discussed by Montaigne, who, in his *Essays*, regards "the unbridled pursuit of individual self-interest" as "the cause of civil war" (Force 141). The view that "reason dictates that the public interest must take precedence over a private interest" (140) continued to be current in the seventeenth century, Pierre Force observes, as both Thomas Hobbes and John Locke "mention private interest as a destructive force because the content of private interest is defined by private passions" (141). Commenting on the discussion of enclosure practices to increase profit in the treatise *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England* (c. 1549), Leslie Clarkson claims that self-interest "was firmly entrenched as a guide to economic behavior even though it was sometimes questioned" (21) in the early modern period. This description of early modern economy as

¹¹ The act ends with Master Gallipot admonishing his wife and forgiving Laxton, which Howard describes as a final male bonding, whereas the citizen wives are "shunted aside" ("Sex" 178).

¹² In the early modern period the term used to refer to this notion would have been self-love rather than self-interest. Pierre Force's study *Self-Interest before Adam Smith* traces the "philosophical and literary tradition" of the concept back to Epicurean and Augustinian writings as well as to Virgil and explains that the term "self-love" is "the translation of a technical term used by Renaissance humanists, *philautia*" (2).

driven by self-interest has been rejected in more recent studies by Muldrew. He argues that "the language of utilitarian motivation" which "arose after [Adam] Smith to interpret marketing has in time come to incorporate in itself the notion that the type of marketing it defined grew up in Europe from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries" ("Interpreting" 168). Instead, Muldrew's findings suggest that the early modern economy continued to be characterised by moral notions of "trust [and] obligation" ("Interpreting" 163). However, Muldrew admits that the "expansion of market transactions certainly put strains on trust" ("Interpreting" 169), as evidenced by "the huge number of court cases concerning failed credit relations" ("Interpreting" 172). He concludes that

Structural change leading to a more utilitarian marketing culture, where self-interest could have come to be seen as a more reasonably coherent and believable explanation of behaviour than that provided by the language of trust, must have been slow and piecemeal[.] ("Interpreting" 180)

Nonetheless, the emphasis on trust and trustworthiness in the early modern period betrays an awareness of the danger which self-interest presents for an economy based on pervasive local, national and international credit and debt networks. In such an economy, individual households simultaneously act as both creditors and debtors ("Interpreting" 178). Indeed, early modern households were, on the one hand, competing with each other for a share in the market and, on the other, had to trust in each other's credit for their own solvency. Therefore, as Muldrew observes, "Many began to worry that they might end up paying for the purchase of luxury goods or the good living of their socially ambitious neighbours, if the latter overestimated the profits of their business or labour and were eventually unable to meet their obligation" (*Economy* 4). As a consequence, although profit in itself was not regarded as condemnable if it was the result of thrift and labour (*Economy* 4, 124), "Almost all contemporary references to self-interest . . . were negative in character before the end of the eighteenth century" and "self-love was equated with prodigality and poor housekeeping" (*Economy* 126) – a view which the play seems to share.

Considering this historical economic context of ubiquitous lending and borrowing, the figure of Moll in the play is curiously independent with respect to money. She uses money, but in opposition to the "common belief" stipulated by Gray, "that money had become *the* controlling influence over Renaissance societal values" (1), Moll's character and actions cannot be circumscribed by money. She seems to have

money without getting or earning it – witness the ten angels with which she matches Laxton's bribe. Yet, she does not seem to need money to shape events, relying instead on her accomplishments, her superior knowledge of society and her intimate relations to people of all classes. Indeed, linking the main marriage plot with the subplot of the shopkeepers, Moll is a socially exceptional character, who converses familiarly with representatives of all social classes from criminals to noblemen. This characteristic is also underlined by Craig Rustici, who stresses "her ability to evade boundaries and to mediate between disparate communities" (171).¹³ As a result, she is not only able to defeat Laxton, but can also disarm vagabonds and pickpockets and command thieves to return stolen money to a friend of hers. Sir Alexander, Laxton and Mistress Gallipot employ money to secure services but ultimately fail and lose their self-interested investments. None of them sees their money again and none of them gets what they try to buy. Moll's relations to others, by contrast, are based on exchanges of favours rather than money. Moll describes the friend whose money is to be returned as "a knight to whom I'm bound for many favours" (V.i.288).¹⁴ She considers saving Jack Dapper from arrest as "one good work today" (III.iii.220) and offers to do the same for other "gentlemen" (III.iii.221). Moreover, she presents her sharing of knowledge about the criminal underworld as a friendly favour (V.i.322-5). Hence, when Moll twice points out her part in bringing about the happy ending, saying, "thank me for't, I'd a forefinger in't" (V.ii.168-9) and "Father and son, I ha' done you simple service here" (V.ii.206),¹⁵ she is not asking for money, I would argue. She rather reminds Sir Alexander and Sebastian of their moral obligation towards her, asking them to acknowledge her generosity.¹⁶

¹³ See also Coppélia Kahn's introduction to her edition of *The Roaring Girl* in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (721).

¹⁴ Korda points out that Moll here acts like a so-called "thief-taker," that is, someone with connections to criminals who helps victims of theft recover their belongings in return for a fee (77-78). Korda thus reads this incident as a gesture towards the real material circumstances of the historical Mary Frith (77-79) and as "valuable publicity" for her business ventures (83). Korda does not, however, comment on the circumstance that Moll in the play does not charge any fee for her service.

¹⁵ Marjorie Garber draws attention to the sexual innuendo of "I'd a forefinger in't" given "*The Roaring Girl's* omnipresent references to castration, emasculation, penises and testicles worn (like clothing . . .) by women rather than men" (225).

¹⁶ Jacobs offers an alternative interpretation of Moll's line "Father and son, I ha' done you simple service here" (V.ii.206), arguing that she thus "summarizes her role as one of 'service' to the existing order" and that the following lines constitute Sebastian and Sir

The notion that “one good turn deserves another” – as opposed to the self-interest of Laxton, Sir Alexander, Mistress Gallipot and also the father of Jack Dapper – is emphasised further on the level of the citizen plot: Master Openwork probes the friendship of the gallant Goshawk and theatrically unveils the “bad turn” with which Goshawk requites Openwork’s generosity:

MASTER OPENWORK

I’ll tell you, Master Goshawk, – Ay, in your eye
 I have seen wanton fire, and then to try
 The soundness of my judgment, I told you
 I kept a whore, made you believe ’twas true,
 Only to feel how your pulse beat, but find
 The world can hardly yield a perfect friend.
 Come, come, a trick of youth, and ’tis forgiven.
 This rub put by, our love shall run more even. (IV.ii.211-218)

Master Openwork’s emphasis that “nothing is perfect born” (IV.ii.207) presents truly disinterested friendship as an ideal that one should try to live up to rather than as a reality. If Mistress Gallipot functions as a foil for Moll, Master Openwork can be seen as Moll’s double on the level of the citizen plot. The play sets up the resemblance between Moll and Master Openwork in the first scene of act two – that is, the only scene where both characters are on stage – when they go off together for a drink after Moll has warned Openwork against Goshawk (II.i.367-368).¹⁷ Like Moll, whom Aaron Kitch describes as an “examiner of character” (413), Openwork tests those who profess loyalty to him, combining perspicacity with generosity, and he forces Goshawk to acknowledge his moral obligation by inviting him back into the house (IV.ii.221).

As has been shown, Moll (and through her the play, one might argue) does not condone money transactions that further one’s own interests to somebody else’s disadvantage, and she actively prevents or undoes criminal money transactions, that is, swindling or stealing. In contrast, there are two further types of financial transactions in the play that she sanctions, namely the remuneration of artistic performance and the payment of material goods. That Moll considers artistic performance or

Alexander’s “recognition of that role” (81). For my own reading of Sebastian’s reaction to Moll’s line, see below.

¹⁷ I am not convinced by Lloyd Edward Kermode’s suggestion that Openwork’s quibble on the word “bastards” in “We’ll have a pint of the same wine, i’faith, Moll” (II.i.368) implies a secret adulterous relationship with Moll (429-430).

entertainment as worthy of payment is not surprising given the context of the theatre. In front of a paying theatre audience it would be rather counterintuitive if Moll did not endorse the remuneration of performance. What is more intriguing is that after Moll's appearance as a disguised male musician in the third act, the second artistic performance is a bout of canting and a canting song in the fifth act, for which the two rogues Trapdoor and Tearcat receive two shillings sixpence from Lord Noland. Apart from pointing to the enduring popularity of cant, this implies that even rogues – or maybe people of an ambiguous social status like players – deserve to be paid for a pleasing performance. Moreover, although Moll in this instance does not interrupt the circulation of money – unlike earlier in the scene when she prevents Sir Beauteous from giving money to the rogues in soldiers' disguise – she again controls the flow of money. Lord Noland does not pay Trapdoor and Tearcat directly, but gives the money to Moll to distribute, thus putting her into the position of a judge who is to decide on the value of the performance. Moll, in this instance, could even be seen as an idealised “middleman,” who does not profit from the financial transaction that she oversees – as opposed to the common perception of middlemen, who, though necessary to the expanding early modern trading networks, “were denounced from the pulpit and widely blamed for rising prices” (Grav 10).

As for the payment of material goods, we never actually see Moll buy anything, but there are several lines in the play implying that she spends money on clothes and pays her tailor. For example, when she feigns taking on the scoundrel Trapdoor as her servant, she tells him, “Come follow me to St Thomas Apostle's, / I'll put a livery cloak upon your back / The first thing I do” (III.i.197-99). When she meets Laxton, she observes “if [gallants] would keep their days as well with their mercers as their hours with their harlots, no bankrupt would give seven score pound for a sergeant's place” (III.i.36-39). To enable a meeting between the two young lovers, Moll has her tailor “fit” Mary Fitz-Allard with men's clothes (IV.i.69), and the short scene between Moll and her tailor (II.ii.72-99) indicates that Moll is a good customer, whom the tailor is eager to retain.¹⁸ With this accumulating evidence of Moll's buying and paying habits as a customer, her indignation when Mistress Openwork tells her to leave the shop becomes in retrospect even more comprehen-

¹⁸ Critics' references to this scene generally focus on its bawdy innuendos and the sexualisation of Moll's body (see especially Forman 1544-1546). However, even if the tailor is interpreted as making bawdy jokes at Moll's expense, it is clear that Moll is a regular customer of his, whose wishes he seeks to satisfy.

sible. To Mistress Openwork's "Get you from my shop" (II.i.217), Moll objects, "I come to buy" (II.i.218), and becomes properly enraged at Mistress Openwork's reply, "I'll sell thee nothing, I warn ye my house and shop" (II.i.219). Mistress Openwork then not only offends Moll by treating her as an indecent person or even a prostitute, but she also rejects Moll's vision of honest business relations, valuing the feigned creditability of the gallant Goshawk more highly than Moll's hard currency.

Middleton and Dekker's play has been interpreted from various theoretical perspectives, including gender and new economic criticism,¹⁹ and depending on the critic, the character of Moll acquires a different significance. In gender criticism, some of the recurrent questions concern Moll's attitude towards dominant views of marriage and women's social position and rights. Although scholars generally point out Moll's subversive potential in this respect, they disagree over the extent to which Moll's character can be read as a successful critique of early modern society and over Moll's own final status within this society. Thus, whereas Jean Howard interprets Moll as a character that "def[ies] expectations about woman's nature and . . . protest[s] the injustices caused by the sex-gender system" ("Cross-dressing" 40) and Viviana Comensoli sees Moll as "provid[ing] a compelling alternative to the ideal marriage" (251),²⁰ Baston argues that Moll ultimately turns into something of a hired performer, "adopt[ing] this role for the entertainment of the assembled gentry, and at the expense of her own dignity" (331). Moreover, Baston sees Moll as "gradually contained and incorporated into the prevailing social apparatus of the play" (320). Mary Beth Rose, by contrast, affirms that "[t]he question of her social identity . . . remains unresolved at the end . . . because she has helped to create a society from which she is both excluded and excludes herself" (91).²¹ Susan E. Krantz, finally, reads this self-exclusion positively, proposing that the play "privileg[es] the intellectual reading of Moll as symbolic hermaphroditic ideal" (15), which is self-sufficient and transcends sexual binaries (15-16).

New economic readings of the play have also interpreted the figure of Moll in different ways. Rather than analysing the challenge Moll poses for the "sex-gender system," these readings treat Moll as a sym-

¹⁹ For a short introduction to new economic criticism and early modern economy, see Grav (1-27).

²⁰ For an alternative interpretation of Mary Fitz-Allard and Moll as the "acceptable and less acceptable" sides of "the figure of the 'roaring girl'" (229), see Garber.

²¹ This position is challenged in turn by Comensoli (250-251).

bolic figure who reflects contemporary economic anxieties. For Valerie Forman, Moll serves “both as a reminder of the loss of legible and reliable material guarantees and as a compensatory fiction for it” (1540), i.e. her function is to “compensate for the increasingly abstract and ‘dematerialized’ social relations of the play’s credit and commodity-driven economy” (1532). According to Kitch, “Moll is the ultimate source of credit” (413) in a society where creditability is hard to ascertain and requires one to judge the character of others to establish their trustworthiness (407).²² For Harris, finally, the play and its heroine negotiate contemporary economic concerns over the conflict between the necessity and the dangers of (excessive) consumption (181-2, 184). He thereby sees Moll as an ideal consumer who is both “trendsetting” and able to “control herself and her desires” (182).

Moll is certainly an ambivalent figure from a feminist perspective with her simultaneous challenge and acceptance of marriage and the social hierarchies between men and women this implies. I do not agree with Baston, however, that the play “thoroughly stages Moll’s recuperation” (320) and that “Moll’s role as translator in act V shows her capitulation to the dominant practices of class and gender” (331). Instead, I see some of these actions, like Moll’s support of the young couple, her canting performance or her final appearance in female dress, which Baston interprets as indicating Moll’s submission (328, 331-2), as linked to her idealistic character in an economic and social sense. Indeed, Moll’s criticism of female oppression may not offer a vision of a society that transcends patriarchal order, but her numerous interventions in the play sketch a code of conduct that points towards an ideal society where, presumably, the relations between men and women would be based on mutual favours. While I would question the weight that Howard accords to Moll’s feminist agenda, I generally agree with her claim that Moll’s description of an ideal world in which she would consider marrying (V.ii.217-24) “is clear in its utopian aspirations, clear in making the ending of women’s oppression a central part of a more encompassing utopian vision of social reform” (“Cross-dressing” 41).

This “utopian vision” of reform also extends to economic concerns. *The Roaring Girl* clearly “registers and addresses economic pressures” (1532), as Forman puts it. Thus, Kitch’s argument that the play dramatises the unreliability of credit and the anxieties related to this economic

²² See also Muldrew’s remark that “The linguistic distinction between economic and social credit had not yet arisen, and to be a creditor in an economic sense still had a strong ethical meaning” (“Interpreting” 177).

development (407) appears on the whole convincing. What is striking, however, and not sufficiently developed in Kitch's analysis is that, considering her behaviour, Moll as a character seems to operate outside an economy of credit – both in a literal and a figurative sense. Not only does Moll avoid financial indebtedness and seem unconcerned by scarcity of coin, she is and acts according to her principles regardless of the “credit” she is accorded by other characters or the outfit that she wears. In other words, her actions repeatedly do not conform to the various (and often negative) expectations of her voiced in the play and provoked for the most part by her transgressive clothing. This failure to conform to expectations is epitomised, one might say, by the incongruity between the play's subtitle *Moll Cutpurse* and the consistently honourable behaviour of Moll in the play. Moll therefore appears as an independent agent and a genuine entity beyond pre-set opinions or her changing exterior,²³ meaning that “Sebastian can bank on her character” (413), as Kitch formulates it. This impression of genuineness is further reinforced by the metaleptic gestures towards the historical Mary Frith in the play's prologue and epilogue, as both Forman (1541) and Kitch (414) have noted. I am not suggesting that Moll's character should be described as “real” (1541) or “lifelike” (1540) – a critical “trend,” which Forman traces back to T.S. Eliot (1541).²⁴ Rather, I agree with Kitch's characterisation of Moll's authenticity in terms of “credibility,” meaning that she represents an “alternative to the false world of credit relationships” (413).²⁵ In this sense, Moll's genuineness is not so much “lifelike”

²³ See also Kitch's claim that Moll's “authenticity derives from her transgression against cultural norms, especially those of clothing” (414). Moll's occasional and sometimes partial cross-dressing has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Patrick Cheney, for instance, proposes a symbolic reading of Moll as a hermaphrodite symbolising married love and the union of two souls (124, 125). Critics like Krantz, Garber, Howard and Baston discuss cross-dressing as challenging gender prerogatives or categories as such. Rustici suggests a medical reading of cross-dressing as the outward manifestation of Moll's mixed male and female nature induced by smoking according to Galenic theory (171-179), and Korda provides a material analysis with Moll's changing clothes pointing to women's investment in the second-hand clothes trade (84-85).

²⁴ See for instance Comensoli, who comments on “Moll's fullness and complexity” (259) – as opposed to Howard, who thinks that the “competing ideological strands” that constitute Moll's character “prevent her from being read as an entirely unified subjectivity” (“Sex” 179).

²⁵ In contrast to Kitch, Forman reads Moll as simultaneously representing the wish for and the illusory nature of “material guarantees” (1540) and hence authenticity. However, focusing primarily on the projection of Sir Alexander's “anxious fantasies” (1544) on Moll, Forman disregards Moll's own economic interactions and the criticism of certain financial transactions expressed through her interventions in the circulation of money.

as nostalgic idealisation, harking back to the utopian economic order in works like Thomas Deloney's *Jack of Newbury* (cf. Grav 14). Hence, in accordance with Forman's suggestion that Moll "embodies . . . cultural fantasies" (1541), I would contend that Moll's character represents a more straightforward society and economy where interpersonal relations are forged by mutual favours that are independent of financial transactions and where material goods are paid for without fail – as opposed to the complex credit and debt relations that shaped early modern society in England.²⁶

With regard to Moll's final status, the question is therefore not so much whether she appears in a dress in the closing scene or whether her last rejection of marriage is formulaic, as Baston thinks (331-2),²⁷ but rather whether she is assimilated into a society where, as Sebastian at some point formulates it, "Plain dealing . . . takes no effect" (III.i.194). This, I would argue, is ultimately left open by the play and can be staged either way, depending on how the character of Moll reacts to Sir Alexander's final speech.²⁸ Already Sebastian's reply to Moll's reminder, "Father and son, I ha' done you simple service here" (V.ii.206), is problematic because by saying, "For which thou shalt not part, Moll, unrequited" (V.ii.207), Sebastian seems to imply that Moll's "simple," that is, disinterested, intervention on his behalf can be recompensed financially. Put differently, he recognises his obligation towards Moll but does not seem inclined to remain bound to her in a system based on exchanging favours. More blatantly, Sir Alexander tries to make up for his trickery with the hollow-hearted angels by paying Moll off, stating, "So far I'm sorry, I'll thrice double 'em/To make thy wrongs amends" (V.ii.256-

²⁶ In his analysis of Middleton's contribution to *Timon of Athens*, John Jowett identifies a similar combination of satiric criticism and sentimentalism with regard to the representation of social relationships and credit- and debt-based economy in the passages presumably authored by Middleton (220-221). This might suggest that Middleton rather than Dekker was ultimately responsible for the ideological perspective of *The Roaring Girl*. This cannot be further supported on the basis of textual indications, however, since, as Mulholland details in his introduction to the play, "Few scenes point conclusively to either dramatist as the main writer" (11) and "Each writer may . . . have revised the other's work, and that perhaps more than once" (12).

²⁷ In their 2014 production of the play, the RSC offered a controversial reading of Moll's final refusal of marriage by "suggesting that she resists marriage because she's a lesbian," as Rachel Ellen Clark remarks in her performance review.

²⁸ See also Kitch's argument that Middleton "leaves the audience to make final moral and epistemological judgments" with regard to "credibility of character" (420).

7).²⁹ Since this is the final speech before the epilogue and there are no stage directions, the text gives no clue as to how Moll reacts to this offer and whether Sir Alexander literally tries to give her money at this instant. Acceptance of such a recompense on Moll's part would, it seems to me, severely compromise her financial independence and signal the corruption of her idealistic figure and the utopian society she stands for. A gesture of refusal on the other hand,³⁰ confirms Moll's exceptional status as a generous figure untainted by the lure of self-interest and independent of credit and debt relations – a figure who can command the circulation of money rather than being subject to it.

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²⁹ Forman likewise sees the ending of the play as “Sir Alexander’s attempt to reintegrate Moll . . . by making her a subject of his forgiveness, an act that would nonetheless keep his position of authority relatively intact” (1551). Forman notes that “Moll undermines his attempt to make her the subject of his authority” (1551), but she does not comment on Sir Alexander’s final offer of money.

³⁰ In the 1983 RSC production, Moll is presented as “incorruptible” (288), as Chi-fang Sophia Li notes, and “rejects all monetary temptations as well as rewards” (private communication with Chi-fang Sophia Li of 25 May 2015). The 2014 RSC production of *The Roaring Girl* also seems to have gone in this direction since Peter Buckroyd writes in his review that “Moll spits at the departing Sir Alexander” – an action that he found slightly discordant in the context of the production.

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