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Mary Frith, Moll Cutpurse and the Development of an Early Modern Criminal Celebrity

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Abstract

Mary Frith (1584?-1659) is one of the most intriguing and well-documented female criminals of early modern London, both in court records and in literature. Popular perceptions of her criminality were shaped not by her crimes themselves, but by Frith's cultivation of her own version of female celebrity, which drew upon and reframed her criminal actions. Frith constructed the *persona* of Moll Cutpurse as part of her development as a musical performer in London's Bankside theatre district. She built upon her own criminal history to create a female character whose transgressiveness – both as a petty thief and as a cross-dressing performer – made her an intriguing and distinctive figure who quickly proved a fascinating topic for a variety of popular literature. Ballads, plays, and tales reshaped her criminal activities as heroic by exploiting her criminal celebrity *persona*. The popularity of Moll's subsequent depictions in fiction has overshadowed Frith's own achievements as a savvy performer and businesswoman, albeit one operating at the edges of the law. Only by examining Frith's historical record alongside but distinct from the fictional portrayals of Moll can we determine the ways in which Frith's female criminal celebrity shaped and was in turn shaped by her literary legacy.

Keywords: *Celebrity, Crime, Fiction, Mary Frith, Moll Cutpurse*

1. Introduction

In a letter dated 12 February 1612, John Chamberlain described the latest news from London to his long-term correspondent Dudley Carleton, with whom he exchanged hundreds of letters during the first decades of the seventeenth century. These letters 'were designed to be useful to an ambitious diplomat eager to keep up with the latest English news', and their content often relayed matters of both local and international political import (Finkelpearl 2004). In this particular letter, Chamberlain recounts two new proclamations from King James, movements

of the Spanish navy, the Queen's impending travels to Bath, colonization efforts in Virginia and Bermuda, the beginnings of Thomas Bodley's library, and tales of recent penitents at Paul's Cross. In this last category, he details the penance of Mary Frith, alias Moll Cutpurse, a notable local woman who had been arrested for public lewdness:

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 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 penaunce: 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 tarried rather to heare Mall Cutpurse then him. (Chamberlain 1939, 334)

This incident reveals a great deal about Frith's life and her place within London society. While she was, in fact, a criminal, her crimes and punishments alike were seen more as spectacle than as condemned violations of societal rules. Frith was apparently well known enough, even if only by reputation, that Chamberlain did not have to offer substantial context for her penance, even to a correspondent quite removed from London. Finally, this incident highlights Frith's own skill at shaping her public *persona* as a performer and one of London's first female criminal celebrities.

Mary Frith (1584?-1659) is one of the most intriguing and well-documented female criminals of early modern London. Her story can be traced through both court records and popular literature, both under her own name and under her increasingly fictionalized *persona* as Moll Cutpurse. When considered as a whole, the documents and tales about Frith delineate an evolution from petty criminal to local celebrity to mythical antihero. However, the fictional accounts of Frith's life, which generally adopt the Moll Cutpurse *persona*, often overshadow the actual events of her life. Frith *is* Moll, in the sense that she is Moll's model and her creator, but Moll quickly evolved into an archetypal figure who could stand for and speak to myriad audiences in a rapidly urbanizing London. However, separating the historical Frith from her fictionalized identity as Moll Cutpurse is difficult, largely because her fictional portrayals are more accessible, and perhaps more tantalizing, than the sparse records that exist concerning the real woman and her actual life. When we attempt to read Frith and Moll as a single entity, whether we imagine that entity as historical or fictional, we undermine the significance of both the historical Frith's life as a petty criminal, performer, and businesswoman as well as the skill with which Moll's mythographers adapted her character to address evolving concerns about life in London.

This article disentwines the two figures to argue that, while Frith created Moll, the two should ultimately be treated as separate entities. Drawing from celebrity theory and historical accounts of early modern female criminals, I reevaluate the known facts of Frith's early life as a criminal and a cross-dressing performer; then, I examine how Frith's shaping of her own celebrity *persona* – Moll Cutpurse – led to her story being appropriated in popular literature. I read *The Roaring Girl*¹ as a moment of both fracture and unity between the historical Frith and the fictional Moll, after which the stories of the two figures largely evolve separately. After the events surrounding *The Roaring Girl*, Frith takes steps towards legitimizing herself as a socially mobile businesswoman, while Moll becomes a criminal ringleader synonymous with

¹ All references to *The Roaring Girl* are from Dekker and Middleton 2003.

monstrous womanhood. After Frith's death, fictional representations seek to consolidate these two figures again in the anonymous fictional biography *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith*,² and Frith's and Moll's legacy from the eighteenth century into the present, in both fictional and academic portrayals, tends to conflate the two figures or pass over the historical Frith for the more tantalizing Moll, reimagining her transgression as monstrous or heroic, politically conservative or socially rebellious.

2. *Mary Frith the Criminal*

Mary Frith first entered the public record as a criminal.³ She was first arrested in 1600 along with two other women for stealing a purse. A second arrest, this time with Frith as the sole defendant, occurred in 1602. In both cases, it is unclear whether Frith was found guilty or what punishment was served, if any. Her origins, however, serve as the basis for her later sobriquet, Moll Cutpurse, though this name does not appear in any of her early records. In many ways, Frith's early crimes seem to fit the general mold of women's criminality in seventeenth-century England. As Garthine Walker has demonstrated, women generally worked in groups, most often with other women (1994, 85). They were more likely to be 'burglars, house breakers, and cutpurses' than to commit other categories of crime, and 'unlike other categories of felon, in popular imagination cutpurses and pickpockets were more frequently female' (Walker 2003, 160 and 186). At least in her earliest crimes, Frith fits this profile, though her thefts primarily involved money rather than the household goods targeted by most women. Frith's crimes matched many of the archetypes established in other criminal literature, particularly cony-catching pamphlets and Robin Hood tales, which later facilitated the construction of the Moll Cutpurse figure from the details of her life.

In 1608, another legal document⁴ names Frith as 'Maria Foith de Southworke', demonstrating that by this time she had taken up residence in the entertainment district of Bankside in Southwark, where she would remain throughout her life. Here, Frith built a reputation for herself as both criminal and local celebrity, forming the basis for her later legacy as Moll Cutpurse. This record also begins a new trend in Frith's criminal association; rather than appearing as a defendant, Frith here appeared in court to 'prosecute and give evidence against Edward Welles and Gilbert Dadson on suspicion of felony' (Ungerer 2000, 64). Throughout her life, Frith would often find herself on both sides of legal action, and in her fictional representations, this often translated to Moll Cutpurse being imagined as a negotiator between criminals and non-criminals, equally at home in both worlds. Indeed, it appears that Frith's experiences with London's legal system allowed her to develop significant legal savvy. Her next arrest in 1609, this time for house burglary, ended in Frith being found not guilty, though, as Ungerer suggests, it is likely that she made an arrangement with her victim 'to return part of the stolen goods', a 'popular' solution since 'stolen goods, in the event of a conviction, would be confiscated by the crown' (*ibid.*). This same strategy would prove immensely lucrative for Frith throughout her life, and she eventually operated a licensed brokerage business acting as a go-between for thieves and their victims to arrange precisely these kinds of deals.

² All quotes are taken from Spearing and Todd 1994.

³ For a full accounting of all the legal documents concerning Mary Frith's life, see Ungerer 2000, 52-62.

⁴ This document is quoted and briefly summarized in Ungerer 2000, 200. See the same for a full accounting of all the legal documents concerning Mary Frith's life.

While Frith does not appear to have ever served sustained prison time or to have been subjected to any other punishments more severe than public penance, the records of her life⁵ clearly demonstrate that she operated on the fringes of legality, even after she had taken steps toward legitimizing herself as a London businesswoman. However, in order to thrive in a rapidly urbanizing London, Frith had to set herself apart. To do so, she transformed herself into a celebrity and performer whose criminal past and knowledge made her more enticing and recognizable among the entertainers of Southwark.

3. *Mary Frith the Celebrity*

The connection between certain kinds of criminality and celebrity is a relatively new field of study, and the theorizing of early modern celebrity is likewise still in development. Even so, there is an undeniable connection between early modern and modern fascinations with criminal activities and psychology, and the ways in which celebrity has developed throughout time. Ruth Penfold-Mounce's study of modern criminals and celebrity culture argues that 'the joy of transgressing boundaries through crime and deviance necessitates consideration of why and how pleasure occurs through illicit activities' (2009, 4). The same, of course, can be said of the audience's pleasure in observing these acts of transgression, whether in viewing public penance, seeing the acts reproduced on stage, hearing them sung in a ballad, or reading about them in a printed account. Joseph Roach has argued that the seventeenth century was the point 'when popular celebrities began to circulate their images in the place of religious and royal icons' (2007, 1-2), and this is certainly the case with Mary Frith. For a woman from the lower classes, she was incredibly well-known and present throughout the literary and popular imagination of her time, as both the historical record and her literary legacy attest.

After relocating to Southwark, and likely as part of her performance act, Frith developed the *persona* of Moll Cutpurse, a cross-dressing (or, at least, masculine-dressing), swearing, drinking, smoking woman whose connections to criminality gave her an added allure alongside her already transgressive behaviour. Frith's sobriquet 'Moll Cutpurse' appears to be a nod to her prior arrests and knowledge of criminality. The first known usage of it is in John Day's lost text 'The Madde Pranckes of Mery Mall of the Bankside' (c. 1610), though it is likely that she was already well-established, and thus recognizable, under this name by the time of Day's writing, albeit uncertainty over the genre of this document makes Day's intended audience unclear. All evidence suggests that the name was an adopted part of her stage *persona*. While early court records only name her as Mary (or Maria) Frith, after the publication of *The Roaring Girl* (1611) she is presented as both Mary Frith and Moll Cutpurse. A 1612 document notes that 'she confesseth y^e she is commonly termed Ma<ll> cutpurse of her cutting purses' (Mulholland 1977, 31). Though this section is struck out in the original document, the fact that Frith's alias has to be confirmed and explained suggests that it was not, at that time, common knowledge. Likewise, a 1621 Star Chamber case describes her as 'Mary Markham [her married name], *alias* Frith, *alias* Thrift, *alias* "Malcutpurse"' (Dowling 1934, 67). Notably, records from Frith's initial arrests do not make use of any of these aliases, suggesting that the name was adopted only after her move to Southwark, likely as a deliberate step in establishing Frith's stage presence.

⁵ Frith's early court appearances are briefly summarized in Eccles 1985. Ungerer (2000) discusses them at somewhat greater length.

Frith's presentation of herself as Moll Cutpurse seems to suggest a desire for upward mobility, from thief to legitimate performer, and later from performer and folk hero to businesswoman, albeit one operating at the edges of legality. Some scholars have asserted that Frith's performances were meant to assist her 'criminally minded pack of thieves' rob spectators 'befuddled by drink and dazzled by Moll playing on her lute and singing a bawdy song and most likely performing a jig, or guests in a tobacco shop mesmerized by Moll smoking a pipe' (Ungerer 2000, 56). However, this seems counterintuitive to the later facts of Frith's life. While Frith did maintain at least loose criminal connections throughout her life, her move towards increasingly legitimate forms of business suggest that she was seeking relatively conventional social mobility rather than attempting to strengthen her position in a kind of criminal world. Frith's stage *persona* as Moll Cutpurse was meant to suggest and provoke, not to connect her to her past crimes. As a performer seeking to build a recognizable *persona* and brand, it is unlikely that Frith merely used her growing celebrity as a means of furthering illegal enterprises.

Frith's move from pickpocket to entertainer seems to have been part of a lifelong attempt to legitimize herself. After all, creating a visibly distinct *persona* does not serve the interests of a thief who needs to blend into a crowd, but does allow for the kind of instant recognizability needed in the entertainment industry. Indeed, Nancy Mohrlock Bunker has drawn upon visual representations and sartorial descriptions of Frith throughout her life to suggest that Frith was keenly interested in upward social mobility and that, far from attempting to pass herself off as a man, she was 'both feminine and fashionable' (2005, 212). While accounts of Frith suggest that her masculine attire and behaviour were a crucial part of her performance *persona*, they also make it clear that Frith claimed the right to these things as a woman. This fact is suggested also in the fictional representation of *The Roaring Girl*, where her clothing is often a mixture of masculine doublet and feminine safeguard; only occasionally does she dress fully as a man, and even then she ridicules characters like Laxton for mistaking her as such. Rather famously, she used her moment on the stage following a performance of *The Roaring Girl* to tell her audience that 'she thought many of them were of opinion that she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should finde that she is a woman' (Mulholland 1977, 31). Unlike many other crossdressing women of the period, who often attempted to pass as men in order to enlist as soldiers or sailors, find greater opportunities for employment, or travel in greater safety,⁶ Frith does not appear to have ever sought to claim a male identity. Instead, she, like many women of her day, embraced increasingly masculine fashion and behaviours. Like most celebrities throughout time, Frith was at the cutting edge of fashion and taste – even if she sometimes pushed the boundaries further than her audience found comfortable.

4. *Making Moll Cutpurse*

The earliest known fictional portrayal of Moll is the now lost text by playwright John Day mentioned above, titled 'A Booke called The Madde Pranke of Mery Mall of the Bankside, with her Walks in Man's Apparel and to what Purpose'⁷ (c. 1610). Day's text has been imagined variously as a ballad, a play, or a short pamphlet, yet even without an extant text, Day's publication is interesting because of its apparent participation in broader ballad and jestbook

⁶For a historical survey of crossdressing women who *did* attempt to pass as male, see Dekker and Van de Pol 1989.

⁷While the text is no longer extant, it is recorded in the Stationer's Register for 7 August 1610, and can be found in the *Stationer's Register Online* as Entry SRO5772 at <<https://stationersregister.online/entry/SRO5772>>, accessed 1 February 2021.

traditions and for its intersections with the theatre world. The title mimics those used for other jestbooks, jest biographies, and jest ballads: the seventeenth-century ballad ‘The Mad-Merry Pranks of Robbin Good-fellow’⁸ is clearly working from a similar formula. This ballad describes Robin Goodfellow’s night-time exploits, playing tricks on ghosts and goblins and men and women alike. He is benevolent and malicious by turns, completing household tasks in one stanza, then pinching maids and playing tricks in the next. Like many jest figures, he upholds conventional social ideas – here of cleanliness, chastity, and honesty – even as he upsets the status quo by stealing newborns and livestock.

Jest ballads like that of Robin Goodfellow and jest biographies were quite popular during the seventeenth century and often served transgressive functions, placing characters with disparate power relations in conversation with one another. Chris Holcomb reads these conversations as

a powerful strategy for communicating across social difference, but [the upper class] also fear that, precisely because of its power, jesting may go out of control and release energies not only damaging to a speaker’s immediate persuasive aims, but also disruptive of the boundaries and distinctions that ought to be preserved when different kinds of people occupy the same social space. (2001, 2)

Though Holcomb ultimately sees jesting as supporting a conservative ideology which seeks to preserve the status quo, it can be argued that jesting often does so through subverting expectations and conventional roles. Like the later *Roaring Girl*, Day’s text appears to attempt to capitalize on Frith’s most notable characteristic as a performer – her masculine attire – while simultaneously seeking to justify and perhaps rehabilitate her behaviour for her potential audiences, clients, and customers.

Beyond inaugurating Moll into the jesting tradition, ‘The Madde Prances of Mery Mall’ also served as her entrance into the broader theatrical world. Day was a playwright in the employ of Philip Henslowe. Perhaps more important for Frith’s/Moll’s later career, however, was Day’s relationship with other playwrights. John Day, Thomas Dekker, and Thomas Middleton were all part of the same theatrical circle.⁹ All three had produced work for Philip Henslowe in the 1590s and 1600s, and Dekker collaborated with both Day and Middleton.¹⁰ These theatrical associations served to solidify Frith’s transformation into and division from the fictional Moll.

The Roaring Girl is where the figures of Frith and Moll converge. While the Moll of the play is largely a fictional construction, meant to cater to particular social questions of the day and generate paying audiences, the ‘Moll’ who appears in the paratextual letter to the reader, the play’s Prologue, and whose later performance is advertised at the end of the printed play is a

⁸ This ballad appears to have been published infrequently throughout the seventeenth century, both before and after the Restoration. Although its authorship has been attributed to Ben Jonson, such claim is of uncertain provenance. The *English Broadside Ballad Archive* currently includes five editions of the ballad, with publication dates ranging from the early seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century. Here reference is to the earliest of these ballads, EBBA 30163 from the British Library’s Roxburghe Collection, dated between 1601-1640, which can be found at <<https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30163/image>>, accessed 1 February 2021.

⁹ Henslowe’s Diary records numerous transactions with John Day, usually alongside one or more collaborators, particularly Thomas Dekker or William Haughton. Neil Carson notes that ‘when the Company moved to the Fortune, Day was one of the few dramatists to remain actively associated with it’ (1988, 61), suggesting that throughout the period in question, Day worked closely not only with the Admiral’s Men but also with the theatre where *The Roaring Girl* would later premier.

¹⁰ Though the authorship of *Lust’s Dominion* is disputed, Charles Cathcart analyses and supports Cyrus Hoy’s attribution of the play to Dekker, Day, and Haughton, which argues that *Lust’s Dominion* is an alternate title for the lost *The Spanish Moor’s Tragedy*.

much more ambiguous figure, blurring the distinctions between fiction and reality. *The Roaring Girl* opens with an address to the reader which positions the play as a kind of rehabilitation for Frith/Moll. The decorousness of the play is emphasized: it fits the current fashions in playmaking even as Moll's crossdressing provides 'a brave disguise and a safe one', and it is decorous enough to be 'fit for many of your companies, as well as the person itself, and may be allowed both gallery room at the playhouse, and chamber room at your lodging' (2-3). In this way, both the text and its subject are described as presentable, even if the connotations of the playhouse and the chamber room are vaguely sexual. The play is posed as a flirtation, even as it promises to redeem its subject: 'Worse things I must needs confess the world has taxed her for, than has been written of her; but 'tis the excellency of a writer to leave things better than he finds 'em' (3). Doing so, however, seems to demand engaging with a rather flexible idea of the truth. Without Day's ballad, it is impossible to know precisely what Frith's/Moll's reputation was at the time of *The Roaring Girl's* composition, but it seems to have been in need of repair, possibly because of Day's publication, but equally as likely because of Frith's own notoriety as a performer and (former) pickpocket. Middleton asserts that his and Dekker's goal is to rehabilitate the narrative surrounding Frith/Moll, even if it means ignoring some of the worst things that have been said about her: 'though some obscene fellow ... would have ripped up the most nasty vice that ever hell belched forth, and presented it to a modest assembly, yet we rather wish in such discoveries, where reputation lies bleeding, a slackness of truth, than a fullness of slander' (*ibid.*). The version of Moll presented in the body of the play, then, is a fictionalized, idealized version of Frith which cannot be read as a truthful representation.

The Roaring Girl's Moll is a nearly unquestionably heroic figure. Throughout the play, characters are far more concerned with her cross-dressing and her disregard for gender conventions than they are with any possible criminal behaviour. She enters the play as Sebastian's supposed fiancée, though their betrothal is merely a ruse to convince Sebastian's father, Sir Alexander, to accept his true choice, Mary Fitz-Allard. Sir Alexander's initial objections to Moll are gendered, not criminal: he calls Moll

a creature ... nature hath brought forth
 To mock the sex of woman. It is a thing
 One knows not how to name: her birth began
 Ere she was all made: 'tis woman more than man,
 Man more than woman, and (which to none can hap)
 The sun gives her two shadows to one shape. (1.2.127-132)

The shopkeepers who make up the play's subplot, too, initially focus on Moll's subversion of gendered dress and behaviour, though they also begin introducing other elements of her character, such as smoking tobacco, sword fighting, and acting as a mediator between the criminal world and the gentry. However, throughout the play, the emphasis remains on Moll's ability to perform as something in between – neither male nor female, neither criminal nor citizen – and while her own statements about her gender are ambivalent at best, her insistence on her virtue and morality never wavers. Her criminal history is invoked only to be denied as a false reputation, with Moll questioning 'must you have / A black ill name, because ill things you know?' (5.1.325-326) after other characters question her knowledge of thieves' cant. Instead, she explains that her knowledge of criminality comes not from her own transgressions, but from having 'sat amongst such adders; seen their stings, / As any here might, and in full playhouses / Watched their quick-diving hands, to bring to shame / Such rogues, and in that stream met an ill name' (5.1.302-305). Moreover, when Sir Alexander attempts to trap Moll as a thief by

hanging his valuables in plain sight, Moll observes how easy the items would be to steal, but she makes no effort to do so (4.1.1-144). Thus, the play transforms Moll into an unconventional hero whose only association with crime is from observation, not from practice.

Despite the reformatory nature of the play, Frith's reputation seems to have lent *The Roaring Girl* some notoriety even before its initial performance, since the printed Prologue notes that it is 'a play expected long' that now must grapple with all of the ideas that the audience may have constructed about 'a roaring girl' in anticipation (Prologue, 1-5). The Prologue then goes on to provide a catalogue of various kinds of roaring girls, from 'she / That roars at midnight in deep tavern bowls, / That beats the watch, and constables controls' to she that 'roars i'th'daytime, swears, stabs, gives braves, / Yet sells her soul to the lust of fools and slaves' to the 'civil city-roaring girl, whose pride, / Feasting, and riding, shakes her husband's state, / And leaves him roaring through an iron gate' (Prologue, 17-24).

Moll is explicitly identified as not belonging to any of these groups, but 'fl[y]ing' / with wings more lofty' (Prologue, 25-26). The Prologue ends by announcing the play's subject, 'Mad Moll', whose title here seems to call back to the ballad, suggesting that it was, in fact, the source of much of Frith's/Moll's notoriety. The lead-up to this announcement, however, seems to prompt the audience through its negation; by describing what Frith/Moll is *not*, it both sets up the audience to anticipate the reveal even as it creates an implicit association between Frith/Moll and these other kinds of roaring girls – associations which linger in later mythical constructions.

It is difficult to find Frith within *The Roaring Girl*. Though she is certainly the model for Moll, Moll's story is, as the Prologue suggests, heavily revised to the point of becoming an idealized archetype of the heroic female prankster-criminal, whose crossdressing and criminal knowledge allow her to transcend the confines of both gender and class. Moll is, explicitly, not a criminal. However, as in the Prologue, Dekker and Middleton's Moll is defined primarily through negation. Mary Beth Rose comments that 'While the dramatists assure us confidently that their Moll is neither criminal, brawler, whore, nor city wife, the question of her actual social status is left unanswered' (1988, 79). Though the audience is presented with many possible readings of Moll, none of them is stable enough to assert itself as definitive. Nevertheless, Moll's ability to navigate between a variety of social constructions, both in terms of interpersonal and economic interaction, allows her to be the audience's guide to the complexities of London city life as presented in Jacobean city comedy. Moll is a necessary, if protean, figure in this newly urbanized London, since her nature makes her uniquely capable of navigating and making use of all the city has to offer. Though there are certainly elements of Frith in Moll – particularly in Moll's viol playing, which was likely mimicked by Frith's own post-show performance on the lute – by and large, *The Roaring Girl* is a point of fracture between the real and the mythic.

5. *Mary Frith after The Roaring Girl*

While Moll Cutpurse might have made use of Mary Frith's image and celebrity, Frith's own life followed quite a different trajectory from the heroic figure represented in *The Roaring Girl*. After Dekker and Middleton's play and Frith's participation therein, the next record of Frith's life is again in the court records of London, specifically the *Consistory of London Correction Book* for November 1611 to October 1613. Though this is the first surviving record, it is clear from reading the case, transcribed in P.A. Mulholland's 'The Date of *The Roaring Girl*', that this was not Frith's first run-in with the law after *The Roaring Girl*. The record discusses some form of prior punishment in Bridewell for a lengthy list of misbehaviour, though it is somewhat unclear precisely what Frith was punished for. Possible charges include general

lewdness, blasphemy, keeping ‘Ruffinly swaggering and lewd company’, and being drunk and ‘distempered’ (Mulholland 1977, 31). What she *wasn’t* arrested for was the gendered component of her signature manner of dress. While crossdressing invoked ‘a good deal of violent rhetoric’, it was not prohibited by sumptuary laws (Orgel 1996, 107).¹¹ However, the charges Frith faced at this particular trial were somewhat more specific: she was ‘upon Christmas day at night taken in [Paul’s] Church with her petticoate tucked up about her in the fashion of a man with a mans cloake on her to the great scandal of divers persons who understood the same and to the disgrace of all womanhood’ (Mulholland 1977, 31). What is interesting about this case is the way in which Frith’s infamous crossdressing is presented. Rather than describing her as appearing in a cross between men’s and women’s clothing (as the frontispiece for *The Roaring Girl* suggests), the court case describes her problematic garment as an item of specifically female clothing, a petticoat, which she has, perhaps in an impromptu performance, fashioned into an ad hoc pair of breeches necessary for completing the character costume for Moll. The offense seems less about sartorial choice and more about the impropriety of showcasing her undergarments in the churchyard on a holy day. For this, Frith was sent back to Bridewell ‘until [the Lord Bishop of London] might further examine the truth of the misdemeanors inforced against her without laying as yet any further censure upon her’,¹² but no further punishment was recorded, and the records for Bridewell during this era have been lost. Only John Chamberlain’s letter, quoted in the Introduction of this essay, gives us any evidence of what Frith’s penance may have been like.

While her performance seems designed to draw spectators and increase her growing fame, after this event Frith disappears from the historical record for a time, suggesting that her life proceeded fairly uneventfully, at least from a legal standpoint. Following her penance, Frith married Lewknor Markham, about whom very little is known. While Gustav Ungerer suggests that he was a son or relative of playwright Gervase Markham, and thus linked to Frith through her theatrical endeavours, no conclusive evidence has ever been found, and Lewknor is not mentioned in Gervase’s will.¹³ Outside of his marriage contract to Frith, Lewknor Markham is an unknown entity. Though Frith used the fact that she was married in order to subvert legal proceedings against her, Markham himself is never charged in any of these suits, and legal documents suggest that the two were separated (if they had ever lived together at all), and Frith seems to have outlived him, since she names herself a widow in her will.¹⁴ Their marriage, it seems, was one of legal and financial convenience, at least on Frith’s part, rather than romance.

As a married woman, Frith was involved in two more court cases, both of which suggest that she was operating as a businesswoman at the edges of legal trade.¹⁵ In the first, she was sued for an unpaid bill for beaver hats, then a status symbol for relatively wealthy middleclass women, which again suggests Frith’s desire for status and upward mobility. Later, she was questioned in a case in which she appears to have acted as a fence or a broker, mediating between sellers (in Frith’s case, generally believed to be thieves) and buyers (here, often the initial victims of the thefts). While brokers in early modern England were generally more akin to modern

¹¹ Frith’s costume may have crossed class lines as well as gendered lines, and class privileges *were* protected under sumptuary laws.

¹² From the *Consistory of London Correction Book* for November 1611 - October 1613, quoted in Mulholland 1977, 31.

¹³ See Bunker 2005 for a brief discussion of this document.

¹⁴ Frith appears to have claimed both separated and married statuses at different times, potentially to avoid legal action. Mark Eccles (1985) provides examples of both.

¹⁵ References to Frith’s use of her married status in avoiding legal proceedings suggest that there may have been other cases; however, records only survive in these two instances.

pawnbrokers, they were also heavily associated with usury and ‘were frequently little more than receivers of stolen goods, and they charged extortionate rates of interest’ (Hawkes 2010, 33). In the records for this case, Frith claims to have been appointed a royal commission to be involved in the apprehension of other thieves, though it appears that her own reputation for thievery made her an unappealing jailor.¹⁶ As Bunker (2005) and other scholars have argued, these cases demonstrate two important facts about Frith’s life: she was becoming increasingly wealthy and seeking to establish herself as a member of a fashionable merchant class, and she remained involved, however loosely, with criminal activity, though her role seems to have progressed from pickpocket to mediator.

The only additional extant document about the historical Frith’s life is her will, dated 6 June 1659.¹⁷ In it, she describes herself as a widow and uses her married name, and she bequeaths a considerable sum of money to her inheritors, suggesting that her enterprises as criminal, performer and businesswoman were ultimately quite successful, particularly for a woman initially from the lower classes. Even in this document, Frith seems to be striving for further legitimacy after her death. She requests and eventually received burial in the parish church of St. Bridget’s in Fleet Street, ‘a privilege confined to those of greater wealth and higher standing’ (Ungerer 2000, 74). From her beginnings as a pickpocket, Frith fashioned herself into a local celebrity, then used her notoriety to succeed in an increasingly competitive quasi-legal market of stolen and second-hand goods. Her success can largely be attributed to her knowledge and manipulation of the early modern English legal system and the fame that she built for herself as Moll Cutpurse.

6. *Moll Cutpurse’s Legacy*

While the historic Frith’s life – or, at least, her criminal trials – immediately after *The Roaring Girl* has received a fair amount of historical and critical attention, Moll’s appearances in later drama have often been written off as minor allusions or topical references meant to elicit no more than a quick laugh. However, Moll’s next dramatic appearance, in Dekker’s *If This Be Not a Good Play, The Devil is in It* (1611),¹⁸ offers us one possible reading of Frith’s punishment. In the final scene of the play, Pluto asks his attendant devils if Moll Cutpurse has arrived yet in hell. They attempt to rally sympathy for Moll by informing him that ‘Tis not yet fit Mall Cutpurse here should houle, / Shee has bin too late a sore-tormented soule’ who has been ‘beating hemp in bridewell to choke theeues, / Therefore to spare this shee-ramp [Moll] she beseeches, / Till like her selfe all women wear the breeches’ (Dekker 1966, 5.4.104-105, 109-111). Though there is a clear connection between Frith and Moll here through the reference to Frith’s punishment at Bridewell, the scene suggests that Moll, at least as she existed in the public imagination, had little penitential feeling despite the language used in reporting her trial.

¹⁶ A full transcription of Frith’s plea in this case, alongside an analysis of the broader case in which she was involved, can be found in Dowling 1934.

¹⁷ For the full text of the will, see Ungerer 2000, 73-74.

¹⁸ Dates for the following plays come from Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson’s *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue*, vol. VI (2015), verified via email due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Special thanks to Michaela Baca for her assistance with fact checking. In the *Catalogue* dates suggest that *If This Be Not a Good Play* and *Amends for Ladies* (discussed below) are roughly contemporaneous with *The Roaring Girl*; however, the first printings of the plays are in 1612 and 1618 respectively, leaving the precise order in which the plays were first performed uncertain. *If This Be Not a Good Play* is clearly post-*Roaring Girl*, since it mentions Frith’s penance at Bridewell; however, *Amends for Ladies* may possibly pre-date *The Roaring Girl*, and thus could be part of the body of myth that Dekker and Middleton attempt to reform in their presentation of Moll.

References to Moll in other plays seem to offer some evidence for Frith's actual life, though, of course, any conclusions drawn from fictional texts are speculative at best. In *The Witch of Edmonton* (printed 1658, but performed 1621), Cuddy Banks tells the devil, who is disguised as a dog, that 'if you have a mind to the game either at bull or bear, I think I could prefer you to Moll Cutpurse' (Dekker 1966, 5.1.162-164). This passage alludes to a hobby that *The Life and Death* makes far more explicit: Moll's (and, likely, Frith's) participation in bull and bear-baiting and dog-fighting. The line here suggests that Moll can only be outdone by the devil, which is in keeping with the portrayal of Moll's prowess depicted in *The Life and Death*, even if here her actions have a negative rather than positive valence. The first reader's note describes such games as 'consecrated to this Bona Roba, and goodly Matron' (Anonymous 1662, A1v). At several points, Moll's dogs and their uses in her exploits are described at length, including a tale in which she names two dogs Pym and St. John's to use as anti-Parliamentarian allegories in a bull baiting (Anonymous 1662, 112). Because Dekker almost certainly knew Frith, and because these two texts agree on this element of Frith's history, it seems likely that Frith did participate in bear and bull baiting with both frequency and skill. However, no historical records exist to clearly tie Frith to such activities.

Nathan Fields' *Amends for Ladies* (first printed in 1618, republished in 1639, performed as early as 1610) also includes a cameo from Moll. She appears briefly in the second act to deliver a letter from a knight, Sir John Lovall, attempting to arrange a sexual affair with a virtuous citizen's wife, Grace Seldom. Both Grace and her husband comment on Moll's appearance; he calls her 'Mistriss *hic & hac*,'¹⁹ while Grace claims

I know not what to tearme thee man or woman,
 For nature shaming to acknowledge thee
 For either; hath produced thee to the World
 Without a sexe, some say thou art a woman,
 Others a man; and many thou art both Woman and man, but I thinke rather neither
 Or man & horse, as the old Centaures faign'd. (Fields 1639, C2r)

Moll seems unbothered by their commentary on her gender, and instead remains intent on her task, attempting to persuade Grace that more virtuous women than her have maintained both affairs and their appearance of modesty. Though her appearance is brief, it serves to reinforce some elements of Moll's character established in *The Roaring Girl* – her crossdressing (and the tendency of her detractors to read it as a kind of hermaphroditism) and her ability to move and negotiate between classes – even as it adds, or perhaps simply perverts, a new component to the myth: Moll's services as a bawd. While Moll ostensibly serves a similar function in *The Roaring Girl* – the core of the plot is, after all, her negotiation of the relationship between a pair of young lovers – here, she has been tasked not with subverting parental authority, but with arranging an extramarital affair. Moll occupies this same role throughout later depictions, though there is no clear record that Frith ever worked as a bawd.

Fields' depiction of Moll was clearly seen as 'good box office or good for the publisher's receipts', since when the play was reprinted in 1639, the title page had been from *Amends for Ladies With the Humour of Roring. A Comedie to Amends for Ladies. With the merry pranks of Moll Cut-Purse: Or, the humour of roaring: A Comedy full of honest mirth and wit* (Todd and

¹⁹A reference to the anti-crossdressing pamphlet *Hic Mulier* and its pro-fashion, pro-woman response *Haec Vir*, both published in 1620.

Spearing 1994, xv-xvi). Though Moll's role in the play remains the same – she is on stage for a mere thirty-eight lines, only eighteen of which she speaks – her name seems to have only gained cultural currency throughout the 1620s and 1630s. This steady popularity can in part be traced to Moll's continued, if infrequent, reappearance in Dekker's plays. As in Fields' play, the Moll of the later drama is usually quite different from her portrayal in *The Roaring Girl* as a heroic rogue, instead becoming emblematic of theft, prostitution, and London's supposed criminal underworld.

By the 1640s, Moll Cutpurse had transformed into a criminal mastermind, overseeing the actions of thieves across London. Richard Brome's *The Court Beggar* (1632) includes a character named Dainty, who complains of being plagued by cutpurses. His companion, Cit-wit, claims he will 'go to honest Moll about it presently', suggesting that not only does she have authority over all cutpurses in the city, but that she keeps them tightly controlled and prevents them from harassing London's respectable citizens (Brome). Similarly, pamphlets throughout the 1640s imagine Moll as a Sargent at Arms for the 'Parliament of Ladies' that gives the pamphlets their names. In *An Exact Diurnall of the Parliament of Ladyes*²⁰ (Neville [?] 1647a), she 'musters up her witty *Mermidons*', to arrest a series of 'delinquent' men including Prince Rupert and the Archbishop of York. The men are brought forward to defend themselves against charges of cowardice, self-serving betrayal, and a general failure to protect the lives and property of the women during the ongoing Civil War. The women find each of the men guilty and devise bizarre and poetic punishments for them, though ultimately the men's tears drive the women to relent and offer 'a generall Reprive'.²¹ This portrayal of Moll as the leader of a women's (or, at least, female-directed) militia is repeated in another 1647 pamphlet, *The Parliament of Ladies, or Diverse remarkable passages of Ladies in Spring-Garden, in Parliament assembled* (Neville [?] 1647b).²² In this pamphlet, Moll is, alongside another woman named Moll Sebran, 'appointed to guard the House, who being there placed with pipes in both their mouthes, with fire and smoake in a very short time, had almost choaked both the passage and the Passengers'. Though Moll Sebran does not appear to have been mythologized beyond this mention, this passage is enlightening in that it portrays Moll Cutpurse not as a lone and anomalous figure, but as the leader of a royalist military force.

In 1662, a purported autobiography of Frith, *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, Commonly Called Mal Cutpurse* (Anonymous 1662)²³ was printed to be sold by William Gilbertson. Two modern editions of this text exist, the first edited in 1993 by Randal S. Nakayama and the second accompanying a biography of Mary Carleton in Janet Todd and Elizabeth Spearing's *Counterfeit Ladies* (Todd and Spearing 1994).²⁴ Both sets of editors of *The Life and Death* assert that the biography should be treated, at least in part, as authentically Frith's. Nakayama argues that the bulk of the text 'purports to be, and in large measure appears

²⁰ Though both the author and printer of this pamphlet are anonymous, Wing's edition of the *English Short Title Catalogue* has attributed it, along with several similarly named pamphlets from the same year, to Henry Neville.

²¹ For example, Prince Rupert is sentenced 'to be fast bound to a Post amongst *Porcupins*, and so to remaine untill he be stuck to death with their quills,' while the Archbishop of York is exiled to 'the lake of *Lerna*, and there to be confined to a *Welch Cottage*, And get his living by Angling for Frogs out of those ditches' (Neville 1647a, 7).

²² This pamphlet is also attributed to Neville, though his authorship is uncertain.

²³ The full title is *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.*

²⁴ Both Nakayama and Todd and Spearing's editions of *The Life and Death* are based on the sole extant copy at the British Library, filed as Wing 2005, BL c.127.1.a.25, which is also available via microfilm on *Early English Books Online*.

to be, her autobiography'. though he does note that the hands of multiple editors make the validity of the document as a whole somewhat unclear (1993, xi). Similarly, Todd and Spearing believe that *The Life and Death* is a 'told-to' biography, written with the help of an amanuensis (1994, xiii). Indeed, *The Life and Death* claims to be 'Mal Cutpurse's Diary', as the primary tale is titled, and is presented through a first-person narrative. However, the details of the biography bear little semblance to the known facts of Frith's life. Instead, Frith's biographers present a fictionalized version of Frith who can easily trace her lineage not only to her earlier incarnation in *The Roaring Girl*, but also to other tales of outlaw heroes, many of whom were imagined as royalist heroes, fighting against Parliamentary forces through acts of highway robbery and other crimes.

In *The Life and Death*, Moll is reimagined as the criminal mastermind of these royalist outlaws. The biography depicts Moll's 'constant intimacy' with Hind, calling him a 'daring adventurer' (Todd and Spearing 1994, 65). She also claims to be the mastermind behind his criminal exploits: 'there was no ... hazard in his pranks for most of the chief of them I set; both of us concurring to be revenged of Committee Men and Parliament People, by those private assaults [highway robbery], since publique combating of them would not prevaile' (*ibid.*). Another highwayman, Richard Hannam, is also supposed to have been directed by Frith, though she emphasizes that their connection ended when Hannam robbed the king (67).²⁵ Though the author never presents Frith herself as a highwaywoman hero, he does set her up as a key figure in the London criminal underworld. Much as Robin Hood traditionally heads his own band of outlaws, so does Frith take on the role of a proverbial prince of thieves for whom 'money [is] a portable and as [*sic*] partable Commodity', and who is capable of directing not only famous highwaymen such as Hind and Hannam, but also operating a gang of unnamed, lesser thieves and cutpurses within the city (22). As Mowry notes, 'Frith's biographers celebrate her entrepreneurial success and validate her alternative legal authority in terms of her commitment to the status quo distribution of wealth and goods ... As the narrative continues, the notorious rogue becomes increasingly prince-like' (2005, 35). From cutpurse to performer to businesswoman to queen of thieves, Frith's reputation grew ceaselessly throughout her life, culminating in years immediately after her death with the publication of the anonymous biography.

However, as with most of the published texts purportedly about Frith, the accuracy of *The Life and Death* is questionable at best. Many elements of Frith's life, such as her early arrests, her marriage, and her appearance in *The Roaring Girl*, are omitted entirely. This text is both highly selective about the factual evidence of Frith's life as well as extremely political in the fashion of the 'Parliament of Ladies' pamphlets, which suggests that *The Life and Death* is largely fictional, even as it creates a comprehensive view of the legends that evolved around Mary Frith. Gustav Ungerer notes that *The Life and Death* 'is bound to be fallacious considering that the biographers were committed to adjusting their subject in conformance to the stereotypical criminal of fictional biography' (2000, 47). Gilbertson used Frith's reputation for crossdressing to cast her in a startling variety of transgressive forms, including 'as a transvestite usurping male power, as a hermaphrodite transcending the borders of human sexuality, as a virago, as a tomboy, as a prostitute, as a bawd, and even as a chaste woman who remained a spinster' (42). Indeed, the contradictory nature of *The Life and Death* is far more suggestive of the episodic adventures of both jest biographies, like that of Long Meg, and criminal biographies, such as those written about Frith's contemporaries

²⁵ Gilbertson also published a criminal biography of Hannam entitled *Hannam's Last farewell to the world* in 1656. Here, the author defends Hannam against accusations of robbing the king. His commentary in *The Life and Death* appears to be a recanting of his earlier pamphlet.

James Hind and Richard Hannam. Though it seems that her ‘biographers’ knew little of her personal history, their familiarity with her fictional representations is augmented by these other popular tales, the evolving socioeconomic atmosphere of an increasingly urbanized London, and the political turmoil of the English Civil War and the Restoration.

The politicization of Moll Cutpurse remained a common thread throughout later iterations of the Moll Cutpurse story, which variously portrayed her as a royalist highwayman,²⁶ a criminal mastermind, and the pinnacle of debauchery. Even in modern popular culture, Mary Frith and Moll Cutpurse remain figures of interest both within and beyond the academic community. *The Roaring Girl* remains a popular play for theatres with an early modern focus, including a 2014 performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company and a performance from The Shakespeare Project of Chicago in 2019. Frith and Moll have likewise fascinated readers of fiction and true crime aficionados. A 1984 novel by Ellen Galford, *Moll Cutpurse, Her True History* reimagines Moll’s life through the eyes of a fictional lover, an alchemist’s daughter. Though this novel has little basis in Frith’s real history, it is still an evocative reimagining of Moll’s mythic history, one which captures modern debates about gender and sexuality through one reading of Moll’s character, particularly as she arises out of *The Roaring Girl*. Galford is skeptical of the iteration of Moll we have received – or perhaps constructed – from her fictional portrayals. When Galford’s Moll views a performance of *The Roaring Girl* near the end of the novel, she comments that ‘it is the strangest mixture of the Moll you know and a Moll that never was nor could be’ (1985, 181). Here, Galford summarizes the relationship between Frith and Moll that has developed over the last four hundred years: a mixture of truth and impossible, alluring fantasy.

Throughout this essay, I have sought to disentwine the historical woman Mary Frith from her ever-evolving fictional counterpart(s) Moll Cutpurse. Frith, via *The Roaring Girl*’s Moll, is still a recognizable figure through the play’s continued popularity in anthologies of early modern drama, a small but steady stream of scholarship, university and professional performances, and occasional coverage in popular media as a roguish and transgressive anti-hero. However, the facts of Frith’s life and the broader mythology of Moll Cutpurse created in later literature has largely been lost or conflated into *The Roaring Girl*’s heroic iteration of Moll. By disentangling the disparate threads of Frith’s life and Moll’s myth, though, three intriguing narratives become clear, each worthy of further exploration: Frith the fashionable entrepreneur, Moll the mercurial heroine, and Moll the notorious criminal.

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²⁶ See, for instance, Alexander Smith’s *History of the Lives and Robberies of the Most Notorious Highwaymen*, 1714.

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