

The Tragedy of a Duchess, The Comedy of a Girl: Reading Gender and (Homo)

Desire in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Roaring Girl*

Anneke Mulder

Capstone Advisors:

Jonathan Loesberg

Madhavi Menon

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“Why is the name of Moll so fatal, sir?” is the persistent question asked in Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl* (II.ii.151). It is a question bounced back and forth between men as Moll Cutpurse, the titular roaring girl, unabashedly navigates the male-dominated society she inhabits, dressed in breeches but calling herself a woman. Again and again, Moll is described as “fatal,” as “dangerous,” as a disruption not only to the usual logic of things, but also to the physical and mental well-being of those around her. Indeed, the very fabric of identity quivers as Moll circulates through this comedy.

A post-structuralist reading of Moll, invoking queer theorists such as Judith Butler, makes the claim that Moll awakens anxiety in the text for the way that she insists on what Ferdinand de Saussure calls the “arbitrariness of the sign” (67). That is, Moll, by placing men’s clothing on a female body, challenges the security of gender signifiers in relation to bodies. Moll’s resistance to the gender norms of her society results in an incoherence of identity that makes her name and gender the most talked-about signifiers in the entire play. The indeterminacy of her gender enables the central plot—the deception of Sir Alexander Wengrave, in which his son, Sebastian, feigns a desire for Moll in order to frighten his father into consenting to a much more acceptable union with Mary. In this post-

structuralist reading, Sebastian's plot relies on the incoherence of Moll's identity, the site of her threat to the text and identity as a whole.

This reading, however, misses a crucial turning point in the play. In fact, Moll does not become "fatal" until the moment that Sebastian brings her into the realm of desire. Prior to this moment, she is undoubtedly *unintelligible* to everyone in the text—that is, "a creature / So strange in quality, a whole city takes note of her name and person" (I.ii.98-100). She is a curiosity and a mystery, but she isn't a *threat* until she is made the object of desire. It isn't a quality of *Moll's*, then, that necessarily makes her a threat. Rather, the threat arises because of the seeming desire between Moll and Sebastian. What, then, if not Moll's insistence on difference, constitutes the threat of this desire?

The threat of inappropriate desire looms large in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, a play remarkable for the confusion of overlapping desires that drives its plot. *Duchess* takes place in the constant play between hidden desire and the drive toward the revelation of that desire. The play is fascinated with the sexual activity of the title character. The play begins as Ferdinand and the Cardinal forbid their sister, the widowed Duchess, to remarry. The Duchess ignores this injunction against remarriage and pursues Antonio, a loyal steward. The subsequent evidence of their union—nights spent together, the births of their children—must be hidden from the view of the brothers and the public. As the plot unfolds, however, suspicion of the Duchess's clandestine marriage grows and the brothers repeatedly attempt to discover the identity of her husband with the help of Bosola, a dubious character employed by the brothers to infiltrate the

Duchess's quarters by acting as her servant. Ferdinand's insistence upon and paranoia about his twin sister's pollution of their noble blood eventually leads him to orchestrate the deaths of the Duchess, Antonio, and their children. The play finishes with Ferdinand in the throes of insanity and a frantic cascade of violent deaths, leaving very few of the main characters standing at the fall of the curtain.

It is, however, not the Duchess's desire that precipitates such a chaotic and bloody dénouement, much as her desire is repeatedly cited as the play's central concern. Rather, it is Ferdinand's veiled and eventually fatal incestuous desire for his twin that causes his disintegration and the confused violence that ripples outward from it. This incestuous desire is figured in terms of the sameness between the Duchess and Ferdinand: the closeness of their relation and the similarity of their bodies (since they are twins) constantly exercise Ferdinand. The logic of inappropriate desire in *The Duchess of Malfi*, extended to *The Roaring Girl*, allows us to see why Moll becomes a threat in desire. The two seemingly disparate versions of inappropriate desire that occur in the two plays intersect in the way that their status as threatening is rooted in the sameness between the subject and object of desire. Thus, it is *sameness*, rather than *difference*, that is most threatening in these two plays. Examining desire in them together enables me to formulate the term "homo desire."

The term "homo desire" is meant to categorize those desires that occur in a relationship in which the subject identifies *with* the object of desire. Relationships of homo desire take place, not over the chasm of difference, but in the claustrophobic space of similarity. The consequences of homo desire in

these texts is a thwarting of signification, as signifiers and their corresponding signifieds are endlessly—fatally—confused and destabilized. For both *Duchess* and *Roaring Girl*, homo desire enacts a multiplication of signifieds, to the point that signifiers—names, for example—become meaningless, for the signifieds to which they refer have dissolved, become so multiple and contradictory as to have lost all definition. The confusion of signifieds threatens to strain the signifier so far that we are left with an identity; a signifier may only be said to signify itself.

A Post-Structuralist Reading of Moll

Before I may claim to revise the post-structuralist reading of the anxieties around gender and desire in *The Roaring Girl*, I must articulate that argument, against which mine is positioned. Post-structuralist theory is indebted to Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, in which Saussure breaks the "linguistic unit," or sign, into two terms: signifier and signified (66). The terms "signifier" and "signified" are meant to designate the sign's component parts: the "sound-image" and the "concept," respectively (66). The terms "signifier" and "signified" are purposefully distinct from a more "naïve" formulation of "name" and "thing," for, among other faults, the latter pair of terms "assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words" (65). Signification, according to Saussure, relies on both the correspondence between signifier and signified and the difference between them. Separating the signifier from the signified in this way allows Saussure to establish that the "sign is arbitrary" (67)—that is, there is nothing essential, natural, or even necessarily logical about the correspondence

of signifier to signified. The two are essentially *different* entities, whose connection functions, not out of any “inner relationship” between the two (67), but because of the agreed-upon linguistic system. The arbitrariness of the link between signifier and signified becomes anxiogenic as post-structuralist Judith Butler explores the correspondence of gender and sex as a sign system in *Bodies That Matter*.

For Butler, the correspondence of a signified body to the signifier of gender becomes very important to the policing of acceptable desire. In order to mean, gender posits itself as inherent to the material body—claiming to follow the very “inner relationship” Saussure points out is a fiction. Butler calls “the practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production” (231). “Gendering” is a process that produces gender norms *as* norms; gender is imposed upon rather than essential to the body, but it is no less “compulsory” for being so. Gender is also, however, “an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation” (231). That is, because of the constructedness (as opposed to the fictional innateness) of gender norms, no gender is ever embodied exactly. There is a persistent inexactness that accompanies the performance of gender; something is always lost between the ideal of gender and the performance of it. This inevitable discrepancy between the ideal of gender and the embodiment of it introduces a fracture between the signifier of gender and the signified body, threatening to expose the arbitrariness of the sign.

This threat becomes a threat because an individual needs a gender legible on his or her body in order to be intelligible to his or her society. For Butler, “there is no ‘one’ who takes on a gender norm” (232). Instead, the “citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a ‘one,’ to become viable as a ‘one’” (232). Thus, it is our very intelligibility as human that is at stake in a stable gender identity.

Gender norms rely on a signified that is stable and definite in its materiality to assert themselves as signifiers that correspond naturally and essentially to a body that precedes them. That is, in order to maintain the power to judge an individual “viable” as human, gender signifiers must claim a connection to the material human body. The body, Butler argues, is a “constitutive exclusion” from the realm of gender as construction. However, as Butler suggests, “the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification” (30). That is, the physical body is not imbued with a prior, essential materiality “outside of language” (30). Butler argues that there is no surface outside signification; even the material body’s position as a material, natural entity signified by gender norms is itself an act of signification. Thus, to place gender’s stability under question is to question our bodily materiality as well. The arbitrariness of the sign is thus a perpetual anxiety in the system of gender identification, for even beneath the first layer of constructedness lies yet another and another. This anxiety may be understood as an anxiety about difference, an anxiety that the difference between signifier and signified will render an individual unintelligible.

This unintelligibility born of difference is the very quality that makes Moll Cutpurse so remarkable in *The Roaring Girl*. Moll is problematic for the other characters because she insists on disruptions between certain signifiers and the meanings to which those signifiers are meant to correspond. The most readily apparent arena in which Moll disrupts the correspondence of signifier to signified is that of gender. As Mistress Gallipot observes, “Some will not stick to say she’s a man / And some both man and woman” (II.i.194-5). Categories of gender blur in the character of Moll, as this so-called woman performs masculine roles and appears, in terms of clothing at very least, to be a man. Disrupting the correspondence of biological sex to the appearance and performance of gender, Moll becomes the center of a debate that runs throughout the play, across every social stratum. Whether she is a man, a woman, “both man and woman,” or neither is a question that the play never answers. Nonetheless, it is a question to which the play returns again and again. The play is so preoccupied with the question of Moll’s gender, Moll attracts attention from the start of the play as an oddity, an incomprehensible entity for whom the signifier of breeches does not necessarily correspond to the signified male body. Hetero desire stabilizes and is stabilized by the difference between masculine and feminine gender norms, and, in turn, the stability of gender as a category preceded by a legible body is crucial to identity.

The reason that Moll’s problematic gender presentation gives rise to Sebastian’s plot of feigned desire is clear in Butler’s assertion that “gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and

masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond” (Butler 231-2). Intertwined in this claim are the notions of desire and gender identity, which, according to Butler, presume one another. That is, notions of masculinity and femininity define themselves by aiming toward an idealized heterosexual desire, and vice versa. The inextricability of gender norms and heteronormative desire is evident in the proverbial formulation of “man and wife,” which the Duchess uses to describe her union with Antonio in *The Duchess of Malfi* (II.i.191).

The well-known phrase “man and wife” is recognizable as the concluding phrase in traditional marriage ceremonies. Indeed, the positions of subject and object, masculine and feminine, that Butler suggests comprise the “idealization of the heterosexual bond” are neatly defined and tied together in the final, binding utterance of, “I now pronounce you man and wife; you may kiss the bride.” The binaries of “man and woman” and “husband and wife” collide to form “man and wife,” a conflation that makes the role of “man” inseparable from the role of “husband” and, likewise, “woman” inseparable from “wife.” The wedding ceremony goes on to identify the groom/man/husband as the “you” in the marriage, the subject who is henceforth permitted to perform the action of “kissing the bride[/woman/wife].” The conflation of gender identity, the corresponding role in heterosexual relationship, and position as subject or object ensures that the definition of each relies on the others. For this reason, to upset the structure of one is to disrupt the others; this is what is at stake in the policing of acceptable—that is, hetero—desire.

A post-structuralist reading of the anxieties that circulate around Moll, then, locates her disruption of the correspondence of gender norms to the material body at the epicenter of these anxieties. Sebastian describes his plot to Mary in this way:

...All that affection
I owe to thee, on her in counterfeit passion
I spend to mad my father.
...These streams
Shall, I hope, force my father to consent
That here I anchor, rather than be rent
Upon a rock so dangerous.

(I.i.100-10)

Thus, the danger of Moll is framed in terms of violent, bodily fragmentation. That is, Moll makes fragments of things that are not meant to exist in pieces. Moll is the antithesis of an anchor, a “rock so dangerous” as to leave anyone who pursues her in pieces. This metaphorical rending, through Butler’s lens, appears to symbolize the threat of fragmentation of signifier from signified that will surely travel from Moll’s gender identity to Sebastian’s if they are married. Sebastian seems to claim that as violent and as perilous as dashing the physical body against an outcropping of rock is the fragmentation of identity that occurs in Moll. Thus, not only is Moll’s own insistence on the difference

between signifier and signified a site of anxiety, but it threatens to infect the coherence of everyone around her as well. This reading, however, neglects two crucial points, which complicate the location of difference at the heart of gender- and identity-related anxiety in the text.

First, within this framework of identity and desire, Butler situates the feminine as the exclusion against which masculinity is defined. Masculinity occupies an ambivalent space in which it disavows the feminine in order to constitute itself as stable. The definition of a masculine identity *against* an undefinable femininity formulates the gap of difference that is the mark of the “idealized heterosexual bond” to which Butler refers. That is, the identities of man and woman are stabilized by their union in marriage, a union that is less a *union* of masculine and feminine and more a way of insisting on the absolute *distance* between them. The ideal heterosexual desire involves an identification of the masculine *against* the feminine; the masculine subject defines as separate from himself a feminine object of desire.

Thus, while an insistence on difference (between signifier and signified) renders Moll unintelligible by making her position in the system of gender identification an indeterminate one, that very system nonetheless relies on difference to function: the difference between masculine and feminine gender roles depends on and is defined by an ideal of *heterosexual* desire. That is to say, difference is not inevitably threatening to this system; in fact, it is a system that relies on the absolute difference between its terms.

Second, it is crucial to note that Moll only gains the title of “rock so dangerous” upon the suggestion of bringing her into the receiving end of Sebastian’s “counterfeit passion.” Until Sebastian feigns desire for her, she is “mad Moll” or “merry Moll,” nothing more than an odd, strangely marvelous presence in the text. Further, in the conclusion of the play, after Sebastian reveals his desire for Moll to have been a farce all along, Sir Alexander concedes, “In troth thou’rt a good wench, I’m sorry now / The opinion was so hard I conceived of thee” (V.ii.227-8). Dispelling the specter of desire defangs Moll; Sir Alexander welcomes her into his favor, bestowing upon her the praise of “good” and the powerlessness of “wench.” The difference that Moll insists upon, between signifier and signified, gender and sex, name and being, makes her incoherent to the society in which she resides, but it is not until she enters the realm of desire that she becomes *threatening*.

The argument that difference destabilizes identity and is therefore the source of anxiety in *The Roaring Girl* cannot overcome these two problems. This argument may gloss over the first, differentiating difference into two different *classes* of difference—one which the system of gender and desire depends upon and one which that system finds threatening—but the second may only be explained as an untruth on Sir Alexander’s part, for Moll remains as much a disruption to the conventional presentation of gender, whether or not Sebastian marries Mary. If indeed the source of Moll’s threat is the way in which she brings to light a gap of difference between signifier and signified that the system of gender attempts (but perpetually fails) to efface, then she certainly would persist

as a threat, simply by continuing to exist. The misstep of this reading, then, lies in situating *difference* as the bugbear at the heart of issues of destabilized identity. A change in the very starting point of our approach renders these problems no longer problems, altering the trajectory of our reading drastically in order to expose *sameness* as the threat more radically threatening than difference.

Homo Desire

To begin this project, we must look more closely at Moll as an object of desire. In order for this plot to succeed, the play must raise the specter of desire between two male-seeming figures. The phobic reaction that fuels the action of the plot might not register as anything but an inevitability to a reader situated in today's American society, in which some level of homophobia goes simply unquestioned. Ours is a society that celebrates its freedom from past forms of repression and social stricture, but in which men nonetheless greet one another with a rigorous round of "Chicken or Go," laying hands on one another until one party "chickens out"—that is, becomes too uncomfortable with the appearance of homosexual attraction—and ends the game. In both this everyday scene, readily available on quadrangles across the country, and the central plot of *The Roaring Girl*, same-sex desire is a thing that may be called upon to set others ill at ease. In order to ask who or what endows same-sex attraction with the potency that enables its use in these sparring matches between men, it is necessary to take a step back from the question of *homosexual* desire specifically and examine the

space of *inappropriate* desire, which in these texts may include but is not limited to the homosexual.

The logic of inappropriate desire in *The Duchess of Malfi* allows us to see more clearly what is at stake in Sebastian's feigned passion for Moll. *Duchess* occurs in the play between the desires of the twins, the Duchess and Ferdinand, which run counter to one another. In opposition to the Duchess's heterosexual desire for Antonio runs Ferdinand's demand that the Duchess remain single. Ferdinand is adamant that "he would not have [his sister] marry again" (I.iii.159). Upon Bosola's further inquiry, he snaps, "Do not you ask the reason" (I.iii.163). Contrary to his intention, the fact that Ferdinand's motivations remain un-remarked-upon is itself remarkable. Far from deflecting attention, his refusal of Bosola's request for a reason insists that there is an existing and unspeakable reason. That is, to strip a desire of articulation is to situate it securely in the realm of the unacceptable, the inappropriate.

Ferdinand's unspeakable and yet outspoken investment in the Duchess's unmarried state manifests itself in an increasing preoccupation with and sexualization of his sister's body, revealing an incestuous desire for his twin as the force that drives the play. Both of the Duchess's brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, approach the Duchess in order to convince her not to remarry, but Ferdinand dominates the conversation with vigor, seizing every opportunity to refer in detail to his sister's sexual desires. Ferdinand dismisses the Duchess's first marriage, seeming to view it as a compulsory, unavoidable practice, after which she "know[s] already what man is" (I.iii.3). The expected, unremarkable rite

of marriage having been once accomplished, however, leaves only the reason of sexual desire as the reason for a second marriage. Ferdinand protests the excessive desire a second marriage demonstrates, exclaiming, “Marry! They are most luxurious / Will wed twice” (I.iii.6-7). The Cardinal, in contrast, maintains a relative silence on the subject of sex, offering only a few sparsely worded warnings against betraying her own promise not to wed again, which would demonstrate fickleness.

The Cardinal is markedly succinct, speaking in full sentences that are brief and concrete, which Ferdinand quickly interrupts, finishing the lines of pentameter with florid lines overflowing with figurative language. The Cardinal attempts to gird the Duchess’s decision by implying that he has seen widows “commonly” go back on their word when wooed by new suitors (I.iii.11), but Ferdinand interrupts him:

CARDINAL: You may flatter yourself,

And take your own choice; privately be married

Under the eaves of night—

FERDINAND: Think ‘t the best voyage

That e’er you made; like the irregular crab

Which, though ‘t goes backward, thinks that it goes

right

Because it goes its own way...

(I.iii.24-9)

The contrast between the Cardinal's realistic, hypothetical warning and Ferdinand's abrupt simile of the crab is stark. Ferdinand overtakes the Cardinal's unfinished line of pentameter, his own figurative language committing the very crime of excessiveness—of “luxuriousness”—of which he accuses the Duchess.

Ferdinand's own excessive obsession with the Duchess's sexual life becomes still more pronounced, unable to resist one final remark on women's tendency to “like that part which, like the lamprey, / Hath never a bone in ‘t” (I.iii.43-4). At the Duchess's indignant “Oh, fie!” Ferdinand quickly amends that he refers to the tongue, an instrument that “smooth” suitors may use to sway the Duchess (I.iii.44). In either case—that is, whether Ferdinand speaks of the penis or the tongue—both organs hover in the highly sexualized conversation, inserted into the Duchess's ear. Ferdinand is unable to control the overflow of fantasies of sexual organs and orifices into his injunction against the Duchess's potential remarriage.

Ferdinand seems able to understand the Duchess solely in terms of the body—in terms of the Duchess's former sexual purity and the corruption of that purity. “The witchcraft lies in her rank blood,” remarks Ferdinand angrily, equating the stain of sexual licentiousness with the tainting of her physical blood. Ferdinand's incessant references to the Duchess's body are almost always coupled with a reference to Ferdinand's identification with that body—that is, to himself as its twin. As soon as Bosola expresses an unwillingness to harm the Duchess further, Ferdinand rages, “Damn her! That body of hers, / While that my

blood ran pure in 't, was more worth / Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul" (IV.ii.119-21). His identification of his own blood in her veins is explicit, and allows us to understand the problem of incestuous desire in this play. The substance of his own body, he asserts as indistinguishable from that of the Duchess, referring to the blood in her veins as his own. It appears that the "corruption" of the Duchess' body—that is, her sexual relationship with her new husband—so exercises Ferdinand, not because of its status as *her* body, but because of the extent to which her body is *his*.

It is thus the identification of the subject of desire *with* rather than *against* the object that marks inappropriate desire in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The extension of this logic, which identifies inappropriate, threatening desire as a desire of *sameness*, allows us to see the central problem of *The Roaring Girl* much more clearly. I propose to shift the foundation of the examination Moll's character to locate her insistence on *sameness* as the site of anxiety in the text, as opposed to the Butlerian reading's placement of *difference* in this position.

Grounding the reading of gender and desire in these plays in sameness, rather than difference, has a profound effect on the conclusions we may draw from the anxiety and instability that congeal around Moll in *The Roaring Girl* and Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The argument that locates difference as the source of anxiety in these texts insists that Moll and Ferdinand upset the compulsory, heterosexual structure of desire, fragmenting its terms thereby exposing their arbitrariness. However, far more threatening to the system of desire and identification is the possibility of *sameness*, rather than the

arbitrariness of difference. In fact, for these plays, the mark of appropriate, stable desire *is* difference. According to Butler, identity stabilizes by exclusion; that is, in order for the categories of masculine and feminine to persist as categories, they are situated in opposition to one another. The masculine conceives of itself as a stable, coherent identity defined *against* a feminine Other. Ferdinand's incestuous desire for his twin sister, based as it is in his identification with rather than against the object of his desire, introduces a threatening sameness to the system of gender identification that relies on difference in order to function.

The extension of the logic of sameness as unstable in the realm of desire at work in *The Duchess of Malfi*, when extended to the desires of the *The Roaring Girl*, yields a category of desire we may call "homo desire." The term "homo desire" refers to the problematic desire at the heart of both *The Roaring Girl* and *The Duchess of Malfi*: the claustrophobic identification of a subject *with* rather than *against* the object of desire. "Homo" is a term, to borrow a phrase from Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, "obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual'" (1). The category of homo desire is not, of course, employed in order to equate homosexual desire with incestuous desire. Rather, the term allows us to establish the terms on which homosexual desire is made to occupy the space of the inappropriate, the anxiogenic, the sparring tool for fraternity brothers and Sebastian Wengrave alike. It is the argument of this paper that homosexual desire is marked as homo desire by these two texts, though in practice one can perhaps imagine a homosexual

attraction motivated by the subject's identification as *hetero* to the object. That is to say, the distinction between "homo desire" and "homosexual desire" aims to separate the homosexual from the realm of the inappropriate in such a way that we may understand the grounds on which the homosexual is made to bear the mark of inappropriateness—not to make any claim that homosexual desire is inevitably disastrous.

Instead, the term "homo desire" aims to show the way in which a certain category of desire proves more radically threatening within the theoretical framework of desire and identification. Desire that is rooted in a relationship of sameness—that is, homo desire—makes impossible the solidification of boundaries of self that marks hetero desire as proper and stable. Consequently, the introduction of homo desire to these texts has disastrous consequences for both body and identity.

Homo desire, for both these plays, can be figured by the mirror, signaled by the object of desire as a reflection (or twin) of the subject. Far from aiming toward the "idealiz[ed]... heterosexual bond" (Butler 232), these relationships of desire take place, not over the chasm of difference, but in the claustrophobic space of similarity. Alert to this, Moll uses it to needle Sir Alexander, asserting, "Methinks you should be proud of such a daughter, / As good a man as your son" (V.ii.152-3). Moll hits exactly the problem of her marriage to Sebastian: if she is "as good a man" as Sebastian, then her position in the marriage might not be that of wife, but that of husband. If, in turn, Sebastian is husbanded, then that raises the question of whether this would place him in the position of wife. Sir Alexander

articulates his contempt for such an arrangement, demanding, “If the wife go in breeches, the man must wear long coats like a fool” (II.ii.77-8). This garment-trading, which Sir Alexander finds ridiculous yet compulsory in such a situation, assumes a default hetero arrangement toward which desire tends. That is, for Sir Alexander, the prospect of desire between two male-seeming figures must stabilize in the direction of declaring a gendered difference within itself. Sir Alexander’s (pointedly derisive) comment declares difference as a necessary condition for relationships of desire. The husband *must* wear “long coats” if the wife wears breeches, for difference accompanies and identifies desire. That is, Sir Alexander admits desire exclusively in terms of difference, of the hetero.

This assertion allows Sir Alexander to ignore a far worse threat: that it might happen that Moll and Sebastian are, as she says, equally “good men.” Such a scenario yields a marriage without a wife at all. The relationship between a knowable masculine figure and feminine figure allows each entity in the relationship to stabilize around a difference in gender norms. The prospect of a male wife and female husband is ridiculous, for it is by no means Butler’s “idealized heterosexual bond,” but it at least, maintains the stability of difference. More threatening than even the possibility of Sebastian placed in a feminine role, the marriage of two male figures introduces sameness to the realm of desire. The reflection of the masculine across the relationship of desire calls up the same consequences for identity that occur as a result of Ferdinand’s identification with and desire for his twin sister.

The difference Moll insists on, refusing to allow the connection between signifier and signified, gender and sex, name and being to settle, as we have noted, does not become threatening for *The Roaring Girl* until the point at which Moll becomes the object of desire. In fact, let's look again at the passage I read through the lens of Judith Butler above, in which Sebastian outlines his plan to deceive his father. The intervening lines make Sebastian's plot in its entirety look like this:

...all that affection
 I owe to thee, on her in counterfeit passion
 I spend to mad my father: he believes
 I doat upon this roaring girl, and grieves
 As it becomes a father for a son
 That could be so bewitched: yet I'll go on
 This crooked way, sigh still for her, feign dreams
 In which I'll talk only of her: these streams shall,
 I hope, force my father to consent
 That here I anchor, rather than be rent
 Upon a rock so dangerous. Art thou pleased,
 Because thou seest we are waylaid, that I take
 A path that's safe, though it be far about?

(I.i.100-12)

Sebastian's alertness to the aptness of his choice of instrument in the deception of his father—that is, Moll—is delivered to us in rhyming couplets. Sebastian's poetic repetition begins at the moment he starts to speak of Moll's part in his plot, and he falls back to blank verse as soon as his focus shifts to his love for Mary. That is, in speaking of Moll, Sebastian's language gestures toward twinning, each line of pentameter paired with one next to it, sharing the *same* ending syllable. In contrast, Sebastian's language regarding to Mary switches, taking on ending syllables that are *hetero* to one another. Thus, the plot itself is framed by sameness, its initial delivery occurring in twinned lines, revealing at the level of language the investment of Sebastian's plot in sameness.

Sebastian's plot entangles Moll in what Sedgwick calls the "play of desire and identification" (27), entangling her in identification with Sebastian's and even Sir Alexander's bodies as a husband and son. Sebastian's certainty that Moll will prove an unacceptable choice of mate to his father, "a rock so dangerous" that it poses a threat to his bodily and metaphorical wholeness (I.ii.110), is given to us within a poetic form that employs sameness to achieve its goal, just as Sebastian's own plot relies on the sameness Moll brings to the realm of desire to achieve its goal.

The problem of sameness can be understood, Webster's requisite gruesomeness included, by the figure in the final panel of Randall Munroe's "Two Mirrors," the 555th installment of the webcomic *xkcd*. In both plays, the consequences of the realization of homo desire are figured in terms of multiplication. "Two Mirrors" depicts a woman hanging a mirror on the wall

opposite the medicine cabinet above her bathroom sink. The woman positions herself between the two reflective surfaces and recites, “Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary,” and crouches, as the fabled ghost reflection of Mary I is bounced back and forth between the infinite reflections of the two mirrors with a threatening, frustrated “RAAGHHHHH.” The confusion in the final panel of the comic, a confusion of overlapping, indistinguishable bodies, is the mark of the threat of homo desire we see in *Duchess* and *Roaring Girl*.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

The Bloody Mary of Munroe’s comic is obviously meant to tickle rather than frighten, since the predicament of an infamous childhood legend frustrated by the very means by which she enacts her terrorizing incites a sort of vengeful amusement in the generation of readers who once found her image so frightening. The image is funny, however, because of the terror associated with the reflection of Bloody Mary in the first place. The frightening moment associated with the Bloody Mary myth in middle school lore is the sight of “Bloody Mary” staring back at you in place of your own reflection, and the moment of relief comes upon realizing, of course, that the “image” *is* in fact one’s own reflection. This frightened fantasy of mistaking one’s own reflection is very relevant to both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Roaring Girl*, in which the

consequences of homo desire appear much like that fate made comical in “Two Mirrors”: to be trapped in an endless stream of reflection and self-multiplication between the subject and object of desire, in which one body cannot be distinguished from another, and the boundaries of self become unreadable and irreparably confused. The endless multiplication of Bloody Mary occurs in the comic because of the failure of a solid self, distinguishable from (that is, hetero to) Bloody Mary, to insert itself into the scene and stop the overflow of reflections.

A version of this occurs in *The Duchess of Malfi* in Ferdinand’s increasingly fantastic and frenetic outbursts. Upon discovering his sister’s marriage has taken place without his approval, Ferdinand exclaims, “My imagination will carry me / To see her in the shameful act of sin” (II.v.40-1). Ferdinand’s fantasies of the married couple’s sexual intercourse are startling in their vividness, as he envisions his sister

...haply with some strong-thighed bargeman,
Or one o’ th’wood-yard that can quoit the sledge
Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coal up to her privy lodgings.

(II.v.42)

I have discussed the way in which Ferdinand’s sexualization of his sister always occurs in terms of his identification with her. In this passage, this sexualization and identification become so pronounced that Ferdinand imagines

himself into the scene of her marriage bed. Enraged by the “strong-thighed” body of this invading “bargeman,” as Ferdinand envisions his sister’s yet unknown lover, Ferdinand allows his hysterical imaginings to escalate to a point at which the vision of the consummation of his sister’s marriage seems physically real to him. Indeed, still further than envisioning a single, specific masculine entity penetrating the Duchess, Ferdinand offers several detailed versions of the imagined husband. Even as Ferdinand declares his disgust with the Duchess’s “luxurious” sexual desire, this unwarranted list of imagined husbands declares a fascination with his sister’s sexuality. Each fictive husband materializes in Ferdinand’s fantasy as an exaggerated masculine body, identified solely in terms of the capacity to accomplish gross feats of physical strength—to “quoit the sledge / Or toss the bar.” The strength of this “bargeman” and his fellow specters of penetrative power underscores an anxiety about their ability to *overpower*. Thus, Ferdinand is less concerned with sexual pleasure and much more focused on the strength of the “bargeman” to overcome the body he is penetrating. These male bodies materialize in front of Ferdinand to violate, rather than to give pleasure.

Indeed, Ferdinand’s hysteria at this foreign male body is so pronounced, it becomes unclear both to the reader and to Ferdinand whether it is the Duchess being violated or Ferdinand himself being violated. In this fantasy, Ferdinand is no longer able to distinguish between himself and his sister, himself and the object of his desire. The effect, as “Two Mirrors” illustrates, is an uncontrollable overlap and reflection between the bodies of the Duchess and Ferdinand. In the

space of homo desire, the subject of desire is unable to establish itself as a stable entity, distinct from the object of desire.

The subject of hetero desire identifies differences between itself and the object of desire, creating formulations such as the proverbial “man and wife” (Webster II.i.191), in which the subject and object occupy mutually exclusive roles. For Ferdinand, the sameness of his body and the Duchess’s body makes this impossible. The incestuous desire Ferdinand harbors for his sister results in his eventual descent to insanity, a state in which his mind perforates the boundary between Ferdinand and Duchess.

This speech marks a turning point at which Ferdinand makes explicit the eroticism bound up in his outrage at the Duchess’ marriage, which he previously refused to speak of with Bosola. Even the Cardinal remarks upon this tipping point between sanity and its opposite, warily commenting that Ferdinand “fl[ies] beyond [his] reason” and exiting the scene soon after (II.v.47). Ferdinand’s speech may be rightly called an ejaculation, both in the sense of it being a sudden outpouring of speech and in a metaphorical sense of biological ejaculation. This parade of imagined husbands to the Duchess is the point at which Ferdinand has lost control of his words; the desire that he was previously able to contain in the realm of unspokenness has now overflowed his lips. Like Ferdinand’s homo desire, Bloody Mary in Munroe’s comic is locked in the realm of nonexistence until the recitation of her name allows her to spill into the scene. Upon her naming, she springs from the realm of nonexistence to invade the

space of the bathroom. Like Ferdinand's incestuous desire, Bloody Mary does not become a threat until her name is spoken.

This overflow is the ejaculation of Ferdinand's catastrophic homo desire; Ferdinand's ejaculation brings his desire to the realm of the public, draws it out of the realm of the unspoken in which he previously tried to contain it. The consummation of homo desire occurs, not in literal terms, but in the register of metaphor, and fittingly, its consequences begin to resonate at the level of language, in the failure of Ferdinand's identification of himself as a self. Indeed, this "consummation" may not be rightly termed a "consummation" at all. Ferdinand's articulation of his incestuous desire is brought about by a mere fantasy of the Duchess having sex. Perhaps it is more accurate to call this turning point a masturbatory ejaculation, as it is precipitated by nothing (and no one) else beyond Ferdinand's own doing. This ejaculation is the moment at which Ferdinand's incestuous desire spills from its containment in the realm of unspoken and the point at which it becomes a real threat to the stability of his own identity.

Thus, the incestuous sexualization of his sister's body accompanies Ferdinand's descent to madness. The multiplication of uncertainty and instability that occurs as a result of Ferdinand's desire appears in the text much like Bloody Mary in the final panel of "Two Mirrors." In the comic, the various reflections of Bloody Mary overlap, becoming confused and indistinguishable. The uncertainty of identity Ferdinand experiences in this scene is a direct reaction to inappropriate desire. The crisis of identity that accompanies the metaphorical

masturbatory ejaculation of homo desire revolves around his identification with the object of his desire, his twin sister. Like Bloody Mary, Ferdinand's homo desire becomes real upon being articulated. This confusion grows worse and worse from the moment of Ferdinand's outburst.

Eventually, identity becomes such a befuddled space that Ferdinand claims to be a wolf, "only the difference / [Is], a wolf's skin [is] hairy on the outside, / His on the inside" (V.ii.16-8). Ferdinand, first unable to keep his own identity distinct from his sister's, finally loses all sense of himself as male and even as human. Finally, in Act V, he perceives himself as an inverted wolf, his "fur" on the inside of his skin rather than the outside. He comes completely unhooked from the grounds on which identity is mapped, his irrational behavior becoming violent and exaggerated. The violence associated with Ferdinand's madness emphasizes the gruesomeness of homo desire. In this text, homo desire is, as Sir Alexander calls Sebastian's desire for Moll, a "disease" (I.ii.150), an infection of the fabric of identity, which begets more inappropriate desires and unstable identities, each increasingly difficult to control.

Thus, *The Duchess of Malfi* presents the consequences of the ejaculation of homo desire—the chaos of identity among the Duchess, Ferdinand, and Antonio, in which Ferdinand cannot distinguish whether the Duchess is his sister or the object of his desire, or whether the object of his desire is the Duchess or in fact Antonio. This is the threat that Sebastian invokes as he prods Sir Alexander's fears, declaring, "I know that man / Ne'er truly loves—if he gainsay't he lies— / That winks and marries with his father's eyes" (II.ii.15-7). He calls up

the specter of the chaos and collapse of identity that results from the Duchess' similar refusal to "wink and marry" with her brother's eyes in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Sebastian, however, only does this so that he can achieve his desire (that is, Mary) without actually fomenting the same collapse that ends *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Most important to Sir Alexander in Sir Guy's vision of a "crew of roaring sons and daughters" is the fact that Sir Alexander himself is defined in terms of his relationship to these copies of Moll—that is, as their "grandfather." Sir Alexander's identity is as entangled in the marriage of his son as Sebastian's own, and so Ferdinand's fate hovers close as Sebastian performs his fabricated affections for, and intent to marry, Moll.

The Tragedy of a Duchess, The Comedy of a Girl

The catastrophic dissolution of self that Sebastian calls upon to threaten his father is the most salient mark that differentiates the tragedy of *The Duchess of Malfi* from the comedy of *The Roaring Girl*. The plot of *The Duchess of Malfi* may be rightly characterized as a "confusion of desires," for it is the hetero union of the Duchess and Antonio that is relegated to the domain of the hidden, a space of shame and abjection, while Ferdinand's homo desire occupies the foreground, the space of the public, in the form of his decree that the Duchess not remarry and then his increasingly loud madness. Ferdinand's mistaken identification of himself ripples throughout the entire play, as the boundaries of Ferdinand's self dissolve and this dissolution of self destabilizes identity so

profoundly that mistaken identity becomes the primary cause of death in the final act. Shock waves from the central relationship of homo desire destabilize identity across the cast. The play finishes in a chaos of mistaken identity and failed signification. Bosola kills Antonio, mistaking him for Ferdinand. The Cardinal is killed because his attendants, having been commanded not to enter the room, take the Cardinal's screams to be a test of their loyalty to his command. Finally, in a great scuffle, Ferdinand rushes in, and in response to the Cardinal's plea of, "Help me; I am your brother," exclaims, "The devil!", fatally wounding both the Cardinal and Bosola, all the while failing to recognize either of them (V.v.49-50).

The problem with homo desire, then, is not just that it destabilizes the identity of subject against object, but that this crisis of identification multiplies endlessly, wreaking claustrophobic chaos in its wake. The imbalance of hetero desire marked inappropriate and homo desire made public affects the entire play, as the instability of identity bound up in Ferdinand's homo desire multiplies endlessly, destabilizing identity throughout all of Act V, fomenting the bloody end.

In contrast to the spectacularly violent ending to Webster's tragedy, *The Roaring Girl* enacts a sort of containment on the threat of homo desire, which enables its comedy. Indeed, by the logic of homo desire in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Moll becomes a threat when she is brought into the realm of desire, for it is in that realm that the instability of her own identity may infect that of others, a spillage that cannot be contained. Indeed, *The Roaring Girl* ends by returning to where it began, with desire situated between Sebastian and Mary, neatly containing the movements toward chaos that Sebastian's plot puts into place

during the intervening acts. Moll returns to her position outside the realm of desire, his/her gender as undecided as ever, but deemed “a good wench” by Sir Alexander as soon as she is removed from a position in which she might disrupt identity in the same way that Ferdinand does in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

In *Wanton Words: Rhetoric and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama*, Madhavi Menon argues that Moll is sanitized by the play, ultimately “reinforcing, rather than questioning, virtuous and obedient femininity” (58). It is true that even Moll, the very site of disruption and unrecognizable behavior, when faced with the semblance of male-male desire between Sebastian and Mary disguised as a page, exclaims, “How strange this shows, one man to kiss another” (IV.i.45). Menon argues that Moll’s shock at such a display serves to sanitize her of the licentiousness and instability of which she is accused. However, I argue that it is Sebastian who enacts the more careful sanitization and thereby deflects the anxiety awakened by the kiss. “I’d kiss such men to choose, Moll,” he declares playfully (IV.i.46). Moll calls Mary a “man,” but Sebastian qualifies the label with the word “such.” Sebastian carefully suggests that *if* “such men” as Mary were truly men, he would be attracted to them. The statement, however, contains the implicit assertion that Mary is *not* an actual man, disavowing the possibility of homo desire in the kiss. The kiss is not between two men, Sebastian declares, but rather between a man and “a *woman’s* lip... in a doublet” (IV.i.47, my emphasis). Sebastian is careful to clarify that Mary may appear “like a page” but she is not to be confused as anything but a “woman,” an object hetero to his masculine self.

Indeed, it is Sebastian who finally reveals the homo desire haunting *The Roaring Girl* to have been only the *semblance* of actual desire, just as the young men on the fictive quadrangle I concocted earlier in this paper close every round of “Chicken or Go” with a gruff, “No homo.”

Thus, Sebastian calls upon the threat of destabilized identity that multiplies throughout the final acts of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Sebastian, by claiming to desire Moll, calls up the specter of violence and crisis born of homo desire as it occurs in *Duchess* only to banish it again, restoring appropriate hetero desire in his marriage to Mary Fitz-Allard. The workings of comedy in *The Roaring Girl* contain the threat of homo desire Sebastian calls upon, sanitizing desire by declaring all appearance of homo desire in the text to be feigned. Sebastian tends carefully the stable, hetero position of his desire in the end of the play, and Moll Cutpurse is properly contained by her removal from the self-multiplicative realm of homo desire. *The Duchess of Malfi*, however, becomes a tragedy because of Ferdinand’s inability to contain his homo desire.

Though *The Roaring Girl* ends on a note of heterosexual marriage, however, a much happier ending than *The Duchess of Malfi*’s frenzy of destruction, the containment of the threat of homo desire is much more complicated in the comedy than in the tragedy. Even when Moll is finally removed from the realm of desire and Sebastian reveals his homo desire to be feigned, the specter of homoness presumably banished from the scene, Moll persists as an entity that confuses the difference between masculine and feminine, husband and wife. Sebastian may have exposed the falseness of his

own desire for Moll, but the possibility of desiring Moll nonetheless remains. That is to say, Sebastian banishes the semblance of desire for Moll in the immediate realm of Act V, but one can easily imagine the trajectory of another desire for her, having only just witnessed Sebastian performing that very trajectory. In this way, neither Moll nor Sebastian is able to successfully sanitize and stabilize the threat of homo desire; they are merely able to defer it.

Reproduction in Homo Desire

The destabilizing consequences of homo desire that *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Roaring Girl* illustrate and defer, respectively, are almost always presented in both plays in opposition to the results and characteristics of hetero desire. The most salient example of this contrast is the hetero desire of the Duchess for Antonio. The Duchess's desire is repeatedly pointed to as the paragon of hetero desire. Initially, the Duchess expresses nervousness at the prospect of pursuing Antonio in secret, for she fears that to do so is to "[go] into a wilderness / Where [she] shall find nor path nor friendly clue / To be [her] guide" (I.iii.66-8). However, she later amends her statement, realizing that though she wooed Antonio and indeed married below her rank, in fact she "ha[s] not gone about in this to create / Any new world or custom" (III.ii.108-9). That is, though the Duchess's pursuit deviates from both of her brothers' decrees and the conventional arrangement of courtship, her desire nonetheless occupies the safely stable position of hetero desire. In fact, the one concern there may be about her relationship with Antonio is actually that they may be *too* different, but

this concern is dismissed at various points, by the Duchess, Antonio, and even Bosola. Bosola, slowly being convinced over the course of his espionage that he might be working for the wrong side (either in a moral sense or in the sense of being threatening to his personal well-being—these appear to be sporadically interchangeable for Bosola), gains the Duchess's trust by praising her marriage to Antonio and declaring,

...the neglected poets of your time,
 In honor of this trophy of a man,
 Raised by that curious engine, your white hand,
 Shall thank you, in your grave, for 't; and make that
 More reverend than all the cabinets
 Of living princes.

(III.ii.270-5).

Bosola may initially deliver his defense of the Duchess's marriage with his employment to Ferdinand in mind—that is, Bosola delivers this speech with the intent to convince the Duchess to flee to the shrine at Loreto, where the Cardinal may intercept her. Bosola's compliment, however, nonetheless rings true. Though the Duchess fears at first that she has entered a dangerous, uncharted "wilderness" by marrying outside her class, Bosola cites this difference between the Duchess and her object of desire as the quality that makes their union laudable. In fact, Bosola, intertwines the value of the Duchess's marriage with the

celebration of poets. To be praised in art is to be immortalized, as everyone from Shakespeare—“Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade, / When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st” (Norton 1929)—to Keats knows—“She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss / Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!” (Norton 1519). That is, to be written into poetry is to become marble, eternal—a state that is inexorably stable. The Duchess’s desire for Antonio is hetero, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of class, and it is the very extremity of their difference that Bosola cites as the reason for her utter stability.

The transformation of the Duchess’s sentiments—from being frightened at the prospect of wooing Antonio to declaring that doing so was to “create no new world or custom”—occurs alongside the increasing instability and visibility of Ferdinand’s homo desire. That is, the stability of hetero desire becomes more pronounced as the consequences of homo desire also become more pronounced. The play returns to the Duchess’s stability more and more frequently as Ferdinand is gradually undone by his homo desire, the contrast between the two siblings starkly contrasting the results of homo desire and hetero desire.

As a result of her markedly hetero desire, the Duchess remains remarkably stable in contrast to the chaos of identity blossoming around her. In fact, perhaps purely to emphasize the Duchess’s unmatched stability of identity, Antonio comments that women often make it a point to “keep worse-favored [that is, in looks] waiting women / To attend them, and cannot endure fair ones” (III.ii.44-5). He says this in order to inquire as to why the Duchess, unlike these

other women, prefers to have Cariola as a waiting woman, though her face, like the Duchess's, is "so well formed" (III.ii.41). The Duchess explains that other women choose "worse-favored" waiting women because the presence of a prettier face "would disgrace [their] face-making, and undo [them]" (III.ii.49-50). This explanation declares her own confidence in her own face's imperturbability to that "undoing," even placed side-by-side with Cariola, who is so similarly "well formed" as the Duchess.

The Duchess goes on, imagining she sees a gray hair growing from her head. "When I wax gray," she announces, "I shall have all the court / Powder their hair with arras (III.ii.57-8). So stable is the Duchess that to reflect her is not to destabilize her at all: the boundary of her self is made nonporous by the heteroness of her marriage to Antonio. Thus, there can be no confusion even as the members of her court take on her appearance. As the superlatively stable character, the Duchess stands to lose no sense of herself, no matter how many times she is presented with reflections of herself. In fact, her stability makes her an entity to be admired and imitated, as the members of her court would be doing if they were to emulate her by powdering her hair.

The Duchess, the one unwaveringly stable character, proclaims the imperturbability of her identity even as she faces death, stating simply, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.ii.125). The Duchess, however, is eliminated early in the play, a constant that must be destroyed by the machinations of identity unhooking around her. In fact, the Duchess's unwavering stability of identity and exaggeratedly *hetero* desire pronounce the contrast to Ferdinand's catastrophic

instability of identity and desire based in a relationship of sameness, as opposed to difference. This contrast allows us to see the wild and horrific consequences of Ferdinand's incestuous desire as consequences of the sameness in which his desire is rooted.

Antonio outlines the problem with a desire that does not engage the stabilizing force of the hetero, urging,

Oh, fie upon this single life! Forgo it.
 We read how Daphne, for her peevish flight,
 Became a fruitless bay tree; Syrinx turned
 To the pale empty reed; Anaxarete
 Was frozen into marble: whereas those
 Which married, or proved kind unto their friends,
 Were by a gracious influence trans-shaped
 Into the olive, pomegranate, mulberry,
 Became flowers, precious stones, or eminent stars.

(III.ii.22-9)

Antonio points out that in mythology, those who deny heterosexual union—Daphne, Syrinx, and Anaxerete—transform into empty, sterile things, “fruitless” and “frozen” by their refusal to desire heterosexually. By contrast, “those which married” achieve the “gracious” favor of whatever greater powers that be and are

transformed into objects that are fruitful or bursting with “precious” or “eminent” significance.

Thus, heterosexual union is aligned with vitality, with a productivity and lastingness that the “pale empty reed” and “fruitless bay tree” lack. Instead, there is something stunted in the fates of Daphne and company, those who “peevisly” flew from heterosexual desire. Daphne becomes a tree, which cannot bear fruit—that is, a symbol of strength and growth that cannot grow. Syrinx becomes a reed, seemingly living, but which wears the pallor and hollowness of death. Finally, Anaxarete becomes “cold marble,” neither majestic nor beautiful, but only remarked upon in terms of its barrenness and non-movement. There is an element to each transformed state that suggests a sense of not fulfilling what one *should*. That is, to become a tree or a reed seemingly should correspond to the growth and flourishing associated with flora, but instead appears barren and hollow. Anaxarete becomes a marble statue, a form of art, but is only remembered for her immobility, a lastingness that is not colored grandly as the “eminent stars” of heterosexual desirers, but is instead portrayed as a dead permanence.

Sir Alexander envisions his own fate like those of Daphne, Syrinx, and Anaxarete, as Sir Guy Fitz-Allard calls up the notion of reproduction between Sebastian and Moll to tease Sir Alexander. Pleased that Sir Alexander is being punished for rejecting Sir Guy’s own daughter as a match for Sebastian, Sir Guy jibes,

Give you joy, sir,
Of your son's gaskin-bride, you'll be a grandfather
shortly
To a fine crew of roaring sons and daughters,
'Twill help stock the suburbs.

(V.ii.21-5)

Sir Guy envisions a marriage between Sebastian and Moll will give rise to an entire “crew” of sons and daughters exactly like Moll, a multiplication of this roaring “rock so dangerous.” These little Molls, Sir Guy insists, will fill the brothels of the suburbs with the same licentiousness we see earlier in Sir Alexander’s criticism of Moll’s name. This productivity born of homo desire is positioned deliberately in the position of that which usually constitutes the most celebrated aspect of marriage: reproduction. The intrusion of homo desire renders this possibility of children frightening and grotesque. The “crew of roaring sons and daughters” will, unlike the offspring of a properly hetero union, simply clone Moll’s indeterminacy, her inappropriateness, and her homo desire.

Thus, we are given two versions of productivity. On the one hand, "Two Mirrors" offers an uncontrollable proliferation of reflections born of the failure of the crouched woman to insert herself into the scene—that is, a failure of a coherent self to assert itself as distinct from the phantasmatic Other, Bloody Mary what would it mean for the figure to insert herself? To assert her difference from Bloody Mary, or her sameness?. On the other hand, Antonio marks the

reproduction associated with heterosexual marriage as healthy, fruitful and sweet as mulberries and natural and majestic as stars. The productivity of Bloody Mary, of Ferdinand's incestuous desire for the Duchess, of Sebastian's homo desire for Moll, is not a productivity of *reproduction*; rather, it is a claustrophobic multiplication shown to be uncontrollable and grotesque.

Sameness at the Level of Signification

As we have seen, while Moll's behavior and dress expose the difference between signifier and signified by illustrating their arbitrariness, it is not that difference alone that makes her threatening to the other characters of *The Roaring Girl*. There is another thread of difference that runs through this system of gender, desire, and identification: the difference between masculine and feminine. This difference, of course, is crucial to the signification of gender. Difference is, in this light, a stabilizing device, for if masculine and feminine are said to be insurmountably different from one another, then there can be no confusion between them. In a similar way, we can understand Saussure's assertion that the terms "signifier" and "signified" "have the advantage of indicating the *opposition* that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts"—that is, the "sign" (67, my emphasis). To emphasize the separation of signifier and signified in his description of the linguistic sign, Saussure asserts that the two exist in "opposition" to one another. That is, in order to function as a sign, opposition must exist between the signifier and the signified. The system of signification, at a level so basic it seems almost absurd

to remark upon it, relies on a *difference* between the signifier and the signified, for if they were the same, one could certainly not be said to refer to the other. Such a confusion might seem impossible—after all, who with their wits about them could come anywhere near taking the notion of a physical tree to be “the same” as the sound of themselves uttering the word “tree”? This issue, however, becomes much more complicated when brought to the signification of gender and desire. The threat of sameness at the level of signification proves much more radically threatening and destabilizing in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Roaring Girl* than the anxiety of the difference between signifier and signified.

Homo desire dissolves the boundaries that allow individuals to identify themselves as selves. It is impossible for the subject of homo desire to distinguish itself from the object of homo desire, and consequently impossible for the subject to formulate the distinctions between subject and object that constitute the boundaries that define the self. At the level of signification, then, the sameness of homo desire is threatening because as individuals are caught in the endless multiplication and confusion of self we have seen is a consequence of homo desire, the multiplication of signifieds all meant to correspond to a single name—“Moll” or “Ferdinand”—strain the signifier of the name. In other words, as homo desire blurs the distinctions between categories that define identity—bodies, subject and object, male and female—signifiers are strained by the multiplication of the signifieds they are meant to represent.

The threat of this multiplication of signifieds is evident in *The Roaring Girl's* repeated emphasis on Moll as a site of disruption. The distinctions Moll

insists upon between name and being, gender and sex, signifier and signified, disrupt the easy conflation of gendered identity categories—male body, breeches, man, husband—on which the system of hetero desire relies, which, as I discuss earlier, renders her unintelligible to her society. Moll's indeterminacy, however, also illustrates the threat homo desire poses to the system of signification. Moll constantly occupies two opposing positions rather than any coherent singular identity, as, for example, although Moll's role in the play seems purely ancillary to Sebastian's central plot, she, not Sebastian, is the title character.

One might easily describe Moll's role in *The Roaring Girl* as a mere plot device, which is to say, her presence in the play assists the central relationship between Sebastian and Mary and serves little other purpose. The play introduces Moll as "a creature / So strange in quality, a whole city takes / Note of her name and person" (I.i.98-100). She is given to us without background information, without familial relations or even close friendships to ground her presence in the play—the one thing the play offers is the quality of remarkableness that accompanies her. Much as it seems her *raison d'être* is in fact merely to be the *épée* in Sebastian's metaphorical fencing match with his father (I.i.101), however, there is a way in which Moll unexpectedly occupies more of the text than any mere plot device should. Moll, even as (and arguably for the very reason that) she is perfectly suited to be the tool with which Sebastian aims "to mad [his] father," tends to overflow her position at the periphery as a mere device. From the start, she sparks the interest of "a whole city" within the text and is even the

title character of the play. Refusing to settle in either the position of protagonist or the position of plot device, but instead occupying one and then the other at various points in the play, Moll makes defining her role within the play as impossible as deciding her gender.

Sir Alexander remarks on yet another sense in which Moll occupies two seemingly contradictory positions, discomfited that such an unforgettable, singular character is called Moll, a very common woman's name. Seeking a way to establish, to stabilize, the connection of a name to the being it signifies, Sir Alexander initially protests Sebastian's feigned desire for Moll by coloring her name with its frequency in brothels. Sebastian, however, challenges, "He hates unworthily that by rote contemns / for the name neither saves, nor yet condemns" (II.ii.169-70). Instead of simply defending Moll's reputation, Sebastian calls up an element of Moll that is much more threatening than Sir Alexander's first argument, which expresses the fear that the name Moll signifies the sexual licentiousness and dishonor that accompanies the profession of prostitution. Sir Alexander's concern about Moll's common name insists that there is an inherent connection between being and name, seeking to find some solid correspondence of signifier to signified in the character of Moll, but the text refuses to allow signification any stability in the character of Moll.

Indeed, far more anxiogenic than the notion of Moll meaning prostitute is Sebastian's suggestion that the name "Moll" might *not* mean prostitute. That is, if the name Moll cannot be said to mean prostitute but only to *possibly* mean it, but then again perhaps mean its very opposite—that is, if it can do *either*—it might

also do *neither*. As Sebastian insists, the name “neither saves nor yet condemns.” He phrases this in the negative, insisting that either method of stabilizing the relationship of signifier and signified in Moll can only be said to fail. In other words, no stable relationship of signifier to signified can be identified in Moll; one can only enumerate the ways in which Moll’s signifiers signify *neither* one thing nor another. In Moll, name and being come unhooked from one another: the name doesn’t necessarily mean any one thing at all about the being to which it refers.

Sir Alexander’s ire rises at the question of Moll’s name, not because it may be said to mean any *particular* thing, but for the very reason that for Moll, the signifier of the name takes on any number of mutually exclusive meanings and therefore refuses to have any particular meaning at all. Moll is a “fit instrument” for a central plot that does not directly concern her and yet also the title character of the play (II.ii.197); she is both a licentious female body and a “monster with two trinkets,” or testicles (II.ii.76-7). For every signified to which the name Moll is said to correspond, there is a moment at which that name is said to signify something that is mutually exclusive of the first signified.

Indeed, Moll is a “wench... [who] strays so from her kind / *Nature* repents she made her,” though she is also “a *mermaid* [who] has tolled [Sebastian] to shipwreck” (I.ii.214-5, my emphases). Indeed, Moll is “so much flesh and so much nimbleness put together,” Goshawk can hardly believe his eyes (II.i.189-90). Both natural and unnatural within the same breath, fleshy and nimble in the span of a single line, the signifier “Moll,” corresponds also to the contradiction of

every signified it claims to represent. As the signifier is made to correspond to more and more multiple and even contradictory things, these signifieds begin to cancel one another out. At some point, the signifier may only be said to refer to itself: Moll = Moll.

In this way, while the *difference* between gender and sex, signifier and signified, may make Moll a “creature so strange in quality,” we can see that the prospect of arriving at an *identity* between signifier and signified is the threat that fuels the anxieties about desire in both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Roaring Girl*. This identity—this sameness—is more radically threatening than the *difference* at which we arrived in the standard post-structuralist reading I briefly gave of Moll Cutpurse, for this relationship of signifier to signified *has* no signified. Thus, the sign is no longer a sign; the system of signification collapses. This is the threat that Sebastian calls up and then dispels in order to frighten his father—the threat of sameness, the resulting multiplication and dissolution of the signified, and the failure of signification.

Indeed, this failure of signification is evident in the final act of *The Duchess of Malfi*, as signifiers cease to be correctly read by virtually every character in the play. Ferdinand, the locus of this burgeoning instability, is hit hardest, and becomes the nearest representative for the actual identity of “signifier = signifier” in the text. Ferdinand’s dissolution of identity is diagnosed as “lycanthropy,” but in fact his symptoms are not limited to merely the identification of himself as a wolf. In fact, Ferdinand’s actual ailment seems to be the indiscriminate identification of himself as any number of things, from his own

sister to an inverted wolf to finally a soldier on a battlefield in the death scene in which he kills both Bosola and his own brother, the Cardinal (V.v.46-50). As the homo desire for his sister punctures again and again the boundaries of identity that constitute Ferdinand as a discrete self, Ferdinand loses all sense of himself as any particular self. The resulting problem, shown in Ferdinand's insanity, is the same problem Sir Alexander expresses concerning Moll's name in *The Roaring Girl*. At this point, I may finally answer the inquiry with which I began: "Why is the name of Moll so fatal, sir?" (II.ii.151). The names of Moll and Ferdinand become "fatal" as Moll and Ferdinand become, respectively, the object and subject (a distinction that, as we have seen, quickly becomes irreparably confused) of homo desire. In the tragedy, homo desire multiplies and confuses the signified self to which the name "Ferdinand" is meant to correspond, infecting the entire text with problems and failures of signification, precipitating the rapid fire, fatal misinterpretations of signifiers in the final act. The specter of this chaos fuels *The Roaring Girl*, looming in Sebastian's threat to marry Moll. Comedic convention in *The Roaring Girl* contains the threat of homo desire, however, well enough to maintain successful signification, though as I discuss above, this containment is more accurately described as the successful deferral of the threat, rather than the erasure of it.

Conclusion

Though Ferdinand's descent to madness gestures toward the dissolution of the signified and the resultant identity "signifier = signifier," this complete and

and utter sameness between signifier and signified is, in practice, impossible. Its impossibility, however, does not stop it from looming as the central threat of *The Roaring Girl* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Sir Alexander himself dismisses the difference between signifiers of gender and their signified sex, which, our Butlerian reading of *The Roaring Girl* took to constitute the central anxiety of the play. In fact, Sir Alexander's relief is evident upon being convinced that his son's intention is not, after all, to marry Moll. Sir Alexander declares fondly, "Whate'er she be, she has my blessing with her" (V.ii.107). Thus, by his own admission, Sir Alexander is not interested in the body signified by the nonspecific signifier "she." Indeed, "*whate'er*" she is—that is, "*whate'er*" body is signified by the gender signifiers he reads on this bride—he finds her less threatening than (and therefore preferable to) Moll. The sole condition on which his blessing depends is that this bride's legibility as a "*she*" be sufficiently hetero to Sebastian's "*he*." Sir Alexander is unconcerned about the possibility of difference between the signifiers of femininity and the signified body or self they represent; he is solely concerned with the signifier of female gender alone, which secures the status of Sebastian's desire as hetero. Neither Sir Alexander nor I want to make the claim that the unintelligibility born of the disruption between gender and sex is utterly innocuous. However, Sir Alexander's declaration makes the case that in fact the collapse of signification itself, which homo desire brings about, is a far more drastic threat than the complications of signification that arise in a reading of this play that takes difference (between signifier and signified) to be the site of anxiety in these plays.

The argument of post-structuralist readings of anxiety in *The Roaring Girl* situate the root of Moll's threat to Sir Alexander in her insistence on the difference between signifiers of gender and signified biological sex. This argument claims that the resultant unintelligibility of a character like Moll, who confuses the structure of heterosexual desire is such a threat to identity that the comedic text works to dispel that threat by sanitizing Moll and containing her insistence on difference. However, this argument misses part of the problem of Moll. While under the heteronormative, gender normative regime of her society, her difference may make her not "viable as a One," as Butler puts it, and in that sense "unintelligible" to her society, the *sameness* she brings to the realm of desire and identification threatens to make her *literally* unintelligible—that is to say, Moll's sameness threatens the very system of signification. The identification of the subject with the object of desire that is the consequence of homo desire, threatens the system of signification with the multiplication and implosion of signifieds. Thus, the system of desire and identification is much more fundamentally threatened by sameness than by difference, and this fundamental change in our approach to reading Moll Cutpurse enables us to understand the threat of destabilization much more clearly. The threat of difference, as I defined it in my Butlerian reading of *The Roaring Girl*, is the threat of being or becoming unintelligible to an unavoidable, compulsory system by which society defines its subjects, whereas the threat of sameness—of homo desire—is to become truly unintelligible—that is, not to have a functioning system of signification at all.

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