Different Not Dirty Essay, Research Paper

The issue of women s cross-dressing during the Renaissance was an issue of tradition and norms. Many assumptions were made about a person of this era who did not follow the standard way of life. Society did not accept people who were different and automatically assumed they were immoral people. This is the case for a character named Moll in The Roaring Girl by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton. Moll crossed the established boundaries of class and gender, closing the gaps between the division. Moll s disruption of social order was a problem for the ruling patriarchy. Because Moll crossed the lines drawn, previously permanent divisions that were keeping people in their places were being blurred. A woman s dressing in a masculine outfit removes the distinction of gender. Moll, who was socializing with both thieves and lords, was also blurring the rules for social class. The social order in The Roaring Girl depended on men being important, wise, and strong and women being subservient and needy. Moll violated this order. Crossing these lines was dangerous because the gender division of labor was dependent on such a relationship between the sexes. Moll was strong and independent. Unlike the majority of women during this time period, she did not feel as though she needed a man in order to survive. In The Roaring Girl several people don disguises. Mary Fitzallard , who wants to see Sebastian, the man she wants to marry, appears as a sempster in order to get close to him. She also disguises herself as a page in Moll s service, to have opportunities of meeting him. Sebastian, with his mask of trickery, fools his father into believing that he will marry Moll. He says, There s a wench called Moll, Mad Moll or Merry Moll; a creature so strange in quality, a whole city takes note of her name and person. All that affection I owe to thee, on her in counterfeit passion I spend, to mad my father. Sebastian knew that his father would upset over his love for Moll. He used Moll as a mask to cover his true love, Mary. Trapdoor wears the disguise of servant for both Moll and Sir Alexander. Finally Moll, a woman sure of herself and not afraid to break the social barriers, is courageous and more often than not, misunderstood. Many characters in this play were wearing masks and Moll was not one of them. She had less of a mask than any other character, she was true to herself. Moll wore men s clothes. This transgressive practice sparked many debates as members of society connected the changing of one s clothing with the desire to change one s social status. To transgress this social boundary was to encroach upon the advantages of the privileged sex. The state regulated the dress code in urban setting in early modern England to keep people in their proper social place. To violate this was a sin against the social order. Accordingly, the practice is often reflected in the drama of the times. Various Renaissance plays depict characters who disguise themselves in the garb of the opposite sex in order to achieve a desired goal of deceit or crime, although occasionally a disguise is used by good characters to escape persecution. This was not the case with Moll, she was not running or hiding from anybody, she was just being herself. She was treated unfairly because of the clothes she wore. She is not cross-dressing as a means to find or lure a man, or escape from a crime or persecution; she is doing so to signal her freedom from the traditional position of a woman. Society felt anxiety in this time period over not just woman s changing social status but also over the question of sexual desire and who is allowed to have it and for whom one is allowed to have it. The men do not want to lose their edge over the women. The men of this time period wanted women to remain passive and in the house. Wearing pants was just the start of new freedom to come, and the men did not want to see that happen. So instead, they shunned Moll and made her a social outcast. They didn t want anybody to agree with her and her ways. According to them, she had too much freedom for a woman.

Many people in the play believe that the reason a woman would wear men s clothing was most likely to practice unconventional, loose sexual behavior, which would pose a threat to the stability of society. Sir Alexander made a direct link between cross-dressing and prostitution. In Act I he says the following about Moll, A scurvy woman, On whom the passionate old man swore he doated; A creature, saith he, 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. She s a varlet. He assumed Moll to be a prostitute, a bad person, someone who had no standing in their society and all on the basis of her attire. Contrary to Sir Alexander s belief, Moll is not cross-dressing as a form of prostitution, but to signal her freedom from the traditional positions assigned a woman in her culture. No one gives Moll the benefit of the doubt. In the following passage Sir Alexander is talking about Moll once again, More whores of that name than of any ten other. So, Sir Alexander is saying that because she was named Moll her chances of being a prostitute doubled because a lot of women named Moll are prostitutes, more than any other name. The majority of the people in The Roaring Girl assume that since Moll dresses in men s clothing, she must be a prostitute. In all truth she is less of a prostitute than the other women in town, including the married ones who flirt with other men. Dekker and Middleton wrote this play with a clear purpose of showing society the roles they play. They let the readers see Moll as a good person at heart who would risk herself and reputation for the true love of Sebastian and Mary. They showed how she was more sinned against than sinning herself. She knew that Sir Alexander would want to get rid of her somehow, in order to save his son from her, but she still agrees to help Sebastian and Mary. Sir Alexander hired Trapdoor to play thou the subtle spider; weave fine nets to snare her very life Twist thou but cords to catch her; I ll find a law to hang her up. Together Sir Alexander and Trapdoor try to trap her by putting out a watch, a chain, a ruff-band, and other trinkets in the hope of tempting Moll to steal. They do not succeed. She is too strong and virtuous to be tempted into crime. She is not a criminal. They only believe her to be because of her attire.Even though she was different and didn t conform to the social norms and expectations, the authors still made Moll s character the hero of the play. They wanted people to realize that a person should not be judged by his or her clothing. Dekker and Middleton showed that Moll was more true to herself and more virtuous than the people who dressed and acted normally. A person can look normal on the outside and not be normal at all.