

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Holly Marsden, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Winchester and Historic Royal Palaces, to talk about Mary Frith, aka Moll Cutpurse.

HM: Moll or Mary was one of the most notorious characters in Jacobean London. She was born Mary Frith, and her nicknames were Moll or Mal Cutpurse. And Moll's tall figure was known in the capital, and she dressed in masculine clothing, swaggering through the streets of the city. She also smoked tobacco and had a pipe everywhere with her. And she would also walk with a crew of figures who were made up of thieves and highwaymen, general deviant criminals as they were seen, and her giant mastiff, Wild Brat. "I please myself and care not else who loves me," her character claims in the play that was written about her, *The Roaring Girl*, by Middleton and Dekker, which I'll talk a bit more about later. So as well as just being a well-known, almost celebrity character, she was a thief, an entertainer and actress, a fence, a broker of stolen goods, and a celebrated cross-dresser.

AT: And queer history is one of your particular areas of interest, so how does she fit into that?

HM: There's no actual mentions of offenses relating to clothing in records of her arrests in 1600 and 1602. So Moll or Mary likely began dressing in masculine clothing in her 20s. And so some theories are that this was to enhance her act as an entertainer. She first became known for her comedic performances in taverns, and she would sing and dance and play her lute without a license, all while dressed in male clothing. And then she moved to her whole act into tobacco shops and playhouses.

The literary historian Gustav Ungerer suggested that her cross-dressing was a device of her criminality, so pickpockets often operated in busy places in London, I suppose like today, and some of those were playhouses. So Mary would, in her male attire, perform a song or a jig while smoking a pipe and would have been a real distraction while her accomplices took advantage of the crowd. And she was actually repeatedly arrested for cross-dressing and had to perform public penance at St Paul's Cross in 1612. She was also imprisoned in Newgate prison. So it's not known whether her cross-dressing was purely sartorial, allowing her to forge a different way of surviving as a woman in poor Jacobean London, or whether it was an expression of gender identity. But nevertheless, her punishments, notoriety, and cultural references highlight an early modern relationship between cross-dressing and deviance, kind of reflecting how otherness often equalled criminality.

So some scholars also argue that objects such as a pipe in a sword as wielded by Frith across the London streets acted almost as a male sexual apparatus. So if we think about Roman doctor Galen's Four Humors Theory, which was still followed in the 17th century, it said that gender was malleable, even after birth, if the humors were balanced correctly. So people who believe this theory could suggest that Frith smoking would dry the wet female attributes in her body, and smoking was seen as a way to change physical sex sometimes.

But purely the appearance of smoking suits her kind of subversive and rebellious character. It was heavily condemned by James I in a counterblast to tobacco of 1604 and was especially not condoned for women. I'm referring to Moll or Mary with she/her pronouns in accordance with

sources relating to her life, including an alleged autobiography. But we'll never know how Moll referenced herself.

AT: So even before Freud, it all comes back to men thinking that we have penis envy, is what I'm hearing.

HM: Essentially, yes.

AT: I'm always open to theories around people who may not have fit the gender binary that was sort of forced on them by the society of their time. But this is a really good example of someone for whom there were all of these other reasons, where wearing pants may have just been practical rather than actually a reflection of her gender identity. And I understand why someone would want to latch on to anyone who may be genderqueer because there is so little acknowledged representation of that in our histories. But when we look at, not only as you mentioned, she makes a great distraction wearing pants, but also as a criminal, there's that added element of mobility. It's a lot easier to move around in pants. And maybe she smoked because she liked smoking and she carried a sword because she's out here doing criminal things and she may need a weapon to defend herself. And I think a lot of it really comes down to we're ascribing masculinity to things that, I would argue that are not inherently masculine.

HM: I think especially because Moll was born probably in poverty, we're not quite sure of a lot of her early life. But she wasn't privileged with money or financial freedom, so had to kind of gain that freedom and navigate being a kind of poor woman in another way.

AT: It actually reminds me of another English criminal Mary, Mary Read, the pirate who in the 1700s, she was born the result of an extramarital affair. And because her mother's husband had been lost at sea, there was no way she could pass Mary off as her husband's. So she hid her pregnancy and then dressed Mary up in boys' clothes and presented her as her slightly older son who had recently died, to trick her mother-in-law into financially supporting the mother and "son" well into Mary's teen years. And so then as a teen, she worked as a foot boy and on a ship and then she joined the British military and she subsequently fell in love with one of their allied Flemish soldiers. And so she married him, they opened an inn in the Netherlands, but she returned to military service after he died. And she ended up on a ship that was then attacked by pirates and she accepted their offer to join the pirate crew. So that Mary clearly had no issue with living, presenting as a woman, when it suited her. But she had these other reasons that led her to cross-dress.

HM: Yeah, there were definitely so many practical reasons that, dressing in masculine clothing allowed freedoms and kind of allowed women to make a different life for themselves. But ultimately, we will never know how they reference themselves, their relationships with other people, their relationships to themselves. So it's really interesting to think about the meaning of clothing and kind of what it allows, what it doesn't allow, how all clothing is politically coded essentially.

AT: So one of the overlapping issues with women's history and queer history is the lack of documentation. So whether things were recorded in the first place, and then if they were, whether they were saved over the centuries. But with Moll, we have a different problem. We have a lot of documentation. It's just not clear how accurate any of it is.

HM: Yeah, so because Moll was such a notorious figure, people were absolutely enamored with this person, like completely, some people hated her, some people loved her. So because of that, we have so many accounts of her life. Her performances, her style of dress caught the attention of the public and lots of writers. One example is she allegedly rode between the boroughs of Charing Cross and Shoreditch in London, on a famous performing horse named Morocco, mentioned by Shakespeare in *Love's Labour's Lost*, whilst wearing her usual male attire, and this was apparently on a wager from the horse's owner, William Banks. And it was also said that she carried with her a banner and trumpet to create more of a spectacle of the whole scenario, and that she caused a riot in the streets after she was recognised. So she was incredibly well known, and in 1610, there was an entry into the Stationers' Register, which is a record of works approved for publication by the Stationers' Guild, of a, it's kind of unclear whether it's a play or a biography, but it's a book called *The Madde Prancks of Merry Moll of the Bankside, with her walks in Man's Apparel and to what Purpose* written by John Day. Unfortunately, there is no surviving copy of this, so the book might not have been printed, but the evidence is there that somebody was writing about her.

And then in 1611, as I mentioned, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's play *The Roaring Girl* was published, and it had already been performed before that. And it's quite the best known representation of Mary, and features her as a matchmaker, and it was performed at the Fortune Theatre in London, and it's thought that Mary herself may have performed an after piece by her own testimony, though. And according to court records, "she played upon her lute and sang a song as well as making some other immodest and lascivious speeches, whilst in man's apparel." She was arrested in 1611 and sent to Bridewell Prison for a few months, potentially a result of that. And then in October 1612, the performance of after pieces was banned throughout England, and the Fortune was specifically named as the site of lewd songs and dances, liable to attract cutpurses. So even during her lifetime, people were constantly writing about her. In the play as well, the inscription at the front says, "I must work for my living," and this suggests for a few's performance as yet another way to capitalise on and survive as a lower-class woman.

And her work as an actress links her to notorious London females or orange women, the most famous, perhaps being Charles II's mistress, Nell Gwynn, and places her among the earliest actresses, really. The scholars highlight that the introduction of women into the theatre invited the male gaze more so than that in everyday life from being on stage. But this is kind of thrown into question when the female subject is being intentionally subversive through wearing male clothing. I just find it so interesting because Frith was then an on-stage example of economic independence, which would have set an example for the very few lower-class women who did attend the theatre. But also in the Jacobean mindset, the working female also sometimes equated to sexuality, because as we said of fears that financially or socially independent women

would emasculate men. But this whole idea of the roaring women, so relates to the roaring boys who were kind of wild, violent men of the period who would run around London and be criminal and deviant. And Moll had kind of been framed as this kind of this person. And so it also hints at her ability to procure people of both sexes, but she actually personally claimed disinterest in kind of sex and relationships.

AT: And just to clarify, when we say procurement, that's likely referring to the rumors that she was also a madam, which again is iffy, it could have happened, it could have not happened, we don't know. But the latter part is particularly interesting to me as an asexual person, because it's a lot easier to prove that someone may have been queer in an allosexual way. So men interested in men, women interested in women, etc. But it's a lot harder to prove a negative. So anytime someone explicitly says, "I have no interest in people of any gender," that definitely makes my ears prick up and say, "oh, is that one of ours?"

HM: I do believe that she claimed to be completely disinterest, but then also kind of enveloped in the character that she played. She was very roguish and like, "oh, I could get anyone I wanted," but actually personally, she wasn't into it, is my understanding.

AT: And I think that's very much representative of this bigger issue that we're talking about is trying to unpick what was Mary Frith and what was Moll Cutpurse, that persona that she had created?

HM: Definitely. I mean, all of the literature surrounding Mary's life, this is all a character. They kind of all depict the same character, this very constructed version, this very constructed identity. And like I said, there is an alleged biography, but any writing from Mary herself probably doesn't exist today. So it's so hard to unpick who she was underneath the character of Moll Cutpurse that was kind of placed upon her and then she played on and then has been embedded in legacy ever since. Dramatists really enforced this character. So Nathan Fields wrote her as a guest character in his comedy, *Amends for Ladies*. And this was performed at the Black Price Theatre by the companies, the Prince Charles's Men and the Children of the Queen's Revels in 1611. So the character of Moll was even a guest character in another work. And it's also thought that Shakespeare himself alluded to her in *Twelfth Night* through referencing Moll's picture and the character of Maria, who introduces herself as Mary. And this was first performed at the court of James I at Hampton Court's Great Hall. And initially so much of the historical material relating to her life, there is so much there, but it is fragmented and prejudiced and very embellished. So especially after her death, she died in 1659 of dropsy and more biographies were written. And so she just became kind of this legend really.

AT: It's also worth pointing out that generally speaking, first-person accounts where it's letters or a diary where someone is telling their own story are considered sort of the best, like the strongest source. But again, in this situation, because she did lean heavily into this personal branding, this persona, I have to assume that if she had written even an autobiography that was meant for public consumption, she probably would have not stuck to the truth. She probably

would have embellished or even outright lied to make it as sellable as possible because she knew that sensationalism was what made her popular.

HM: There would always be some degree of self-censorship, especially knowing her own popularity, knowing that she was a celebrity of her day, that people would read it. And so she's throughout her life, really, from a very young age, she's constructed an identity, a public identity that perhaps wasn't completely in alignment with her own personal identity. But yeah, exactly. So anything she wrote would, I'm sure she would have been aware that people would read. And so there would always be this sense of self-construction. And yeah, in collaboration with her performances and with her dressing, she was constructing this whole version of herself.

AT: And so let's go back to her younger years. What can you tell us about her origin story?

HM: So her birthday is much contested. She was born in the 1580s. Some people say 1584 or five. Some people say 1589. But she was the daughter of a shoemaker. And from a lower-class background. Perhaps she would have had to end up in servitude in another life, had she not discovered the criminal underworld and acting and all of these other pursuits that she then took on. But she, from a very young age, she kind of decided to ignore convention and chose to run around with groups of roguish boys, swearing, watching fights, generally getting into trouble. And one of her biographers actually described her as "A Very Tomrig or Rumpscuttle, who delighted and sported in boys' play and pastime." So there was this idea from the outside that she was different, that she maybe didn't fit into the ideals of what a young girl should be at the time. And she actually first encountered the law at a fairly young age, so in 1600 and 1602, and she was prosecuted for stealing purses for the first time. And then after this story has been repeated over and over again, and the accounts of it vary quite dramatically. But apparently in 1609, after her parents had died, her remaining family, especially her uncle, were completely fed up with what to do with her, with what they considered unfeminine behavior. And took her to the docks in London with the promise of watching a wrestling match or some other match, some other fight, and actually tricked her onto a ship bound for New England in North America. And some accounts say that she escaped this. Once she realized that she'd been tricked, she escaped this by jumping overboard, once the ship had already left, and swimming back to shore. And then some say she actually negotiated kind of a safe passage back to shore with some money that she brought to bet on the match. And then pretty much all of them say she completely refused to speak to uncle again, and most of her family again. And after that, since breaking away from her family, she joined another group of pit pockets. And this is where her name allegedly began, Moll Cutpurse. And she was quite adept in this skill, which was also called nipping a bung, and it was where pickpockets would cut and steal purses directly from wealthy citizens and then disappearing. So she took this up, was very skilled at it. And she also took up fortune-telling. And because of all of these activities, she very quickly became quite famous. And yeah, this is when these publications start coming out like *The Roaring Girl* and like *The Madde Francks of Merry Moll*.

AT: And as we're talking about her relationships, she was married, but like... **technically**.

HM: In 1614, Frith married, someone called Lukenor Markham. But their marriage seems to be maybe more of convenience. He's not in her will. They never lived together as far as, as I can tell. And during one court case, Mary actually couldn't remember how long they'd been married. She lived completely independently. Perhaps using the status of being a married woman, which also helped her with the law, I could imagine. And she could defend and defeat legal suits against her under her maiden name by saying that she had a husband. But personally, according to a few accounts, she did claim to be entirely disinterested with sex and romance, like I said, so again, it kind of suggests that this was more of a marriage of convenience and not a marriage for romance. And she carried on running all of her many, many pursuits and businesses while allegedly married to Markham, including receiving and exchanging stolen goods. And she was also convicted at one point of being a sex worker, which was often related to dressing in masculine clothing. And then also, because of her knowing someone who owned a brothel, she was also accused of prostituting women as well, all while allegedly married.

AT: And we're also getting back into when you mentioned earlier that she supposedly claimed that she could pimp, essentially, both men and women.

HM: She never admitted to it, I think she defended herself and on all occasions that she was accused of doing that. I believe she allegedly realized that there was also a market for women to find lovers. And so, in her alleged brothel running, she invited guests who were women and men, which is quite interesting.

AT: This also raises the question of if she were supposedly doing this and bragging about it, why didn't it come up in any of her court cases? And I do have to wonder, if it's true, was there perhaps some interference by a powerful patron who kept it out of the courts because they didn't want their own dirty laundry getting aired?

HM: Yeah, exactly. I think also because it's mainly the biographies that say this. And I think also because of the general relationship at the time between dressing in male clothing and sex work, women who dressed in male clothing sometimes were automatically assumed as being involved. So that may be another reason why it was just kind of automatically assumed.

AT: It is always fascinating to see the different interpretations that people place on a woman who steps outside the sort of accepted gender roles based on that person's own biases and experiences and what they want to be true. But that's a whole other topic for a different conversation. But with Moll specifically, even the end of her life was, shall we say, more interesting than most people's?

HM: She actually was admitted to Bedlam Hospital, the hospital that incarcerated mentally unwell people, the very famous hospital. She was released and then she died in 1659 of dropsy. It's a general term to mean swelling, essentially, but it was a very common form of death during the time. It was said that Milton actually wrote her epitaph. This claim is only said in one account. But apparently the epitaph read, "Here lies, under this same marble, Dust, for Time's

last sieve to garble; Dust, to perplex a Sadducee, Whether it rise a He or She, Or two in one, a single pair, Nature's sport, and now her care." I don't think it's very likely that Milton actually wrote her epitaph, but it's quite fun to consider the prospect. And then another account says that she asked to be buried face down, which is quite interesting. But after her death, she was mourned by swathes of people on the London streets. And this kind of only increased over time. She was turned into a legend. And the play *The Roaring Girl* was put on quite a few times in the century after she died as well, which is quite interesting.

According to a lot of the biographies, as she became older, the section of her life where she was admitted to Bedlam was quite unknown. And why that might have happened is quite unknown. But towards the end of her life, it was said that she became kind of a more reserved person. And she engaged in other pursuits of passion, which included breeding bull mastiffs, which I find really interesting. And then also apparently she liked to redecorate her house. And in contrast, like stark contrast to her masculine outward appearance, apparently her house was decorated all in pink with lace and bows.

AT:: And what made you want to talk about Mary Frith today? Because when I see that you're with the Historic Royal Palaces, that's not a connection that I would necessarily think to make.

HM: So I initially came across a Moll during my undergrad actually. And I was looking at 17th century women who kind of carved their own identities and became quite notorious. And I just find her such a fascinating character because she's really got a life of great parallels. So she was a thief, a well-known criminal, arrested multiple times, mainly for cross-dressing. But she was also a huge royalist. So her feathered cap and pipe and sword really fit into this kind of cavalier status that she also assumed. And she was well known for being a great royalist, which I find really interesting. But whilst being this huge criminal.

She was also economically independent, which is an incredibly rare feat for a 17th century woman. She is captivating. I think she succeeded in creating, like playing upon her notoriety to create this incredible persona that is so captivating to audiences. So I was kind of drawn into her because of the way she fashioned her own identity. And I found that really interesting. But my PhD is with Historic Royal Palaces, as you said. And there's so many instances where she's in relation to the court. So as I said, some of the plays were performed at the court themselves. So the monarchs were certainly aware of this character. She was also imprisoned in Newgate, which was established by the crown. And she was a huge royalist. And sadly, she died before the restoration of the monarchy. So there's so many parts of her life that connect with different parts of history that I study and I just find her absolutely fascinating.

I don't know, it's maybe quite fun that she liked to drink. And sometimes she was thought of doing other things, but actually she was just really drunk, which is quite funny.

So another reason why I find Frith so interesting and kind of funny is she really had a sense of humor and there were often accounts of her playing practical jokes on other people or being the subject of a practical joke, which is quite funny, including this potential wager where she rode on a horse in male clothing across the streets of London. And she also really liked a drink. So she had to perform penance at St Paul's Cross in 1612. And a letter afterwards says that she was weeping and very remorseful and very kind of performatively really sad and said that she would

change her ways. And then the sincerity was very much doubted when it was found that she was maudlin drunk, having tiddled off three quarts of sack before she arrived. So just another facet to this very interesting character that maybe a way to get through penance was to have a little tiddle beforehand.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.