Feminine and Fashionable: Regendering the Iconologies of Mary Frith’s “Notorious Reputation”

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A scurrilous reputation based upon ten legal documents and six decades of gossip shapes our retrospective understanding of Mary Frith’s controversial life (1585–1659), a life narrated in literary and artistic fictional representations. Written during Frith’s life and referencing the “Moll Cutpurse” epithet, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s The Roaring Girl (1611) addresses Frith’s reputation as a pickpocket and promiscuous urban female in Cutpurse’s character but also suggests that the reputation is unfair. The comedic heroine eschews temptation, never takes anything that does not belong to her, and always proves morally upright. The playwrights also confront Frith’s cross-dressing, but in the play Moll’s appearance enables her friend Sebastian Wengrave’s legitimate marriage and just inheritance. The earliest visual representations of Frith—title-page woodcuts that accompany The Roaring Girl’s performance and publication—ignore the criminal and focus on her transvestite persona with its pipe, sword, and male breeches.

After The Roaring Girl, Frith’s notorious reputation resurfaces in A Parliament of Ladies (1647), a controversial pamphlet characterizing her as an overtly political activist; furthermore, its accompanying woodcut displays a weapon-wielding figure. The posthumously published criminal biography, The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith Commonly Called Mal Cutpurse. Exactly Collected and now Published for the Delight and Recreation of all Merry disposed Persons (1662), contains real facts such as her incarceration, her tobacco smoking, and her brokery business, but the content perpetuates more fiction than fact. Linked
to *The Life*, what has become known as her “Presidesse” portrait—an engraving with a verse that notes Frith’s underworld reputation and masculine appearance—echoes received opinion. A chapbook published in the same year, *The Womans Champion*,\(^1\) bases its narrative on several of *The Life*’s wild escapades and adds new accounts of Moll’s underworld associations, while its woodcut showing her as a highway robber embellishes a criminal reputation that may already have been exaggerated. Similarities do exist between the historical Frith’s life and her artistic representations, but no evidence has come to light either that she participated in creating the texts associated with her or that she appeared physically as represented in literary and visual media. In both literary and visual forms, information stated as fact merges with exaggerated, if artistic, creative license from her earliest representations; however, cross-dressing—with its concomitant issues of sexuality—creates Frith’s literary and artistic foreground.

Any attempt to examine Mary Frith must deal with a host of contradictions. Visual representations ignored or dismissed Frith’s femininity while promulgating her reputation for masculinity. And, although seventeenth-century viewers maintained a low level of expectation that print art exhibited a mimesis of reality,\(^2\) Frith’s artistic representations furthered a mannish notoriety. However, if we accept that *The Roaring Girl* and *The Parliament of Ladies* contain elements of the real, we must address the feminine Frith. If we endorse *The Life*’s links with the “Presidesse” portrait’s attempts to glorify Frith’s questionable business practices and cross-dressing, we must note her feminine, fashionable, merchant-class apparel. If we sanction *The Womans Champion* and its woodcut depicting Frith on horseback, we must confront the unlikelihood of Frith’s equestrian experience.

The many and varied captivating versions of Mary Frith originated with her first foray into public notoriety in 1600, which set the tone for representations with minimal accuracy but continual intrigue. Interest in her remains to this day, no doubt because lively fiction transforms mundane facts. My discussion will argue that the idea of Frith’s masculine appearance was greatly exaggerated: I will realign the remnants of her life to situate the lifelong transvestite associations in myth and to provide consistent evidence that Mary Frith was both feminine and fashionable. Far from being a social deviant, she was