

Early Modern Gender-Nonconformism as Precursor to Modern Non-Binary Gender: A Study of Mary Frith

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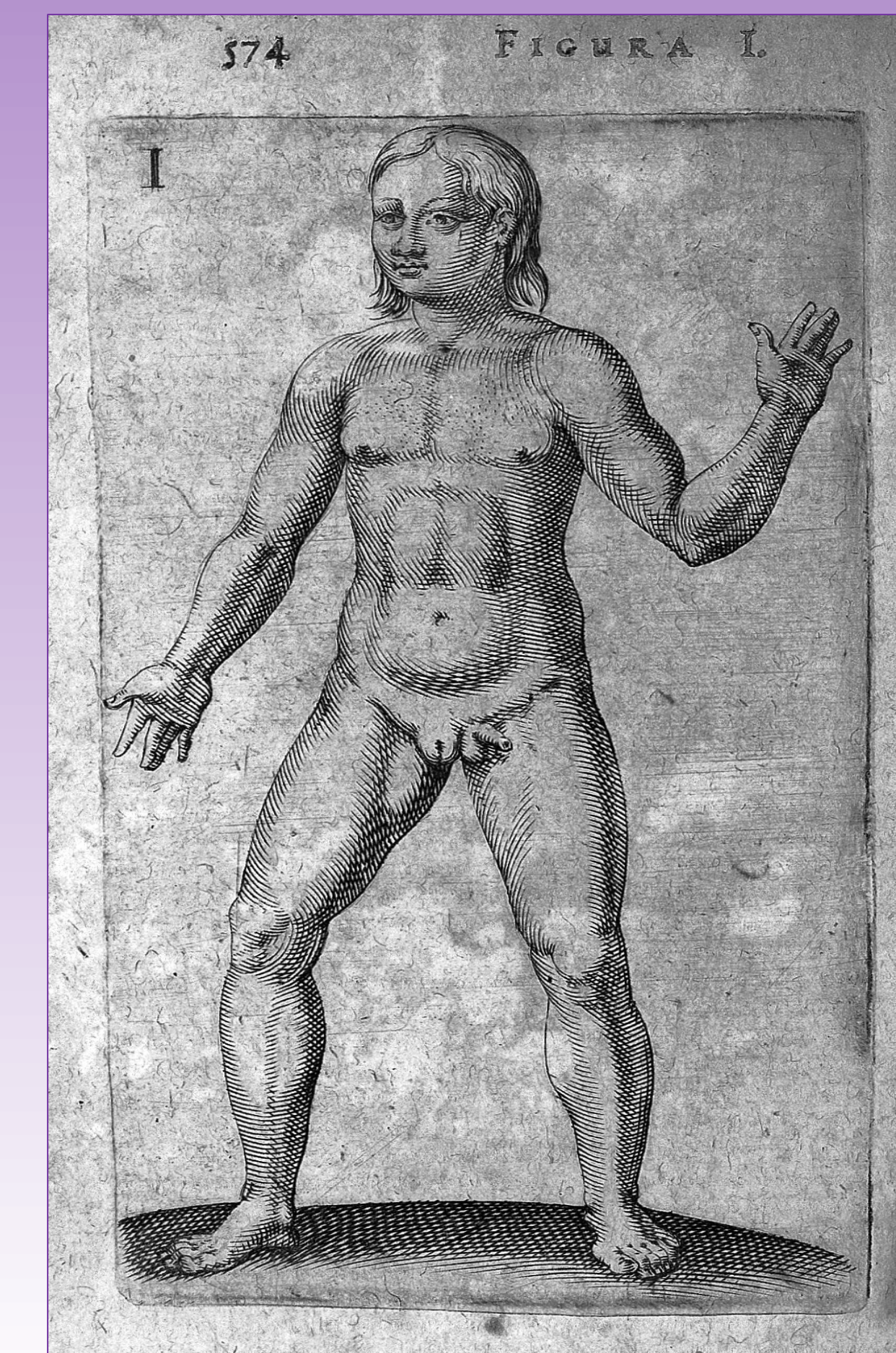
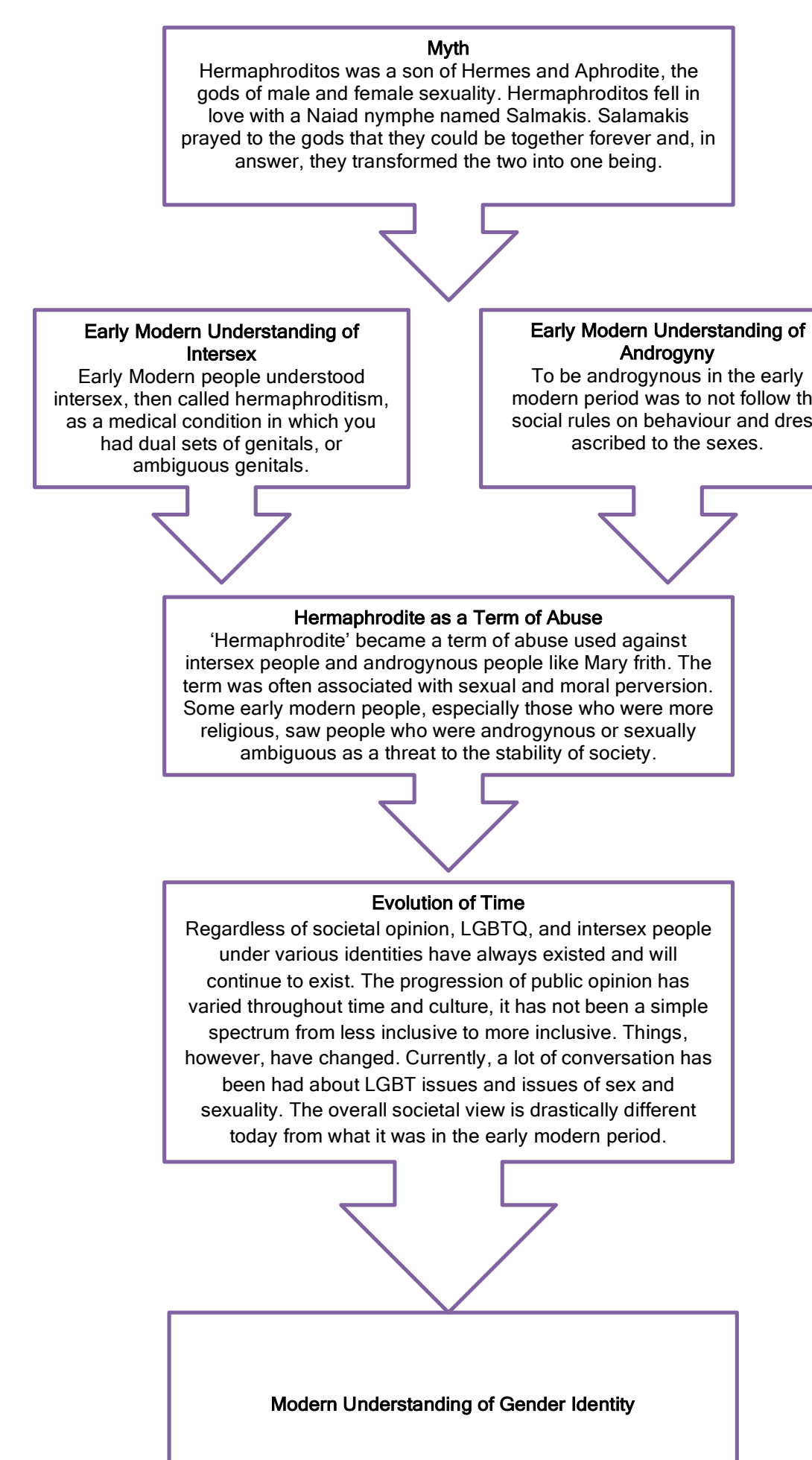


"Woodcut of Mary Frith smoking a pipe and holding a sword"
East End Women's Museum

As both a literary character and documented historical figure, Mary Frith, also known as Moll Cutpurse, expressed herself in behavior and dress as customary for men of her period, without attempting to conceal her biological (female) sex. The real Mary Frith, a well-known underworld figure in London throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, was born in the mid-1580s and died in 1659. There are many representations of Mary Frith throughout the early modern period and afterwards. She is only known through these varying representations and once in her own words in her will. Stories about Moll are full of fantastical rumours such as her apparent escape from a boat sending her to the Americas to be married, or her acting as a bawd for older women looking for young male partners. Descriptions of Moll in historical and fictional works vary from awe at her uniqueness to anger at her 'deformity'. Many works which describe persons like Moll support biological determinism, condemning them as monsters. When early moderns offer neutral or celebratory representations of gender-nonconforming peoples, they tend to operate on the assumption of 'manly' women's superiority to feminine women. The extent to which Moll is celebrated as non-binary, or genderless is explored in this research project. Is she represented as seeing herself as something other than a woman behaving unconventionally? To what extent do interpretations of Moll portray an early concept of non-binary gender? I read both primary and secondary sources to investigate how Moll fits into her larger culture in respect to the understanding of sex and gender in the early modern period.

The term hermaphrodite was often used to describe both people with non-cis-normative genitals, but also women who dressed in men's clothing and behaved in a male-coded way. The term hermaphrodite, now called intersex, comes from the Myth of Hermaphroditos. Transvestites or gender nonconforming people were associated with hermaphroditism, lewd sexuality, untameable behaviour, along with the belief that you desired physical changes. Even though the terms are now outdated and offensive, the words hermaphrodite and transvestite are important to the history of the LGBTQ and intersex communities, particularly for transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer people. As Ruth Gilbert shows in her work *Early Modern Hermaphrodites*, discussion of feminine men and masculine women brought to light that perhaps the gender binary was not as necessary or stable as it seems. Hermaphrodites challenged notions of what it meant to be male, female, and human (5). Mary lived, dressed, and acted in ways that were not only oppositional to the categorical rules society sets forth for the sexes, but ignored the very existence of those rules as a stable basis for society.

INTRODUCTION



"Hermaphrodite from De Hermaphroditum"
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On Androgyny

LGBT2QA terms like gender fluid or non binary didn't exist. There was the misconception that the practice of dressing and behaving in the opposite manner expected for your sex made you some kind of a hybrid as described in the *Anatomy of Abuses* by Philip Stubbes: "Wherefore these women may not improperly be called Hermaphroditii, that is monsters of both kinds, half women, half men." (Gilbert 119)

Early modern writers called women dressed as men, hermaphrodites to shame them and sexualize their behaviour by asserting that their dress and behaviour meant that they desired a very real physical and mental change:

"From the 1570s through the 1620s, not only polemicists, but also preachers and satirists viewed the transvestite female with concern, contempt, and horrified fascination. Castigating them as monsters, hermaphrodites, and amazons, their detractors condemned female transvestism as a transgression against the God-given natural order, associated it with sexual immorality, and claimed that, by wearing the clothes of another sex, women wanted to transform themselves into men." (Lucas 68)

The androgynous were seen by some as monstrous: "[They] from the top to the toe, are so disguised, that though they be in sexe Women, yet in atire they appeare to be men... who conterfaying the shape of either kind, are indeede neither.. But plain monsters." (Averell, *A Mervailous Combat of Contraries*).

Moll defies the ascribed boundaries of womanhood in displaying strength, bravery, wit, and many other gender-bending qualities. Moll forces the other characters to accept her differences in dress and action never asking for approval. The character Moll Cutpurse: "demand[ed] merely by her presence that people reconcile her apparent sexual contradictions, she arouses unspeakable anxieties in the established society of the play" (Rose 228).

Those who described Moll found it difficult to categorize her: A scurvy woman, On whom the passionate old man swore he doted: 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 then man, Man more than woman, and - which to none can hap - The Sun gives her two shadows to one shape, Nay more, let this strange thing, walk, stand or sit, No blazing star draws more eyes after it. (Sir Alexander in 1.2.126-135 of *The Roaring Girl*)

Moll's gender identity, and perhaps even her biological sex, were a subject of gossip in London: Some will not stick to say she's a man, and some, Both man and woman. (Mrs. Gallipot in 2.1.196-197 of *The Roaring Girl*)

Moll's view on marriage, sex, and her masculinity: Sir I am so poor to requite you, you must look for nothing but thanks of me, I have no humor to marry, I love to lie on both sides of the bed myself; and again on the other side, a wife you know ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll never go about it, I love you so well sir for your good will I'll be loath you should repent your bargain after, and therefore we'll never come together at first, I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman, marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden looses one head, and has a worse in its place. (Moll Cutpurse in 2.2.36-45 of *The Roaring Girl*)

DISCUSSION

On Moll Cutpurse

On Mary Frith

During her appearance at the Consistory Court Mary voluntarily confessed her exploits to the onlookers including the fact that she was of female sex: "[She had] long frequented all or most of the disorderly and licentious places in the city, as namely she hath usually in the habit of a man resorted to ail houses, taverns, tobacco shops, and also the playhouses, there to see plays and prizes, and namely being at a play about three quarters of a year since, at the Fortune, in man's apparel, and in her boots and with a sword by her side, she told the company there present that she thought many of them were of opinion that she was a man, but if any of them would come to her lodging they should find that she's a woman." (Panek 147)

On Mary's duality: "On the one hand her outside (her clothes) were masculine, but her essence (her body) was feminine; on the other hand, her outside (her body) was feminine but her essence (her sense of self) was masculine" (Gilbert, 96).

CONCLUSION

It is not completely clear whether Moll would have self identified as non-binary or gender-fluid. Her androgyny, however, was very important to the course of her many representations and to the power and influence her stories had over her period. Her existence as a strong androgynous figure opened up the opportunity for the conversations that drive change in society's views on gender expression. Early modern people may have not had the vocabulary to express it, but people like Moll were examples of a third option in a dichotomous society. Present day, with more and more people self identifying as LGBT, the world slowly becomes more aware and accepting. Progress is not always forward moving; patriarchal societies like that of Canada thrive on the binary and many people identify within it so strongly that it is not easy to change minds: "We have not left behind the ambivalence surrounding sexual indeterminacy.. There is no such thing as a happy limbo of non-identity. Sex matters" (Gilbert 6). Moll Frith embodies notions of gender nonconformism which are very relevant in the current political climate.



"Mary Frith",
Wikimedia Commons

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