



# Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet

## Episode Guide

### Season 1, Episode 4

*Convent of Pleasure: The Queerness of Closet Dramas*

Host: Kara Hankard and Madison Rudolph

Special Guests: Katelyn Spurgin, Sophia Beratta, Johnny Williams III

NOTE: This resource was created for *Writ in the Margins* by students in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University as a final project for graduate students in Prof. Molly E. Seremet's REN670: Dramaturgy class. All recordings and accompanying materials are available for use for educational and entertainment purposes. Please do not duplicate or distribute these materials without permission, however. All opinions stated in episodes are those of the hosts and special guests and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the institutions presenters represent.

## Episode Resources

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

Anderson, Mark. "Defining Society: The Function of Character Names in Ben Jonson's Early Comedies," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 8, Article 19, 1981. <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol8/iss1/19>

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 2006.

Guy-Bray, Stephen. *Shakespeare and Queer Representation*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021.

Kemp, Sawyer. "Shakespeare in Transition: Pedagogies of Transgender Justice and Performance." *Teaching Social Writ in the Margins*, 1.4 (*Convent of Pleasure: The Queerness of Closet Dramas*)

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*Justice Through Shakespeare: Why Renaissance Literature Matters Now*, edited by Hillary Eklund and Wendy Beth Hyman, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pgs. 36–45.

Pearson, Jacqueline. “The least certain of boundaries: gendered bodies and gendered spaces in Early Modern drama,” *SEDERI: Yearbook of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies*. Vol. 13, 2003, pgs. 163-182.

Perel, Esther. “Focus on Eroticism.” *Focus On*, <https://www.estherperel.com/focus-on-categories/eroticism>.

Tyson, Lois. “Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism.” *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2015.

### Useful Links and Digital Tools

**Digital Cavendish Project:** This incredible resource was founded by Dr. Shawn Moore and is currently maintained by Moore and co-directors Dr. Liza Blake and Dr. Jacob Tootalian. As noted on the project’s website, “the goal of the project is to highlight digital research, image archives, scholarly projects, and teaching materials/resources that focus on any aspect of the life and writings of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673).” Check it out at <http://digitalcavendish.org/>

**The Women Writers Project, “Visualizing Speakers in Drama by Gender”:** The Women Writers Project created an awesome visual representation of the classification of speakers in 17th-century drama. The wedges represent the acts of the play and are further divided by scene. The scenes are then divided according to the total percentage of speeches by male and female characters. Read more about this on the Women Writers Project website at <https://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/>

### Episode Transcript

Kara: Hello! And welcome to *Writ in the Margins*, a Mary Baldwin University Shakespeare & Performance Dramaturgical Podcast. We’re your hosts:

Madison: Madison Rudolph

Kara: And Kara Hankard.

Madison: And we’re here to share with you our dramaturgical curiosities in our episode of *Writ in the Margins*.

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Kara: *Writ in the Margins*, is a podcast created by Mary Baldwin University Shakespeare & Performance graduate students to share **other** early modern plays written by **other** playwrights –

Madison: (we don't **only** love Shakespeare)

Kara: and to share what dramaturgical questions this play excites in us – Madison: – in the hopes that these questions will excite your curiosities too. We hope to inspire you to read the play, see it performed, and possibly even produce it yourself! Kara: There are so many perspectives to view the plays from. Your perspective matters.

Madison: Today we'll be looking at *The Convent of Pleasure* by Margaret Cavendish through feminist and queer lenses.

Kara: By looking at the play through these lenses, we invite perspectives from marginalized communities to have their thoughts *Writ in the Margins*.

Madison: Today, we explore the concept of Identity in Margaret Cavendish's play *The Convent of Pleasure*. We'll start by looking at the unique names of these characters. Much like a morality play, Cavendish names her characters based on aspects of their personality, status, or gender identity.

Kara: Then we'll discuss the production history of the play and explore connections between the play-text and modern elements of queer theory.

Madison: We'll also share with you a performance of a scene from *The Convent of Pleasure* performed by the amazing Sophia Beratta, Katelyn Spurgin, and Johnny Williams III. Kara: There will be spoilers in our discussion, so consider this your **spoiler warning**. Pause now if you would like to stop to read the play first before hearing our analysis of it. Madison: Let's get into it!

## Section 1: Identity/Names

Madison: What's in a name? Okay, I know that's from the wrong play, but it really is a great question to ask about the characters in Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*. This play is chock full of characters with kind of out-of-this-world, metaphorical names. We've got characters with names like Madame Mediator, Lady Happy, and Monsieur Take-pleasure. The names, like morality plays, act as an indicator or description of their jobs or place within the play. Madame Mediator acts as an advisor to Lady Happy. Madame Mediator gets the convent up and running and works as a go-between for the convent and the real world. I think Cavendish might have been trying to give her audience and readers clues about the characters right from the beginning. This type of naming convention can also be found in other Early Modern works by playwrights such as Ben Jonson. Jonson was famous for his handling of dramatic material and was adept at creating sophisticated character names. In an article titled "Defining Society: The Function of Character Names in Ben Jonson's Early Comedies" author Mark Anderson points out that "Jonson's use of names, in fact, bears a strong relationship to the hieroglyph, which for the Renaissance meant a picture with a hidden meaning." (Anderson 184) Jonson would name his characters depending on the source material of his play and what kind of message he was hoping to send his audiences. Was the play more allegorical

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(like a morality play) or was it a commentary on current events (typically a court related drama). Did the playwright want the audience to relate to the characters or instead focus on the bigger picture? It appears that Cavendish borrowed some of these naming techniques for *The Convent of Pleasure*. Margaret Cavendish's work was centered primarily around issues of gender, sex, marriage, and courtship. Cavendish wanted her plays to mean something and used her voice as a wronged woman to get people talking about gender inequality and the imbalance of opportunities for women.

There's an expectation that the characters in *The Convent of Pleasure* are either going to live up to the standards of their name or fall short and not achieve what their name asks them to do. It sounds like a lot of pressure to put on a character, but I actually think it's a brilliant move by Cavendish. Instead of giving her characters' names like Jane or Mark, or even Lady Jane or Monsieur Mark, she adds a layer to the world of *The Convent of Pleasure*. Most of the play operates within the walls of the convent. We don't see much of the outside world. It makes sense that after a while, the constructs of the outside society start to strip down and wear away. Maybe Cavendish is alluding to the idea that we all are supposed to fit into this box that society has created for us?

Kara: The Princess is another character whose name sparked interest for us because (there are some **spoilers** coming up, so now's another good time to take a pause and read the play before we keep going!) is that they actually aren't who they say they are. The Princess is actually the Prince in disguise.

Madison: Dun dun dun!

Kara: The Prince's intentions for disguise are unclear in the text - is he trying to trick Lady Happy into marrying him like some of the other suitors who tried and failed? Or are they hoping to escape the patriarchy and expectations set for them by escaping to the Convent, just like women did? Is this a commentary on how oppressive patriarchal gender expectations hurt men too?

Madison: We decided to look into the production history of *The Convent of Pleasure* to see how other shows have represented The Princess on stage.

## Section 2: Production History

Kara: A show of hands out there in the podcast universe, how many of you have seen a production of *The Convent of Pleasure*? Or maybe listened to a recording? Madison: If you're out there raising your hand, we'd love to meet you!

Kara: Seriously though, this play is amazing but seems to be relatively unheard of, at least in comparison to our main man himself, William Shakespeare.

Madison: Okay, well that's not fair! Shakespeare has more groupies and fangirls out there. Jokes aside, Cavendish really hasn't had that many produced productions in the last few centuries.

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Kara: Trust us, we looked all over Google. Although, there has been a recent scholarly resurgence of Cavendish's work that we believe have led to the few staged readings we found like the ones by the Ghostlight Ensemble Theatre in Chicago, IL.

Madison: Now there are a lot of factors here to think about. *The Convent of Pleasure* was originally written to be a closet drama play. A closet drama was created primarily for reading, rather than for production. So when Margaret Cavendish wrote this play she probably envisioned a group of women sitting in their drawing room with a cup of tea reading the play amongst one another.

Kara: So kind of like a book club that reads the book together in real-time? Madison: Yes! It's a lot like staged readings, which playwrights nowadays use to workshop their material.

Kara: Because the play was never originally meant to be performed in full, that means that there might be some challenges to the performance that the playwright didn't consider. We wanted to see what would happen if *The Convent of Pleasure* was actually staged! Was the Princess played by a man? A woman? A non-binary actor?

Madison: We wanted to look for variances in costuming and makeup and how directors attempted to convince the audience as well as the other characters in the play, that the outsiders actually belonged. In a reading, we don't really have to consider bodies in space, but in a play performance, we do. How does casting change the story that the play is telling? Kara: So truthfully, this play has not been performed in full as often as we had hoped. We have been able to find several companies that performed the play as a staged reading in various seasons featuring typically unproduced plays, but it was much more difficult to find a solid production history as we hoped. The Digital Cavendish collaboration website ended up being a very interesting and helpful tool in our research.

Madison: The site is completely devoted to Margaret Cavendish. It truly is a digital archive of her works and other information and resources surrounding her plays. The site includes lots of great information from Cavendish scholars including links to her digital texts, teaching resources, and original research by the project's collaborators.

### Section 3: The Princess

Kara: Madison and I were fascinated by the character of the Princess and their interactions inside the convent and with other characters.

Madison: We first hear about The Princess when Madam Mediator shares the knowledge of her arrival at the convent to two women outside of the convent as "a Princely brave Woman truly, of a Masculine Presence." (8)

Kara: The women abruptly change the subject to discussing other enjoyments at the convent because they are jealous of single women who get to live here. The abrupt change makes me wonder what they think about Madam Mediator's statement. Do they just accept that bodies and personalities have more variety than gender norms at the time described? Do the women accept The Princess's masculine presence because they are from another country?

Madison: Or is it just because Madam Mediator interrupted their previous discussion about wanting to be in the convent so they went back to their original topic?

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Kara: It *could* also be a reference to Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth referred to herself with male pronouns and as ‘princely’ because she wanted to highlight traits in herself that were typically associated with men so her subjects would feel more comfortable having a female monarch. Madison: In the very next scene, we see other suitors of Lady Happy’s discussing the possibility of disguising themselves as women to gain entrance into the convent, but they come to the conclusion that it would be too challenging for them to make a believable disguise. This might set the audience up to trust that the Princess is really a woman **or** it might be a set up by the playwright to put that idea in the audience’s head.

Kara: When Lady Happy first meets The Princess, she does not seem to realize that The Princess might be a prince in disguise. The epilogue of the play reads : “Marriage is a Curse we find, / Especially to Women kind: From the Cobbler’s Wife we see, / To Ladies, they unhappy be.” (16) The last line of the epilogue referencing being unhappy seems especially pointed to Lady Happy.

Madison: Reexamining plays like *The Convent of Pleasure* in 2021 allows us the opportunity to bring different perspectives and knowledge to the conversation that might have previously been unconsidered or left out of the conversation. Feminist and gender studies are two lenses that breathe new life into Cavendish’s work. Cavendish might have originally written the Princess to be a male-identifying person in order to further push her feminist agenda in the play. Kara: Exactly! The Prince is called the Princess until the last 3-4 pages of the play so most of the play features a same-sex relationship. The ending is heteronormative, but it is such a small percentage of the play, that it makes one wonder if it was put on at the end. Gender is a spectrum, so it is fair to argue that the Princess might not actually be the straight male-identifying person Cavendish’s script alludes to. Could the Princess be a non-binary identifying person? A trans woman? These are some of the questions we have to ask in order to explain the apparent successful disguise of the Prince/Princess.

Madison: We could probably spend hours discussing the many different variations and possibilities of gender identity and expression of the Princess and how this impacts their relationship with Lady Happy, but we only have 20 minutes here so let’s jump into our first scene study. We’ll be looking at a selection from Act 3 Scene 1. We have Katelyn Spurgin, a female-identifying actor, reading for the Princess and Sophia Beratta reading for Lady Happy.

Kara: Take a listen and we’ll be back to continue our discussion!

## Scene Work:

### Act III, Scene I – Version 1

[The Princess is played by **Katelyn Spurgin** and Lady Happy played by **Sophia Beratta**]

**Lady Happy:** Madam, Your Highness has done me much Honour, to come from a Splendid Court to a retired Convent.

**Princess:** Sweet Lady Happy, there are many, that have quit their Crowns and Power, for a Cloister of

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Restraint; then well may I quit a Court of troubles for a Convent of Pleasure: but the greatest pleasure I could receive, were to have your Friendship.

**Lady Happy:** I should be ungrateful, should I not be not only your Friend, but humble Servant.

**Princess:** I desire you would be my Mistress, and I your Servant; and upon this agreement of Friendship I desire you will grant me one Request.

**Lady Happy:** Anything that is in my power to grant.

**Princess:** Why then, I observing in your several Recreations, some of your Ladies do accoustre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts; I desire you will give me leave to be sometimes so accoustred and act the part of your loving Servant.

**Lady Happy:** I shall never desire to have any other loving Servant then your Self. **Princess:** Nor I any other loving Mistress then Your-Self.

**Lady Happy:** More innocent Lovers never can there be, Then my most Princely Lover, that's a She.

**Princess:** Nor never Convent did such pleasures give, Where Lovers with their Mistresses may live.

Kara: That was great! What are some takeaways from this first read-through? Madison: Well I think first of all we have to remember that we are listening to this with our 2021 perspectives and understandings. We now know that gender is a construct. Kara: Right, of course!

Madison: So when the Princess shows up at this point in the play, there isn't really anything indicating that they are in a disguise.

Kara: Having a female-identifying actor, Katelyn, read the part of the Princess highlights the lesbian potential of the relationship between Lady Happy and the Princess. Madison: Yeah, yeah.

Kara: Sophia and Katelyn did a great job of highlighting the budding relationship between Lady Happy and the Princess. Because we weren't worried about what the Princess looked like, we could focus on the language and the nuance of their relationship.

Madison: Now, let's listen to another reading of the same scene, this time with Sophia Beratta as Lady Happy and Johnny Williams III, a male-identifying actor, as the Princess.

## Act III, Scene I – Version 2

[The Princess is played by **Johnny Williams** and Lady Happy is played by **Sophia Beratta**]

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**Lady Happy:** Madam, Your Highness has done me much Honour, to come from a Splendid Court to a retired Convent.

**Princess:** Sweet Lady Happy, there are many, that have quit their Crowns and Power, for a Cloister of Restraint; then well may I quit a Court of troubles for a Convent of Pleasure: but the greatest pleasure I could receive, were to have your Friendship.

**Lady Happy:** I should be ungrateful, should I not be not only your Friend, but humble Servant.

**Princess:** I desire you would be my Mistress, and I your Servant; and upon this agreement of Friendship I desire you will grant me one Request.

**Lady Happy:** Anything that is in my power to grant.

**Princess:** Why then, I observing in your several Recreations, some of your Ladies do accoustre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts; I desire you will give me leave to be sometimes so accoustred and act the part of your loving Servant.

**Lady Happy:** I shall never desire to have any other loving Servant then your Self.

**Princess:** Nor I any other loving Mistress then Your-Self.

**Lady Happy:** More innocent Lovers never can there be, Then my most Princely Lover, that's a She.

**Princess:** Nor never Convent did such pleasures give, Where Lovers with their Mistresses may live.

Madison: That was such a great reading.

Kara: Yeah, and Johnny did a great job of embodying the masculinity that Madam Mediator references when discussing the Princess.

Madison: I absolutely agree.

Kara: But, I wonder does that give away the surprise ending of the Prince identity too soon? Madison: That's a great question, I think, you know, we're given this luxury by just listening to this scene versus seeing it on the stage.

Kara: Exactly! There's so many things you don't have to consider in a reading that's just auditory, but yes, bodies in space, watching with your eyes, tells a different story. Madison: If we've gleaned anything from these readings it's that there isn't one version that's better than the other. Casting is a choice and these choices will tell a story. Directors can and *should* take this into consideration when casting their productions of *The Convent of Pleasure*.

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### Section 3: Queer Text Theory

Kara: Definitely! Most of this play celebrates female-female friendships, romantic relationships, and erotic bonds. The convent, unlike the patriarchal world outside of the convent, prioritizes joy, pleasure, and the genuine interests of women. Some of these interests resonate with modern queer audiences due to their possibility of queer representation. I decided to look at *The Convent of Pleasure* through the lens of queer theory.

At the start of the play, Madam Mediator and Lady Happy's male suitors assume that Lady Happy will want to marry a man. This is an example of what we now call *compulsory heterosexuality*. This term describes the pressure that people feel to be heterosexual based on the opinions of their families, employers, schools, and other aspects of society. It then surprises the suitors when Lady Happy decides to separate herself from men and form a convent with only single or widowed women allowed to live or work there.

By creating a same-sex environment, Lady Happy is prioritizing *homosocial bonding*, which is bonding between people of the same gender identity. This can be seen as a text-based hint at queer relations because it values same-sex emotional bonds over opposite-sex ones. Cavendish takes this a step further by hinting at *homoeroticism*, which is another name for same-sex attraction. Homoeroticism does not need to necessarily be sexual. Esther Perel defines *eroticism* as not necessarily sex, but "the qualities of vitality, curiosity, and spontaneity that make us feel alive."

When discussing the creation of *The Convent of Pleasure* with Madam Mediator, Lady Happy makes it clear that she does not plan to live without pleasure. Words or names with the root "pleasure" appear **67 times** in *The Convent of Pleasure*.

Madison: Wow!

Kara: which is only 30 pages, that is so many times!

Madison: So many times!

Kara: Even though they won't live among men, Lady Happy intends for the women in her convent to experience as much pleasure as possible. When reading this section through a queer lens, that seems to imply same-sex romanticism and eroticism. When the Princess is revealed as the Prince in disguise – Lady Happy does not break up with them. But this does not necessarily mean they are bound for a happily-ever-after. Their relationship will certainly change based on their new dynamic. The reveal changes the relationship itself, much like the act of queer people coming out changes the nature of their relationship to everyone who they come out to. This is similar to an idea expressed in Sawyer Kemp's *Shakespeare in Transition: Pedagogies of Transgender Justice and Performance*.

This conclusion with Lady Happy marrying a man, even though she thought she was falling in love with a woman, feels like modern *Queerbaiting*. Queerbaiting in pop culture nowadays is when shows tempt Queer audiences with possible romantic representation, only to have it not either wind up as friends or it doesn't delve deeply enough into their relationship.

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When Madison and I discussed portrayals of The Princess by a male-identifying actor, we wondered about the possible reasons behind The Prince joining the convent, which are never made explicitly clear. This contrasts Lady Happy's other suitors who overtly say that they want to bring about the destruction of the convent. I like to think that the Prince's ambiguous opinion of the convent suggests an openness to supporting queer communities.

We don't really know how the Princess sees their gender. Since the Prince seems to be equally comfortable in their identity as the Prince or the Princess, their gender identity might be ambiguous. This leads me to hope that some of the gender and sexual freedom of their queer-seeming relationship with Lady Happy will continue in their marriage. Not knowing the exact expectations of their marital relationship, I hope that their relationship will remain queer outside of the convent as well.

### **Conclusion:**

Madison: That was great Kara, thank you for sharing!

Kara: My pleasure!

Madison: Well it looks like we're out of time. Thank you for joining us on our edition of *Writ in the Margins* Podcast. We hope that you enjoyed our exploration of Identity in Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*.

Kara: Thank you to our professor Molly Seremet providing relevant readings and suggestions for expanding our investigation further.

Madison: Thank you to the scholars who wrote the articles, books, and websites that aided our research - Sarah Ahmed, Sawyer Kemp, Lois Tyson, and the scholars at Digital Cavendish Project,

Kara: Thank you to Sophia Beratta , Katelyn Spurgin , and Johnny Williams III for bringing the play to life with their fantastic readings from Act 3, Scene 1.

Madison: Thank you for taking this journey through the dramaturgical aspects of *The Convent of Pleasure* with us. We hope that this inspires lively discussions, an interest in Cavendish's work, and lights a dramaturgical spark of questioning what is being said and what is possible.

Kara: Again, I'm Kara Hankard

Madison: And I'm Madison Rudolph

Kara: Bye!

Madison: Bye!

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