



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 5

Convent of Pleasure: Goin' to the Convent, Not Gettin' Married

Hosts: Macy Foss, Kelsey Linberg & Rosemary Richards

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Episode Transcript

MACY: Are you tired of men?

KELSEY: Do you think that the world of the patriarchy is terrible and stupid?

ROSEMARY: Would you rather live in a fancy house with all your female friends and never have to talk to men again?

MACY: Well, have we got the place for you!

KELSEY: Lady Happy has created a new convent, The Convent of Pleasures, for all women to join!

ROSEMARY: Requirements: must be willing to hang with the ladies, participate in plays, and ignore men at all costs.

MACY: Come on down to the Convent of Pleasure!

CUT TO: Theme song (1 minute long)

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Original music with the following lyrics taken from the play:

For every Sense shall pleasure take,
 And all our Lives shall merry make:
 Our Minds in full delight shall joy,
 Not vex'd with every idle Toy:
 Each Season shall our Caterers be, To
 search the Land, and Fish the Sea;
 To gather Fruit and reap the Corn,
 That's brought to us in Plenty's Horn;
 With which we'll feast and please our fast,
 But not luxurious make a wast.
 We'll Cloth our selves with softest Silk,
 And Linnen fine as white as milk.
 We'll please our Sight with Pictures rare;
 Our Nostrils with perfumed Air.
 Our Ears with sweet melodious Sound,
 Whose Substance can be no where found;
 Our Tast with sweet delicious Meat,
 And savory Sauces we will eat:
 Variety each Sense shall feed,
 And Change in them new Appetites breed.
 Thus will in Pleasure's Convent I
 Live with delight, and with it die.

MACY: Hello! My name is MACY, the censorship witch

KELSEY: I'm KELSEY, the queer witch

ROSEMARY: And I'm ROSEMARY, the feminist witch and we are

ALL: THE WEIRD SISTERS!

ROSEMARY: Oh we did that so well!

KELSEY: We did so well!

MACY: If the witches of Macbeth got together to make a podcast about an amazing play written by a super cool lady, that would be this podcast.

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ROSEMARY: You may be wondering why three witches got together to talk about an old play, and that's because we three cannot resist a story written by women, about women, and FOR women! With magical elements! It's a witches' delight!

KELSEY: We have joined together our three forces (censorship, queerness, and feminism) to talk about the wonderful Restoration-age play, *The Convent of Pleasure* written by Margaret Cavendish.

MACY: For a quick plot summary: *The Convent of Pleasure* tells the story of Lady Happy who opens up her own convent after being dissatisfied with men. Women from all over come and join this convent, and Lady Happy soon falls in love with a visiting princess. Pastoral scenes, nymph scenes, maypoles, and all sorts of fun ensue. The princess is later revealed to be a prince

ROSEMARY: BOO!!!

MACY: And they get married and live happily ever after. The end.

KELSEY: One thing that fascinates me about this play is that the plot structure is not "linear" - the characters don't follow the traditional, aristotelian plot.

ROSEMARY: Yeah, they kind of go from scene to scene having a good time and talking about the convent or the love between Lady Happy and the Prince.

KELSEY: Exactly! I do a lot of work in the world of queer theory, and the plot structure of *The Convent of Pleasure* is a perfect example of a queer narrative structure.

ROSEMARY: (a la John Mulaney) SAY. MORE. RIGHT. NOW.

KELSEY: In queer theory, we tend to try and find queerness everywhere in a story. While it's easy to look at the characters of a play for queerness, I have been fascinated by how the story itself creates a queer space and time. "Traditional" narrative structure features characters who have desire that drive them towards a goal, ending in a climax.

MACY: Sexy.

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KELSEY: Oh yeah. But in queer narrative - and especially what I study, which is an asexual narrative structure - that is not necessarily the case. Queer narrative structure is not linear, does not have to stick to time, can meander through different settings. We can spend time and linger on a long pastoral scene or a nymph scene and not worry about sticking to traditional plot and desire structures.

ROSEMARY: Sounds familiar...

KELSEY: As it should! *The Convent of Pleasure* totally has a queer narrative structure. The world of the convent that Lady Happy creates allows them to live outside of heterosexuality, both literally as the characters and figuratively in the world of the story. The characters can waste time, go from place to place, and not worry about an overarching conflict. The play focuses on Lady Happy and the Princess' relationship instead of following a regular plot. The play quite literally creates a queer space and time for the characters to live in!

MACY: Why is a queer narrative structure important to the play? Can it be applied in production?

KELSEY: Yes! The queer narrative structure allows a production to be more loopy-goopy with time and space, allowing to go more freely between everything without having to worry about making it A "Correct" Play. The convent can now be a queer space, and the actors playing the characters can explore the character's queerness within a safe, queer space and time!

ROSEMARY: And the characters sure are queer, aren't they?

KELSEY: Oh MAN. They play with gender, they play with desire, they play with relationships. There is so much queerness in this play and it honestly creates a space for queer joy to thrive. We absolutely love to see it.

MACY: Thank you so much for that overview, Kelsey!

KELSEY: You're welcome!

MACY: Now that we've given you that excellent plot summary and discussed the queer structure of the play, we now thought it would be a good idea to let you hear some of it yourself!

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KELSEY: One fascinating part of *The Convent of Pleasure* happens in one of my favorite early modern tropes: a play within a play. Once the Princess arrives to the convent, the women of the convent decide to put on a play for the princess and Lady Happy.

ROSEMARY: Because that's a normal thing to do.

KELSEY: That's a normal thing to do! You're friends come over and you're like, here's a play.

ROSEMARY: The play features many short scenes with women of all ages and backgrounds discussing the pain that men inflict on them in their daily lives.

MACY: The moral of the story?

KELSEY: Men cause only pain, and this is the convent of pleasure, so who needs men?

ROSEMARY: For real though! The Weird Sisters will now transform into these characters and play a few of these scenes for you. We will use our magic powers regarding censorship, queerness, and feminism in looking at these scenes. This particular part of the play occurs in Act III is a series of short scenes commenting on women's struggles. Today we will be focusing on Scenes VI through VIII as these particular scenes highlight these struggles through the lenses of young women, old women, and even "men." We are nothing if not inclusive.

KELSEY: And now, WE BUBBLE!

ROSEMARY: Scene VI. *Enter a Citizen's Wife, as into a Tavern, where a Bush is hung out, and meets some Gentlemen there.*

KELSEY: Citizen's Wife: Pray Gentleman, is my Husband, Mr. Negligent here?

MACY: 1 Gent: He was, but he is gone some quarter of an hour since.

KELSEY: Cit. Wife: Could he go, Gentlemen?

ROSEMARY: 2 Gent: Yes, with a Supporter.

KELSEY: Cit. Wife: Out upon him! must he be supported? Upon my credit Gentlemen, he will undo himself and me too, with his drinking and carelessness, leaving his Shop and all his Commodities at six's and seven's; and his

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Prentices and Journey-men are as careless and idle as he; besides, they cozen him of his Wares. But, was it a He or She-Supporter, my Husband was supported by?

MACY: 1 Gent: A She-supporter; for it was one of the Maid-servants, which belong to this Tavern.

KELSEY: Cit. Wife: Out upon him Knave, must he have a She-supporter, in the Devil's name? but I'll go and seek them both out with a Vengeance.

ROSEMARY: 2 Gent: Pray, let us entreat your stay to drink a cup of Wine with us.

KELSEY: Cit. Wife: I will take your kind Offer; for Wine may chance to abate Cholerick vapours, and pacifie the Spleen.

MACY: 1 Gent: That it will; for Wine and good Company are the only abaters of Vapours.

ROSEMARY: 2 Gent: It doth not abate Vapours so much as cure Melancholy.

KELSEY: Cit. Wife: In truth, I find a cup of Wine doth comfort me sometimes.

MACY: 1 Gent: It will cheer the Heart.

ROSEMARY: 2 Gent: Yes, and enlighten the Understanding.

KELSEY: Cit. Wife: Indeed, and my understanding requires enlightening.

ROSEMARY: *Exeunt.* SCENE VII.

Enter a Lady big with Child, groaning as in labour, and a Company of Women with her.

MACY: Lady w/ Child: OH my back, my back will break, Oh! Oh! Oh!

ROSEMARY: 1 Woman: Is the Midwife sent for?

KELSEY: 2 Woman: Yes, but she is with another Lady.

MACY: Lady: Oh my back! Oh! Oh! Oh! Juno, give me some ease.

ROSEMARY: *Exeunt.* Scene VIII. *Enter two Ancient Ladies.*

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KELSEY: 1 Lady: I have brought my Son into the World with great pains, bred him with tender care, much pains and great cost; and must he now be hang'd for killing a Man in a quarrel? when he should be a comfort and staff of my age, is he to be my ages affliction?

MACY: 2 Lady: I confess it is a great affliction; but I have had as great; having had but two Daughters, and them fair ones, though I say it, and might have matched them well: but one of them was got with Child to my great disgrace; th' other run away with my Butler, not worth the droppings of his Taps.

KELSEY: 1 Lady: Who would desire Children, since they come to such misfortunes?

ROSEMARY: *Exeunt.*

MACY: That's just part of some of the great scenes within this mini-play.

ROSEMARY: It really highlights the different struggles that women went through during that time. The fact that the scenes were so short really brings home that these issues were nothing more than glanced at. These women do not get a true scene. Even in the excerpts we performed, the longest scene had male characters who don't really address the issues which their female counterpart is enduring and simply encourage her to drink her troubles away. It really is a powerful statement that Cavendish is making. These short scenes also seem to reflect on specific aspects of Cavendish's personal life, but more on that later!

KELSEY: Now, let's go into a bit of the textual conditions of the play – a little bit about the playwright, how the play was written, all that fun jazz.

ROSEMARY: Let's start with a biography of the amazing playwright herself, Margaret Cavendish.

KELSEY: I'm so excited.

ROSEMARY: Get ready for a wild ride, guys. Margaret Cavendish, formerly Margaret Lucas, was possibly born in the year 1623 and died on December 15, 1673. Her mother was a single and widowed and was held in awe by the people around for her QUOTE “grave behaviour” END QUOTE. So remember the old women who were just like oh i hate my life kind of thing? that's her mom. Her brother had his raided because he was QUOTE “a contentious

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Colchester landowner” END QUOTE that antagonized lower orders within the area during the Stour Valley riots that occurred on August 22, 1642. Not the best male inspiration, you could say. Talking a lot of issues within the family dynamic. Dangers of war when young caused her to move from Colchester to Oxford to live with her sister, Catherine. She just leaves her brother behind. Said bye! While there in 1643, she actually became a maid of honour for Queen Henrietta Maria! (*Another strong female inspiration*).

Cavendish was actually notoriously shy, it was very difficult to interact with others while she was at court. However, she got the courage to talk to one William Cavendish hint hint wink wink that’s her husband, marquess of Newcastle upon Tyne, who was a widower and QUOTE “a defeated Royalist commander at Marston Moor” END QUOTE. Love is blind y’all. she could look past all that. she said I’ll give a chance despite all that you know. Their courtship was highly discouraged by Queen Henrietta Maria. In fact, she greatly opposed the idea. The couple married anyway in 1645 in the private chapel of Sir Richard Browne. They had no children even after seeking fertility help from Physician Richard Farrar. That whole struggle with childbirth that’s referenced throughout the play and that particular scene, that might be based on a true story. Not able to have children of her own, Margaret helped raise Newcastle’s three surviving children from his first marriage.

Her Brother Sir Charles was executed in 1648 for being a royalist. at this point *Margaret really has a bad taste in her mouth about war, brothers men, at this point*

Husband constantly letting her down in regards to financial decisions as well as failing to QUOTE “obtain the court office she thought he deserved” END QUOTE. So he lost the battle, he’s losing money left and right, he can’t even get a simple court position. She’s like floored.

During all of these hardships, she began to publish writings such as *Poems and Fancies* as well as *Philosophical Fancies*. Not to mention she began actually running the ducal estate which lead to an increase in revenue as well as estate improvements, including a MANSION.

KELSEY: Good for her!

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ROSEMARY: You would think, right? Rather than being grateful for these improvements, many, including her step-daughter, thought that she was just doing it to increase her own funds in hopes of her husband's death. Real nice.

Something I find hilarious is that while they were visiting London in 1667 to promote her husband's plays, it was Margaret who stole the show because SHE WAS CROSS DRESSING IN MEN'S APPAREL!!! What an icon!! She was met with a lot of hate (cough cough jealousy), having Mary Evelyn, daughter to Sir Richard Brown, make the statement that she QUOTE “was surprised to find so much extravagancy and vanity in any person not confined within four walls ” END QUOTE. Multiple statements were made of that nature. Among these delightful compliments include her being called obscene and vulgar and an unapologetic flirt.

KELSEY: Those are my titles too.

MACY: Amazing

ROSEMARY: BASICALLY, Cavendish had a lot of legitimate reasons to be angry about the patriarchy, and she made her mind known in *The Convent of Pleasure*. And you know what girl? Same. Many of the plot elements and scenes seem to reflect what was going on in her own life because you can see the cross dressing, you can see the financial struggles, the struggles with child bearing, were all through like personal experience if we look at it through this lens gives whole new meaning to the play. It's really amazing.

KELSEY: It's interesting because the plays that she wrote are what we call a “closet drama”, in which plays were written to be read aloud in a group domestic setting instead of performed in a playhouse or on a traditional stage. This brings the traditional sense of performance into the domestic and social setting, ensuring that the art form did not just belong to the men on the playhouse stages. Women could do it to themselves in these closet dramas. So Cavendish is empowering women here. As closet dramas weren't meant to ever be produced though, and you can tell because they often featured fantastical sequences, quick scene changes that are impossible to do, and other

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elements that would have made actual production of the play much harder. She has stage directions where it's like "the scene vanishes" and you're like great, where, how?

MACY: How does the play being a closet drama affect performance?

KELSEY: They weren't meant to be performed. but instead you're supposed to imagine what you're seeing in your mind. the crazy scene changes, "the scene vanishes", or feature scenes that take place in impossible sets, such as the middle of the ocean. As the plays were not meant to be performed, but instead imagined in the reader or listener's mind, that significantly changes how a production can put on these scene changes.

ROSEMARY: A production will need to work harder to pull off these fantastical elements, especially if producing with modern day theatre practices in mind where we just don't really think of those things.

KELSEY: Now here's a question, is the play within a play a closet drama of its own?

ROSEMARY: Oh! Snap!

KELSEY: It is performed in a domestic space (the convent) within a community of people as opposed to on a traditional stage. As closet dramas were never meant to be publicly performed or published, they were not privy to the same types of censorship as other plays of the time. Therefore, closet dramas themselves created an inherently subversive space where women could write about their troubles and their beliefs and go on to share those ideas through the public outlet of communal reading.

MACY: Without the fear of censorship! Which was so much a thing during this time period.

ROSEMARY: Yes exactly! But that just blew my mind a little bit.

KELSEY: Also, by viewing this play-within-a-play of *The Convent of Pleasures* as a closet drama itself, we can gain a better understanding of its inclusion within the larger play. The women of the convent seek to express their griefs about men in a space with other women and decide to do so through the domestic art of the closet drama. The convent that they have created provides a utopia away from men where they were free from the horrors of heterosexuality. Women are free to express their ideas and live outside the traditional gender roles that society forces

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upon them. This makes the play-within-a-play one of the most exciting parts of *The Convent of Pleasure* as it holds a mirror up both to its own creation and to the society around it. A closet drama within a closet drama further reveals the importance of the genre, as it allows women to speak out and be heard when they otherwise could not.

MACY: What about the parts of the play that start with the quote “Written by my Lord Duke”? What’s that about?

KELSEY: “Written by my Lord Duke” is a reference to her husband, who added scenes to the play after it was initially written. In physical printings of the play that exist today, it appears that the phrase “written by my Lord Duke” has been typed up AFTER the fact and glued into the pages after publication.

ROSEMARY: Margaret really wants us to know that she did not write these scenes, didn’t she?

MACY: She did! “Written by my Lord Duke” appears three times in the play!

KELSEY: Once before a verse monologue that a shepherd gives in the pastoral scene, second before a song that another shepherd sings in the pastoral scene, and third before a scene with Madam Mediator crying that the women of the convent had been tricked by a man in disguise. Like oh no we were tricked!

ROSEMARY: Why did Cavendish want to clarify that these parts were not written by her?

MACY: Possibly to celebrate the parts that were written by her.

ROSEMARY: Most likely yeah.

KELSEY: Possibly to give credit to the Duke where credit was due.

ROSEMARY: Possibly to assign parts of the play that she didn’t like to someone else.

KELSEY: At the end of the day we won’t ever know, but the fact that she went through the process to add “Written by my Lord Duke” means that Margaret Cavendish believes that it is important for the understanding of the play to know which scenes were written by a man.

MACY: That makes me wonder how does the “written by my Lord Duke” aspect affect performance?

KELSEY: Because you know how when we do Shakespeare, people will take out scenes by Middleton, or like scenes that don’t feel Shakespearean. So people in a production of *The Convent of Pleasure* do the same thing and can choose

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to include these scenes or not. It's not like there's a traditional plot they have to follow that the scenes are definitely needed for. If it is important to the production to play the play as it was published, by all means include the scenes! If a production would rather focus on the female playwright writing on female issues, they may want to remove these scenes written by a man OR make some sort of nod to the fact that a man wrote these scenes and not Margaret Cavendish.

MACY: That's super interesting. You know what else is interesting?

KELSEY: What's interesting, Macy????

ROSEMARY: Please, we HAVE TO KNOW!!!

MACY: Convents in general!

KELSEY: YES!!!

ROSEMARY: I MUST KNOW ABOUT CONVENTS. TELL ME NOW!

MACY: Typically, in order to form a convent, one must be a member of a certain church, affiliate that convent with a specific parish or community, and adhere to the teachings of a specific order. In Catholicism at least, this could be Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelites, Benedictines, etc. All of these orders have different philanthropic and everyday teachings and goals, but they are all connected and one with the Catholic Church and its theology.

KELSEY: Is that what the convent in *The Convent of Pleasure* is like?

MACY: Nope! Lady Happy's convent does not adhere to the teachings of a unified church and the theology/beliefs of the outside community are never really established. This lack of specific religion (other than "nature") brings up the issue of how exactly it is that Lady Happy was able to start her own cloistered convent in the first place. It also made me question why no one in the community took issue with the religious portion of the convent, but did take issue with the fact that the women were no longer available for marriage.

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ROSEMARY: you know what's funny is like especially in the French Catholic convents, if a woman chose not to be married, like say she's a widow and didn't want to get married again, or she was just happy being single, her choices were join a convent or go to prison.

KELSEY: Oh great.

ROSEMARY: wouldn't the convent come with like the expectation of a religious order? so how does apply to the convent?

MACY: Most of the characters do mention Nature as an entity, so it is possible to assume that because her convent was not related to a church organization that she wasn't being heretical or breaking any kind of church rules by opening it. The question that this brings up is the issue of taking vows or joining the convent. Because you have to take vows of poverty, chastity in other convents. But the conditions of the convent seem to be only that one first of all must choose to live there and give up the outside world. They must only believe in the freedoms and pleasures they will have as long as they stay within the convent.

ROSEMARY Thank god these ladies can live outside the patriarchy.

MACY: Exactly! The only reason these teachings are a subversion of the beliefs of the outside world is because they directly challenge the patriarchal structure in many ways. Marriage for men (their access to women) was a proprietary exchange. Women went from being the property of their fathers to the property of their husband, and they were often an asset rather than a partner. The independence of the women in the convent essentially showed that women are capable of taking care of themselves and exercising or recognizing their own agency as humans.

KELSEY: Women as people? What a concept!

MACY: The moral of the story: women are people!

KELSEY: Women are people. Totally agree.

ROSEMARY: Well, I think that just about covers it, what do you think?

MACY: Thank you so much for listening to this podcast.

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KELSEY: We hope you go out and read, or possibly even perform, this awesome play.

ROSEMARY: Do it! Now, we will take some inspiration from the epilogue of *The Convent of Pleasure* and perform an epilogue of our own:

MACY: Noble listeners of this Podcast,

KELSEY: We know not what to say except we are done, I guess:

ROSEMARY: We dare not beg Applause, even though we know we thus killed it.

MACY: For we are witches

KELSEY: And can do no wrong

ROSEMARY: If you dislike our podcast,

ALL: We do not care.

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