Teaching Queer Theory and the History of Sexuality with Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*

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*The Convent of Pleasure*

Abstract
This article summarizes my approach to teaching Cavendish’s play *The Convent of Pleasure* in my course “LGBTQ+ Literature and Culture,” which I teach at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. I demonstrate how I teach the play with excerpts from literary scholarship in queer theory in order to help students sharpen their close reading skills, teach scholarly engagement, and deepen students’ understanding of early modern and Restoration comedy and the history of sexuality.

Keywords
Duchess of Newcastle, Restoration Comedy, LGBTQIA+ Literature, queer theory, trans theory

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Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank E Mariah Spencer for the invitation to contribute to this special issue and for her editorial guidance on this article.
For the past decade, I have taught Margaret Cavendish’s play *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) in my “LGBTQ+ Literature and Culture” course at two small liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. This article describes how I teach the play in this context and how I use it to explore with students the capaciousness of queer theory as a critical framework. It also demonstrates the payoffs of using Cavendish to teach early modern comedy, close reading, and engagement with scholarship, which easily extends to survey courses, courses on the long eighteenth century, and women writers courses, all of which are enriched by queer theory and queer voices. In what follows, I detail my pedagogy across two seventy-five-minute sessions; the first focuses on close reading skills and performance, and the second introduces students to three scholarly arguments about the play informed by queer and trans theory and asks students to evaluate and respond to these arguments using textual evidence. These arguments come from excerpts from Jeffrey Masten’s article “Material Cavendish: Paper, Performance, and ‘Sociable Virginity’” (2004), Simone Chess’s chapter “Crossdressing, Sex, and Gender Labor: *Convent of Pleasure, Gallathea, and ‘The Male and Female Husband’*” (2016), and Megan Cole’s article “Traumatic Pregnancy, Queer Virginity, and Asexual Reproduction in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*” (2021). In these two lessons, students build their reading skills, learn to interrogate the conventions of early modern comedy, glimpse how rich and varied queer readings of a single text might be, and prepare for their final project, which requires engagement with at least one scholarly secondary text.

Cavendish appears on our syllabus at a critical moment in our course, as part of a unit on queer histories and just as we begin work on the final project. “LGBTQ+ Literature and Culture” is a 200-level (sophomore/junior) course that caps at twenty-five students, but it attracts first-year students through seniors and English majors and non-majors alike, meaning that students enter the course with a range of abilities and prior exposure to literary scholarship. The first half of the semester focuses on twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts—*Stone Butch Blues, Giovanni’s Room, Fun Home, Genderqueer*, and poetry by transgender poets Trish Salah and Noah Baldino, for instance—and introduces students to the basics of queer and trans theory using Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), essays from Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* (1987), excerpts from Nanamari Jagose’s *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1997), Jagose and Donald E. Hall’s *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (2012), and Susan Stryker’s *The Transgender Studies Reader* 2 (2013). After the midterm, we turn to questions about the history of sexuality, and here Cavendish follows David Halperin’s “How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality” (2000), excerpts from Shakespeare’s sonnets, Christopher Marlowe’s tragedy
Edward II, and an excerpt from Lee Edelman’s No Future (2004). With this context, students approach The Convent of Pleasure with an awareness of sexuality’s complex history and with tools for applying modern theories to early texts. Halperin makes easily accessible Foucault’s argument that our modern understanding of sexuality as an identity developed recently, in the nineteenth century, which helps students approach early modern texts with a more flexible attitude toward sexuality. Shakespeare and Marlowe set up conversations about men’s same-sex love in early modern literature, and Edelman shows students that queer theory can provide new ways of thinking about what they might take for granted, such as the assumption that reproduction is the highest social good. This context gives students tools for reading gender and sexuality in Cavendish as fluid and provides queer ways of analyzing the play’s aversion to pregnancy and childbirth. Since this unit is, until Cavendish, dominated by male voices, students are also eager to return to the questions about women’s queer intimacies and genderqueer bodies and subjectivities we pursued in the first half of the course. Instructors teaching Convent in a historical survey or a women writers course might want to use excerpts from Queer Theory: An Introduction, The Routledge Queer Studies Reader, and The Transgender Studies Reader 2, particularly the introductions, to provide grounding in queer and trans theory for students before they read the play, but many students today bring into the classroom enough knowledge of their own to understand the basics of gender theory and so do not need twelve weeks of queer literature and theory in order to do the following activity, especially if those students have some experience reading literary scholarship.

Reading the play: Gender, pleasure, compulsory heterosexuality, and performance

For those not familiar with The Convent of Pleasure, the plot is as follows: the wealthy Lady Happy decides to forego marriage and uses her inheritance to start a secular convent where wealthy women bond with each other and pursue their own fancies and pleasures, free from the obligations and incumbrances of marriage. Some of the women routinely dress in men’s attire as part of the daily entertainments the convent offers. Meanwhile, several buffoonish male suitors lament the loss of the women’s inheritance from the marriage market and devise ineffectual schemes for entering the convent. Soon, the convent is honored with the arrival of a foreign princess—named, simply, the Princess—and Lady Happy and the Princess quickly fall in love and court each other through a series of games and performances during which the Princess cross-dresses to play male parts. At the play’s end, the Princess is revealed as a Prince in disguise, and he
claims Lady Happy as his bride and the convent as his property. After this revelation, Lady Happy falls silent, and the play ends without clarifying her feelings on the match.

For the first session of our two seventy-five-minute class periods on the play, I ask students to read only Acts 1 through 3, which describe Lady Happy’s convent, introduce the Princess, and include several scenes in which characters argue that marriage produces pain and misery for women rather than pleasure and stability. During this session, I point students to passages in which Lady Happy defines pleasure and explains the theory behind her convent, as well as scenes that demonstrate the oppositional ways the female and male characters talk about nature. For example, although the male characters contend that “if she [Lady Happy] be a Votress to Nature, she must be a Mistress to Men,” Lady Happy explains her motivation for establishing the convent rather than marrying by asserting that “Men are the only troublers of Women; for they only cross and oppose their sweet delights, and peaceable life; they cause their pains, but not their pleasures” (104; 101). The male characters define nature by reducing it exclusively to reproductive sex, but Lady Happy offers a clear critique of cross-sex marriage and articulates a relationship with nature that celebrates pleasure as experienced through the body in ways that go beyond the sexual. Here, some context on Epicurean philosophy can be helpful for students. Epicurus taught that pleasure is attained through moderation, tranquility of mind, and the rejection of what causes pain—including love, sex, and even marriage, though he made allowances for these experiences in moderation. This Epicurean definition of pleasure connects with Lady Happy’s assertion that “My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them” (101). The song that follows elaborates on how the convent provides pleasure by engaging all five senses and describes how an all-female community enables women to connect with nature through this sensory experience. The convent also runs according to seasonal change, with these cycles demonstrating how women’s community can be more natural than cross-sex marriage.

On this first day, students are also drawn to the performance of a series of vignettes that comprises most of Act 3 and that dramatizes the miseries marriage and motherhood cause women. Students readily connect this performance to Rich’s critique of compulsory heterosexuality and Edelman’s critique of reproductive futurism, and our discussion also leads us to the performative genre of drama in which Cavendish writes. Students consider, for example, how seeing the women dance together in both male and female attire would enhance the queer dimensions of the play, and they have fun imagining the cartoonish male characters Monsieurs Courtly, Take-pleasure, and Facile played by women.
wearing false beards and lampooning masculine swagger with deliberate over-acting. Students also read the Princess as a transmasculine figure and contrast this character’s successful courtly masculinity with the masculinity of the other male characters, which leads also to connections with *Stone Butch Blues* and Noah Baldino’s poetry.

Though students are usually delighted by Acts 1 through 3, they are invariably disappointed and often angered when they finish the play for the second class session and find that the Princess is a Prince in disguise; they often feel tricked by the play’s reassertion of heterosexuality at the end. My response is to lean into this anger, working with students’ negative reactions as a productive starting place for deeper engagement with the text. I take the first ten minutes of our second session to let students vent their frustrations, and then I introduce Masten, Chess, and Cole, framing them as queer theorists whose arguments can help students move beyond these emotions to do more interesting interpretive work with the text. I provide a handout on each source with key quotations and a writing prompt (see appendix), which we work through together (8-10 minutes per source) to make sure that students understand the arguments. Students then select one source for further analysis and spend ten minutes working on the writing prompt. Then they form groups with others who selected the same source, and they work together to present their arguments and evidence to the rest of the class. The presentations and final discussion often spill into the next class session, which, in turn, provides a useful springboard for introducing their final project and the scholarly engagement it requires. In what follows, I offer an overview of each source and examples of the interpretive work students do with it.

**Engaging with scholarship: Book history, trans theory, and asexuality studies**

In his article, Jeffrey Masten reports on a discovery he made while visiting archives to look at several copies of the first edition of Cavendish’s *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668), the volume that includes *The Convent of Pleasure*. He found that the phrase “Written by my Lord Duke” that appears three times before scenes or passages in Acts 4 and 5 of *The Convent of Pleasure* as well as elsewhere in the volume is not printed directly on the page; rather, it appears on slips of paper pasted into the book after it was printed. Masten links these slips with Cavendish’s performance of her authorial identity and with her extensive collaboration with her husband William. He argues that inherent to Cavendish’s work is a tension between her assertion of a distinctive authorial voice and her performance of an idealized collaborative relationship with her husband, and that “the slips, pasted on at some point after the printing of the pages, perhaps after the
binding of the book, either are an afterthought or are performed as one” (56). For Masten, this performance of afterthought raises several questions about the Cavendishes, book history, and companionate marriage, which he pursues throughout the rest of his article. For my students, though, the question becomes more localized: Why call attention to these particular three moments in *The Convent of Pleasure* as authored by William? The writing prompt that accompanies this article reads: Look at the passages and scenes following the three paste-in slips in *The Convent of Pleasure*. What is the effect of marking these scenes as authored by William? What details in these scenes might Cavendish want to “disown”? What argument of your own would you build about *Convent* that makes use of Masten’s research findings?

Students who choose this prompt strengthen their close reading skills by working with the specific passages marked as written by William. They find that these three passages distinguish themselves from the rest of the play through their bawdy humor and lines that contradict the play’s other assertions about sex and marriage. The first passage, a song that appears after a pastoral masque in which ladies dressed as shepherdesses dance with ladies dressed as shepherds, includes the following couplet: “For Dancing heretofore has got more Riches / Then we can find in all our Shepherds Breeches” (123). Close readers find a multi-leveled penis joke in these lines: dancing is better than sex with men; dancing is better than sex with anyone; dancing is better than sex because these shepherds are all women and thus have nothing to find in their breeches. This last layer of meaning offers a particularly male-oriented way of thinking about women’s bodies and pleasures, and this bawdy joke at women’s expense is out of character with the rest of the play. The next passage marked as William’s, another song that directly follows the first passage, valorizes marriage in a way not yet seen in the convent: after the dancers pair up, the singer declares, “So home by Couples, and thus draw / Our selves by holy Hymen’s law” (123, italics in original). This couplet reverses Lady Happy’s theory of love and pleasure to assert the primacy of marriage as divine law. While this passage can support a queer reading in which pairs of women leave the stage to be married, it nonetheless works against Lady Happy’s assertion in the first act that she is “resolv’d to live a single life, and vow Virginity” (101). The third passage marked as William’s is a full scene shot through with bawdy jokes and sexualized double entendres (129-131).

Students who attend to these details craft arguments about the ideological tension between the scenes marked as William’s and other moments in the play, while sometimes asserting that Cavendish is not merely crediting her collaborator but denying ownership of certain passages that work against the convent’s philosophy. This prompt also leads to arguments about genre: through the slips of
paper, Cavendish performs discomfort with the comic ending and the cross-sex marital closure it demands. Instead, she makes her husband responsible for this ending. If students felt tricked by the ending, they might find, through Masten, that this emotion is part of the point Cavendish is making as she suggests that both marriage and the structure of comedy are restrictive because they limit the possibilities of pleasure, nature, and the imagination. Students have responded well to this new way of thinking about the last two acts and appreciate seeing their initial emotional reactions lead to deeper analysis.

Masten’s article engages students interested in book history, genre, and Cavendish biography, but Simone Chess’s chapter takes up issues of transgender bodies, identities, and relationships that feel more current and personally and politically urgent to many students. Chess provides a reading of the play informed by trans theory, explaining her approach as using “representations of the relationships between MTF [male-to-female] crossdressed characters and the cisgender characters around them to explore the notion of ‘gender labor,’ in which a cisgender partner (one whose gender identity matches his or her assigned sex) participates in cocreating his or her partner’s queer gender for the benefit of those around them” (138). Chess reads the Princess as transmasculine and argues that Lady Happy performs gender labor by agreeing “to use her own normative gender to prop up the Princess’s masculine performance” (145). Chess concedes that aspects of the play’s ending are troubling, but she argues that oddities and ambiguities in the stage directions at the end suggest that Lady Happy and the Princess/Prince’s “heterosexual marriage may be as constructed and performed as their played heterosexuality in the convent” (147). For this text, students consider the following prompt: What evidence in the play supports Chess’s argument? Building on Chess’s argument, what other trans possibilities might this play provide? In other words, how might you extend or disagree with Chess’s argument to make your own argument applying queer and trans theory to this play? In a follow-up conversation with the students during group work time, I also encourage them to consider the embodied art form of drama: how would casting, mannerisms, and other visual and vocal choices impact the play’s trans potential?

Students who choose this prompt have a range of reactions. Many are excited by Chess’s reading of the Princess/Prince as transmasculine and point to moments in Act 4 when Lady Happy plays a shepherdess or a sea goddess beside the Princess’s performance as a shepherd or Neptune. Attentive readers also note that the Princess seems to be creating a new kind of masculinity in the pastoral masques of Act 4. In the first of these masques, for instance, the Princess plays the third shepherd to woo the shepherdess played by Lady Happy. The first
shepherd claims that he will die if Lady happy does not return his love, and the second focuses not on love but on the economic assets he would bring to their marriage (119). Neither the first shepherd’s clichés nor the second shepherd’s emphasis on economics takes into account Lady Happy’s individuality or desires. The Princess/Prince, though, offers a long speech praising Lady Happy’s intelligence and connection to the natural world. This speech opens:

My Shepherdess, your Wit flies high,
Up to the Skie,
And views the Gates of Heaven,
Which are the Planets Seven,
Sees how fixt Stars are plac’d,
And how the Meteors wast;
What makes the Snow so white,
And how the Sun makes light… (119-20)

Here, the Princess/Prince expresses a love inspired by Lady Happy’s celestial and earthly knowledge. The Princess/Prince, in other words, values Lady Happy for her thoughts and as a full person rather than as a poetic trope or a means to economic stability. In this way, as Lady Happy and the Princess/Prince together create the character’s masculinity, they also create a new form of masculinity that diverges from and improves upon conventional models of masculinity in seventeenth-century poetry. Students who take this approach sometimes argue that the play’s ending completes the Princess’s/Prince’s transition by revealing the truth of the character’s identity, in which case the comic ending wields not an oppressive reassertion of heteronormativity, but rather a generative power to affirm trans identity.

Other students respond to Chess by reading the Princess/Prince as transfeminine instead, noting the character’s reluctance to leave the convent both in a soliloquy in Act 4 and when discovered as the Prince in Act 5. These students also contrast the Princess/Prince’s ability to pass as a woman in the convent with a scene in Act 2 in which the other male characters consider dressing as women to enter the convent but eventually discard the idea because they doubt their ability to perform aristocratic femininity convincingly. As one male character asserts, “it will be as great a difficulty to raise our Voices to a Treble-sound, as for Women to press down their voices to a Base; besides, We shall never frame our Eyes and Mouths to such coy, dissembling looks, and pretty simpering Mopes and Smiles, as they do” (109). This character and the other men in the scene look down on aristocratic femininity and describe it as a performance to which they are not suited, but students note that when the Princess appears on stage for the first time in the next
scene in what seems a deliberate juxtaposition, this character fully embodies femininity without mocking it, fitting in seamlessly with the other women and succeeding where the male characters from the previous scene imagine failing. These students end up debating whether the ending forces the Princess back into a male role she does not want, or whether it instead leaves open the possibility that her marriage to Lady Happy will provide the space for her to continue living, at least in private, as a masculine woman. Students who choose this prompt develop a greater appreciation for scholarly debate as they argue through the many ways of applying trans theory to this play, and they raise important questions about performance as they think deeply about how a production might cast a transgender or nonbinary actor as the Princess in order to avoid the potential transphobia of crossdressing comedy.

Like both Masten and Chess, Megan Cole provides a new way of making sense of Convent’s comic ending. Cole applies asexual modes of reading to the play to argue that the unsatisfying ending offers a searing critique of compulsory allosexuality (the assumption that everyone wants to have sex) and sexual reproduction. She argues that

the convent’s queerness is evident in its centering of virginity, its modeling of an alternative kinship network for women, and its reproductive ideology, which links asexual virginity with creative fecundity despite its foreclosure of heterosexual, biological reproduction. Although the play culminates in a traditional marriage, it in fact mocks the allossexual theatrical convention of equating heterosexual unions with happiness. (84)

For Cole, then, the anger the ending provokes in some readers reflects one of Cavendish’s primary goals for this play. The prompt I provide with this article is similar to the prompt I provide with Chess: What evidence in the play supports Cole’s argument? How might you build on, extend, or disagree with Cole to make your own argument applying queer and asexual theory to this play?

Students who choose this prompt note that in the first act, Lady Happy vows to live “a single life” surrounded by a network of female friends and that the focus in the convent is on enjoying not sex, but luxury clothing, beautiful artwork, perfumes, music, and fine food (101). They also focus on the Act 3 vignettes dramatizing the misery that marriage and motherhood cause women (111-117). They might also note that in the final scene, after Lady Happy has married the Prince, she is referred to as the Princess and is quite literally no longer “Happy.” Students working with Cole’s article find their angry response to the play’s
ending validated and also see that they might redirect that anger by considering that Cavendish might not have tricked them, but rather may have aimed to provoke anger on purpose. In the process, they, too, begin to think more critically about the conventions of early modern comedy and also about their own expectations for what constitutes a “happy” ending.

**Conclusion: Outcomes and applications**

I teach this lesson on critical engagement in a single seventy-five-minute session, but it would also work spread out over two fifty-minute class periods or a longer span of time, depending on student needs. The students in my class already have some experience reading theory and literary scholarship when they approach this activity, so instructors who are using this activity to introduce scholarly or theoretical engagement might want to plan an additional class period. These three pieces of scholarship offer different samples of what queer theory can do, and they engage students with a wide range of interests, from modern gender and sexual identity categories to Cavendish biography and book history. All three prompts also point students to specific scenes for close reading, thereby encouraging them to pay closer attention to Cavendish’s language and poetic forms. This lesson might also find a home in a literature survey or a women writers course, where it would bring queer theory to the center of the discussion. My students present their work in groups orally to the class, but some instructors might choose to collect the students’ initial in-class writing and/or a revised group-authored paragraph.

Since two of the scholarly texts I use in this lesson approach an early modern play through modern identity categories, it is important throughout this lesson to make clear for students both how early modern notions of sex and sexuality were different from our own, and yet how methods informed by modern questions about sexuality and sexual identity can enrich both our historical understanding of early texts and the way these texts continue to carry meaning in the present. Instructors seeking more grounding in the methods of queer history might consult the introduction to Valerie Traub’s *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (2002) and part 1 of Traub’s *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (2016), both of which provide useful overviews of methods in the field as well as details about Traub’s own queer historicist methods. For a different model that posits a method characterized by “a queer historical impulse…toward making connections across time,” I recommend medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1).
In my course “LGBTQ+ Literature and Culture,” as in other general education courses or courses for undergraduates not well-versed in early modern literature and literary scholarship, this lesson provides a number of benefits. Students improve their close reading skills, develop tools for approaching early literature, and build skills and confidence in entering scholarly debates. Students unfamiliar with the genre of early modern comedy and its restoration of order through marriage at first see Cavendish doing something normative and conservative with the play’s ending, but these articles give us a chance to discuss the constraints of genre against which Cavendish pushes as well as the tools queer theory can provide for understanding comedy of the long eighteenth century in new ways. Queer theory can help students see how comic resolutions can sometimes operate as a critique of heteronormativity instead of a reassertion of it, an issue that also appears in many of Shakespeare’s comedies, including Measure for Measure, All’s Well That Ends Well, Much Ado About Nothing, and Twelfth Night. After the activity, students express surprise at finding so much in Convent that resonates with the ways they and their peers think and talk about sexuality, relationships, and gender identity in the twenty-first century, which in turn raises their interest in early women writers and the history of sexuality. Indeed, some students develop an enthusiasm for Cavendish and seek out other English and philosophy courses at our college in which they can read more of her work. This lesson also demonstrates the payoffs of thinking about the past using the tools of queer and trans theory and places a woman writer at the center of our inquiry. Such an approach invites students to see a rich past that works against the development of the modern ideologies of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory allosexuality, and binary gender.

Notes

1 This essay contributes to Part I of the “Concise Collection on Teaching the Works of Margaret Cavendish,” guest edited by E Mariah Spencer, Aphra Behn Online, vol. 14, no. 1, 2024. To read the essays in this collection, follow this link: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol14/iss1/. Part II will be published in Fall 2024.

2 Edelman uses the term “reproductive futurism” to discuss the ways American political discourses preserve heteronormativity by focusing on the future through the figure of a symbolic Child whom we are obligated to protect (2).

3 For a fuller analysis of how Epicurean philosophy applies to The Convent of Pleasure, see Lisa Walters. See also Line Cottegnies, who charts Cavendish’s shifting attitudes toward and uses of Epicurean philosophy across her career.

4 Although Cavendish’s plays were never performed publicly during her lifetime, a number of scholars, including Sophie Tomlinson, Marta Straznicky, Julie Crawford, and Katherine R. Kellett, have argued for the critical payoffs of analyzing the performative elements of these plays.
For resources and research on asexuality, see the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), Liza Blake and Jenna McKellips’s The Asexuality and Aromanticism Bibliography, and Angela Chen’s ACE: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex. For more research on early modern asexualities, see “Early Modern Asexuality and Performance: An ACMRS Roundtable” and Liza Blake, Simone Chess, Catherine Clifford, and Ashley “Aley” O’Mara’s “A Bibliography for Early Modern Asexualities.”

In The Renaissance of Lesbianism, Traub articulates her method as “maintaining an awareness of the difference between past and present while refusing to capitulate to prior ideas of what the past might have been,” meaning that she seeks to offer a bold new history that refutes widely held historicist assumptions about women’s same-sex erotics in the past (16). In Thinking Sex, she “reframe[es] the history of sexuality as an epistemological problem” and takes lesbian erotics as an example of how queer methods can reframe charges of anachronism into more pedagogically productive questions: “insofar as the central question in the history of female eroticism has been how to talk about ‘lesbianism’ before the advent of modern identity categories, we would do well to consider how this question of anachronistic terminology can morph into an ontological question—what is lesbianism in any given era?—as well as how these queries might be supplemented with the epistemological question: how do we know it?” (2, 54). In other words, queer historical methods can help us access ways of thinking and knowing about the past that are unavailable if we surrender to charges of anachronism instead of using the tools at our disposal in the present to think about and with the past.

See also Madhavi Menon’s Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film (2008).

Works Cited


Appendix: Handout

Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure:* Three Perspectives from Queer Theorists


In this article, Masten reports on an interesting discovery he made while visiting archives to look at first editions of Cavendish’s *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668), the volume that includes *The Convent of Pleasure.* He found that the phrase “Written by my Lord Duke” that appears three times before scenes or chunks of poetry in Acts 4 and 5 of *The Convent of Pleasure* isn’t printed directly on the page; rather, it appears on slips of paper that were pasted into the book after it was printed (see pp. 122, 123, and 129). He notes that these slips are unique in printed books of the period because while printers occasionally use slips to correct errors, Cavendish’s slips “add; they supplement; there is nothing printed below them; they correct a blank” (53).

Masten goes on to put these slips into context with Cavendish’s interest in performance of her authorial identity and with her extensive collaboration with her husband William. He argues that inherent to Cavendish’s work is a tension between her own assertion of a distinctive authorial voice and her performance of an idealized collaborative relationship with her husband, which she describes in a prefatory letter to the volume by saying that their “Wits join as in Matrimony.” Masten argues that “the slips, pasted on at some point after the printing of the pages, perhaps after the binding of the book, either are an afterthought or are performed as one” (56).

For Masten, this performance raises a number of questions: “Is a paste-on a correction, or a supplement, or a continued improvisation or afterthought? What does it mean, in 1668, to afterthink one’s husband, or to act as if one has? What does it mean to use printed pasted strips not as corrections…but as apparently individual first-person utterances (‘Written by my Lord Duke’) that are nonetheless mechanically reproduced?” (58). These questions lead Masten to an analysis of authorship, collaboration, the ideology of companionate marriage, and the “sociable virginity”—the practices of “groups of women separated from the company of men, living in the company of their own kind, and thus empowered” (65)—depicted in *The Convent of Pleasure* elsewhere in Cavendish’s writing.
Prompt: Look at the passages and scenes following the three paste-in slips in *The Convent of Pleasure*. What is the effect of marking these scenes off as authored by William? What details in these scenes might Cavendish not want to “own”? What might Cavendish be saying about the end of her play by marking these particular passages as his rather than hers? You might think about the genre here (early modern comedies require marriage at the end). Starting from Masten’s findings, what “I say” might you make to build on his “they say”?


In this chapter, Chess explores the “relationship between MTF [male-to-female] crossdressers, their partners, and their communities” in three early modern texts, including *Convent* (138). Chess argues that these texts “explore the notion of ‘gender labor,’ in which a cisgender partner (one whose gender identity matches his or her assigned sex) participates in cocreating his or her partner’s queer gender for the benefit of those around them,” which enables analysis of both lovers as queer and “moves the discussion of crossdressers or genderqueer individuals and their partners beyond sex to include other aspects of their lived experience” (138).

Drawing on scholarship by Jane Ward and J. Halberstam, Chess explains the term “gender labor”: “Being ‘the girl’ is perhaps the most apparent way that femme partners of trans* masculine individuals bolster their partners’ genders, one in which a partner develops or exaggerates her own gender performance to supplement and enhance her partner’s. By playing ‘the girl’ in appearance, domestic roles, and social situations, the femme partner creates space for her partner to be ‘the boy,’ even when that performance is ironic or queer” (140).

About *The Convent of Pleasure*, Chess argues, “the cisgender Lady Happy helps her MTF crossdressed partner, the Princess, to play a masculine role well before s/he/they gives up his/her/their crossdressed disguise” (141). As soon as the Princess joins the convent, Lady Happy “notices and admires the Princess’s masculine gender presentation. Lady Happy takes this admiration a step further when she agrees to co-create a masculine identity for the Princess, supporting the latter’s right to masculine presentation even within the all-female cloister” (143).

Chess concedes that parts of the ending are troubling, including Lady Happy’s loss of her name and the convent, but she argues that “the stage directions show how little has changed in the co-production of gender performance between the
lovers. Other than the switch from Princess to Prince, the wedding’s stage directions show the exact same couples and organizing of gender as the crossdressed scenes do. Rather than resolving the crossdressing plot with a straight marriage, then, the stage directions show that the gender labor of the couple continues, and, further, that their heterosexual marriage may be as constructed and performed as their played heterosexuality in the convent” (147).

Prompt: What evidence in the play supports Chess’s argument? In other words, how would you prove her “I say”? Building on Chess’s argument, what other trans possibilities might this play provide? Do you read the Princess/Prince as transmasculine or transfeminine? How might you extend her argument to add your own “I say” applying queer and trans theory to this play?


Cole reads *The Convent of Pleasure* with an asexual lens to argue that the unsatisfying ending offers a searing critique of compulsory allosexuality (the assumption that everyone wants to have sex) and sexual reproduction. She argues that “recognizing *The Convent of Pleasure* as a rejection of penetrative sex and pregnancy illuminates the play’s investments in theorizing queer communities and asexual reproduction for women. In this sense, the play has two inextricable ideological projects: rejecting traditional sexual reproduction and envisioning queer alternatives to such” (84).

Cole’s central argument is that “the convent’s queerness is evident in its centering of virginity, its modeling of an alternative kinship network for women, and its reproductive ideology, which links asexual virginity with creative fecundity despite its foreclosure of heterosexual, biological reproduction. Although the play culminates in a traditional marriage, it in fact mocks the allosexual theatrical convention of equating heterosexual unions with happiness” (84).

Expanding on the queer possibilities enabled by using the vocabulary of asexuality to analyze the play, Cole argues that “while asexuality is commonly mischaracterized as oppositional to reproduction, Cavendish, refuting medical and religious ideology of the period, describes asexual virginity as an inherently productive state” and that “the play also depicts asexuality as capable of generating erotic pleasure, despite its rejection of sexual relationships” (85).
Finally, Cole asserts that in the ending, “just as in the vignettes, heteronormative sexuality is equated with violence and death, a sharp contrast to the vitality of the all-female convent. In this sense, the play’s ending bolsters its critique of heteronormativity. The striking changes in the final acts of the play in terms of tone and voice support the notion that this was not written as a happy ending but rather as the final piece of evidence in the case Cavendish is building against reproductive norms” (90).

Prompt: What evidence in the play supports Cole’s argument? In other words, how would you prove her “I say”? Building on Cole’s argument, how might you extend her argument to add your own “I say” applying queer and asexual theory to this play?