Gender and Cross-dressing in the Seventeenth Century: Margaret Cavendish Reads Shakespeare

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Abstract

Is there a woman in Shakespeare? This might sound facetious, but it is not so outlandish in the context of boy actors. Elizabethan drama was after all designed and stage-managed by men mostly for men. In this context, is there an "essential" woman on the stage? In this essay, I examine issues of gender and sexual identity in Shakespeare's drama by looking at how one particular woman reader of the seventeenth century, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, perceived femininity in his plays. In particular, I look at what can be read as a commentary on the ambivalent ending of *Measure for Measure* in her own *Convent of Pleasure* (1668) to try and offer a contextualized reflection on notions of gender expectations, and issues of reception.

Is there a female character in Shakespeare? This might sound tongue-in-cheek, but not so outlandish when confronting once again the bare fact that female roles were held by young actors, and that we are dealing after all with a theatre designed and stage-managed by men mostly for men. Is there a "woman" (even a mythic one) in Shakespeare? And what does this mean? In this article, I will discuss and reflect on issues of gender and sexual identity in Shakespeare's drama by comparing our modern perspectives with how *one* seventeenth-century woman (and author), Margaret Cavendish, perceived the representation of women in Shakespeare. In one of her plays in particular, Cavendish obviously gave the issue of cross-dressing as it was represented in Shakespeare a great deal of thought. Published in 1668, *The Convent of Pleasure*[1] reveals her familiarity with several of Shakespeare's comedies in which cross-dressing played a key role. My claim is that this 1668 play written by a woman only half a century after Shakespeare's death offers a fascinating insight into historicized gender expectations and conceptions of sexual identity. Cavendish was obviously fascinated with the question of transvestism, which included that of the cross-dressed actor. Interestingly, her play shows both an awareness of the constructed nature of gender, and of the resisting presence of the female as an essential identity. After describing what I call the paradox of the critic in which I think we are now trapped, I will turn to Cavendish's treatment of the

theme of cross-dressing. I am hoping that this detour can finally help us return to Shakespeare's female character as performed by cross-dressed actors with a fresh perspective.

The paradox of the critic

Everything has been said, it would seem, about the implications of having a male actor playing a female role, a fact that has become so counter-intuitive to our own perception of Shakespeare's female characters today. Two main schools of thought can perhaps be distinguished in recent criticism for convenience's sake. First those who claim that the "women" created on stage were in fact impersonations as alien to the nature of the actors as the men they played, be they Romans or aristocrats; in the words of Juliet Dusinberre:

> Why should the fact of the male body make it impossible to conceive of a woman on the stage, any more than the fact of the commoner's body might make it impossible to conceive of Richard's body? Both are figments of the actor's art[2].

'Women' embodied on stage by the actors should be taken at face value as mimetic creations, Dusinberre implies, in a tradition which assumes that the audience knows how to interpret in their mind's eyes what they see, beyond the stage on which the actors stand. As Dympna Callaghan aptly reminds us too, «transvestite theater was the norm, not the exception»[3]. Yet looking at Elizabethan drama in this light calls into question the centrality of homoeroticism in Shakespeare's drama, which some have seen as the inevitable consequence of all-male casts. David Mann, among others, takes to task what he sees as a new form of orthodoxy as represented, for instance, in the works of Stephen Orgel or Jonathan Goldberg, and claims that the prevailing view of the theatre as a hothouse of homosexual activity is largely overstated[4].

For the other main school of thought, which Orgel and Goldberg exemplify, the body of the actor playing a female part was never meant to be ignored in the process. Its opacity was precisely what the playwright worked on. It was alternatively displayed and concealed in transvestite roles which self-consciously toyed with the sexual ambiguity of the young actors who could be shown romantically involved (or otherwise) with men on stage. These critics insist that the theatre of that period was somehow always a man's theatre written and performed by men for men, which explicitly played on the homoerotic implications of a boy actor strutting in female garb for the benefit of male gazes.

It is of course possible to see these schools of thoughts merely as different ways of successively reading the presence of boy actors on stage and it is not necessary to consider them as mutually exclusive. A play might explore instances of the homoerotic implications of a given situation, without necessarily being entirely homoerotically-oriented, if that is conceivable. However,

this critical paradigm has now solidified, and it is hard to go beyond the form of aporia that it has led to. The only way to escape from the aporia would be to refuse the paradigmatic alternative and to embrace both positions as equally valid and conclusive, a form of paradox that Shakespeare would not have denied: a boy actor *is* and *is not* Cleopatra. The essence of theatre, and of the mimetic illusion (and *belief*) on which it is based, reside in this very paradox: I can believe it is a convincing representation of a form of reality, *because* (and only because) I know it is not true[5]. Therefore the presence of the boy actor's body underneath the costume and the role is not effaced, nor is it to be erased, since it is the very condition of possibility of a successful illusion. Like the actors' masks in Ancient Greece, the boy actor constitutes a signifier of theatricality, a trigger, or threshold for a convincing illusion. What this means, however, is that the idea of a fixed "female identity" or essence is naturally meaningless on the stage, as Dympna Callaghan again points out about such a "strong" character as Cleopatra:

> Whether she is thoroughly feminine or thoroughly homoerotic, that Cleopatra is so compelling a *female* character role written for a male actor (whether or not it was ever performed by one) indicates the impossibility of pure sexual or gender categories. The crude category of woman, defined only by biology and outside the text and insulated from the ways in which cultural representations produce and reinforce assigned subject positions, is a classification of no more substantial existence than the most outlandish fiction[6].

Four centuries before Judith Butler, Shakespeare's drama demonstrates that gender is a cultural construct enacted through performance. Women on stage must be seen as representations of subject positions themselves created in a culturally-defined environment.

Cavendish, reader of Shakespeare

It might be interesting to turn to Margaret Cavendish to test whether these perspectives on gender make sense for a reader or spectator almost contemporary with Shakespeare. Cavendish was obviously very interested in the representation of female subjects in Shakespeare's drama, as well as in the subject of cross-dressing. She mentions Shakespeare several times in her works. In *Sociable Letters* (1664), she comments on his talent and praises him as «a Natural Orator, as well as a Natural Poet»[7], thus contributing to the legend of Shakespeare as the mellifluous, natural genius in contrast with more learned authors such as Ben Jonson. On the subject of his female roles, Cavendish comments:

> One would think the he had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman, for who could Describe Cleopatra Better than he hath done, and many other Females of his

own Creating, as Nan Page, Mrs. Page, Mrs. Ford, the Doctors Maid, Bettrice, Mrs Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, and others, too many to Relate?[8]

This passage focuses mainly on the mature women in Shakespeare (from *Anthony and Cleopatra, Henry IV, Part 2*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), rather than on the young romantic heroines such as Rosalind and Viola, although she was clearly interested in Shakespeare's romantic comedies as well, as we shall see. Her perspective seems here at first essentialist – one would think Shakespeare was a woman, because his women are so true to life, – although this essentialism is simultaneously denied and subverted by the fluid sexual identity almost magically attributed to the playwright: the idea of the metamorphosis calls to mind Ovid's numerous tales of sex change, as well as the cross-dressed actors on the Elizabethan stage.

In *The Convent of Pleasure*, Cavendish uses episodes and devices borrowed from several of Shakespeare's comedies to reflect on transvestism and its implications. In this play, a young heiress, Lady Happy, decides to withdraw from the marriage market, and found a lay "convent" alongside with about twenty young ladies – a convent, in fact, which reminds us of Rabelais's *Abbaye de Thélème*, although it is completely single-sex. This is also reminiscent of the plot of *Love's Labour's Lost*, although it is the women who decide here to withdraw from the company of men. This causes the utter dismay of the gentlemen of the city. A Prince, hearing about Lady Happy's scheme and her beauty, decides to enter the convent disguised as a Princess, but his true identity is only revealed to the spectator-reader as well as to the other characters at the very end of the play. In the Convent, the ladies while away their time in the most pleasant manner, indulging in all the lawful pleasures the senses can afford. As their main pastimes, they stage short dramatic entertainments for their own benefits, just as real ladies in Cavendish's time might stage or read plays among their family circles. Once inside the convent, the "Princess" asks for permission to cross-dress as a man, to become Lady Happy's "Servant". The "Princess," i.e. the Prince acting the part of the Princess who is herself cross-dressed, then gradually manages to seduce Lady Happy under the guise of a "Shepherd" in the course of a pastoral in which the latter plays a Shepherdess. In the last Act, the Prince's true identity is revealed by his servant who comes to require him to resume his own civil responsibilities. The Prince then publicly announces his intention to marry Lady Happy, who remains strangely silent, only exchanging a few lines with her heretofore invisible jester at the very end of the play.

It is clear that the ending engages with the denouement of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure.* Isabella, who, in Shakespeare's play, is constantly characterized by her eloquence and her wit up to the last Act, remains suspiciously silent after the Duke, disguised for most of the play, publicly declares his decision to marry her – a blunt denial of her own expressed desire to become a

Nun and to withdraw from the world. At the beginning of the play, indeed, Isabella's calling is clearly presented as a personal decision which implies the choice of chastity. When introduced to the rules of the votarists of Saint Clare she expresses the zeal of the new converted, «rather wishing a more strict restraint» than the one she is presented with[9]. When pressed to yield to Angelo's advances in order to save her brother's life, she defiantly defines her chastity as her most precious attribute – in accordance, in fact, with the dictates of prescriptive morality, but again with a zeal that borders on fanaticism: «Then, Isabel live chaste, and brother, die: / More than our brother is our chastity» (II. 4, 183-184). Seen against this robust upholding of chastity, marriage can be seen here a violation of her vow, a crime only second to sex outside marriage, unambiguously called "fornication" throughout the play, a sin which she is pressed to commit both by Angelo and her own brother.

The denouement of *Measure for Measure* has sometimes been interpreted as a necessary return to comic resolution and integration, but it was obviously interpreted as a moral and aesthetic anomaly by a reader of Shakespeare as astute as Cavendish. The denouement of *The Convent of Pleasure* repeats the interpretive aporia which Kathryn Schwartz describes as the breaking open of «the comic unification of necessity and desire, revealing that they must converge but cannot cohere»[10]. Like Isabella, Lady Happy expresses her desire for chastity at the beginning of the play. For Cavendish's heroine the choice of chastity is explicitly described as a strategy to avoid being enslaved by men:

> Men are the only troublers of Women […]. Women […] were mad to live with Men, who make the Female sex their slaves; but I will not be so inslaved, but will live retired from their Company[11].

Lady Happy's "conversion" to marriage after she discovers she has fallen in love with the Prince is then clearly described as a betrayal of her ideal of a female community set apart from society. Love is in fact described as a form of disgrace:

> O Nature, O you gods above,
> Suffer me not to fall in Love;
> O strike me dead here in this place
> Rather than fall into disgrace (p. 239).

It is not completely clear here whether she feels she might fall into disgrace because she has fallen in love with a woman – since she is not supposed to have discovered the Prince's real identity at this stage, – or because she knows she will have to recant and announce her conversion to an idea of marriage that she had so violently rejected before. However, the dominant feeling here is clearly shame, most probably the shame of losing her status as an independ-

ent, rational subject, the only "absolute Monarch" of herself, when she lived as «Emperess of the whole World», as Madam Mediator describes the lay nuns' happy condition (p. 226). This is one way of accounting for her conspicuous silence at the crucial moment of the Prince's final, public declaration.

But there is an important difference between the endings of *Measure for Measure* and of *The Convent of Pleasure*, which draws attention again, I think, to Cavendish's dissatisfaction with Shakespeare's play, or more exactly, perhaps, with what she must have considered a lack of realism in his depiction of female psychology, which needed amending. In order to soften the violence of the denouement Cavendish invents a psychological, sentimental background to justify Lady Happy's silence. If Happy remains silent in the end, it is not primarily because she is shocked into silence by an all-powerful powerful male (as seems to be the case in *Measure for Measure*), but because she has fallen in love with her Prince/Princess. In the *Convent of Pleasure*, in contrast with *Measure for Measure*, several asides help the reader point at the moments when Lady Happy comes to the full realization that reason must yield to passion, and her desire of freedom must give way to a man's superior will. This alternative version of the same ending highlights even more blatantly the fact that in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* Isabella is pointedly *not* given such feelings. In this instance, Cavendish's reworking of Shakespeare's play can be interpreted indirectly as a critical comment on its puzzling ending, as a reaction expressing dissatisfaction with his female character's final treatment. By adding a psychological justification for her own heroine in contrast, Cavendish implicitly points out that Isabella might have been treated unfairly – and she incidentally steps into the mimetic illusion described by Dusinberre above.

The way Lady Happy's passion is described is also extremely interesting to understand how Cavendish must have read cases of cross-dressing in Shakespeare's romantic comedies. It shows a slightly different conception of gender and sexual identity. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, Cavendish uses the familiar topos of comedic cross-dressing encountered both in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, offering a fascinating insight into a contemporary perception by a woman of the impact of cross-dressing and its role in the codification, or unsettling, of gender. The situation between Lady Happy and the "Princess" is indeed strongly reminiscent of the *risqué*, one-way romance between Viola cross-dressed as Cesario and Olivia, as well as the more conventional story between Viola – Cesario and Orsino, or between Rosalind crossed-dressed as Ganymede and Orlando. Cavendish uses the topos first in a conventional way. As in Shakespeare, the disguise allows the lovers, who otherwise would have found it hard to cross paths, to meet and court. But Cavendish goes one step further than Shakespeare by having her characters also *act* in a play: the disguise is doubled-up as it were, as her (cross-dressed) characters fall in love with each other while acting a play (in a way that is not totally dissimilar to

Rosalind – Ganymede teaching Orlando how to woo), a play in which they perform a part. It is not love at first sight we are dealing with here, but love caused by make-believe, through the work of imagination and fantasy, a familiar baroque topos: the characters fall in love by figuring forth a situation of courtship and by imitating feelings of love in a formulaic pastoral. The play-within-the-play in *Convent* creates a space in which mimicry conjures up actual passion. It is by imitating a fiction of pastoral love between a Shepherd and his Shepherdess that the Prince, doubly cross-dressed (first as a Princess, secondly as a Princess cross-dressing as a shepherd), hence reassigned to his initial gender, and Lady Happy are led to experience the feelings they are only supposed to be acting.

Cavendish develops here an idea that had only been fleetingly suggested in *As You Like It* in the courtship scene between Orlando and Rosalind cross-dressing as Ganymede (Act IV, Scene I), where what the spectator sees is Orlando wooing a young man (Rosalind crossed-dressed) in lieu of his lady. But Cavendish does not hesitate to show the potentially devastating consequences of giving free vein to fantasy in such a way: when the spectre of same-sex love is conjured up, it leads in *The Convent of Pleasure* to explicit and perhaps damaging consequences. This is another important difference between the use of the device of cross-dressing in Cavendish and in Shakespeare. Where in Shakespeare, the homoerotic implications are playfully suggested and toyed with, before being resolved almost magically by the revelation of the true gender of the cross-dressed characters (Rosalind, Viola), or the miraculous arrival of a providential twin (Sebastian), *The Convent of Pleasure* does not shy away from the more serious homoerotic implications the supposed gender of the "Princess" suggests. When Lady Happy first feels attracted to her "Princess", she appears to be dismayed at experiencing such strong feelings for another woman: «My Name is *Happy;* and so was my Condition, before I saw this Princess; but now I am like to be the most unhappy Maid alive: But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could a Man?» (p. 234). Madam Mediator pointedly comments on Lady Happy's wan complexion, which she interprets as a suspicious sign of her loose morals, even taking the "Princess" to task for it: «give me leave to tell you, I am not so old, nor yet so blind, / But that I see you are too kind» (p. 240). She even comments later on their hot kisses: «me-thought they kissed with more alacrity than Women use, a kind of Titillation, and more Vigorous» (p. 244). Besides, several stage directions show Lady Happy and the "Princess" in each other's arms, kissing (for instance, p. 234) – fairly *risqué* moments given that the "Princess" is still believed both by the spectator – reader and by Lady Happy to be a woman. One also remembers Lady Happy's dismay at her imminent "disgrace", the cause of which remains ambiguous: is she referring to attraction for another woman, as the text seems to indicate, or is she simply commenting on her failed vow of chastity?

It is clear that Cavendish makes explicit what was a playful, homoerotic subtext in a play like *Twelfth Night.* In Shakespeare's play, transvestism leads to a tension which Shakespeare comically resolves with the aptly-timed revelation that Orsino's page is a woman, and secondly with the fortunate coincidence of the reappearance of Viola's twin brother – which allows a painless, happy substitution deemed satisfactory by all. That Cavendish should give a full development to what was only lightly teased out in Shakespeare clearly shows that contemporary audiences and readers *did* register the homoerotic innuendoes implicit in such situations of transvestism. Cavendish's perhaps unsubtle recycling of *topoi* found in Shakespeare indicates her degree of awareness of the *risqué* subtext of these early comedies. On this point, Cavendish proves right the second school of thought that I described further up.

Does Cavendish ever show any awareness that female parts were performed by male actors in Shakespeare's time? She does not comment on this fact, and it is not known whether she meant her plays ever to be performed, and if so if she had actresses or male actors in mind for her female parts – or whether she was even thinking of a single-sex cast (either all male or all female), for that matter. Given her presence on the continent in the 1640s and 1650s, where the common practice was mixed casts, and given that women on stage were still a new phenomenon in the 1660s, it is most likely that she had women actresses in mind for her women's parts, but we are left to speculate about what she intended for her male parts, most particularly for her character of the Prince. In the 2003 filmed version that was made by Gweno Williams and her students, the cast was all-female, except for one male actor who adamantly refused to play the role of the "Princess", therefore the performance had to rely on costume choices to differentiate genders (breeches for male parts; skirts for female parts), echoing and also complicating in a way the dramatic problem posed by an all-male cast for Elizabethan playwrights[12]. However, the character of the "Princess" clearly presented an interesting dilemma to Cavendish, as it does to the reader still today, since the stage directions do not reveal the real identity of the "Princess" until "she" is unmasked on stage in Act V. From her first appearance, the "Princess" is in fact described as ambivalent in terms of gender by Madam Mediator, who talks of «a Princely brave Woman truly, of a Masculine Presence» (p. 226) – which some critics consider as a fairly transparent signal referring to her true gender, but this remains open to speculation[13]. In many respects, the "Princess" is marked in the text as a male body with a female gender. "She" complicates assigned genders further by invoking "her" femininity as a licence for physical rapprochement with Lady Happy, also boasting of her "masculine mind":

Lady Happy. But innocent Lovers do not use to kiss.
Prin. Not any act more frequent among amongst us Women-kind; nay, it were a sin in friendship, should not we kiss… (*They imbrace and kiss, ad hold each other in their Arms.*)

These my Imbraces though a Femal kind,
May be as fervent as a Masculine mind.

The "Princess" presents herself repeatedly as an ambivalent being, female in essence, but choosing to dress in male garb, and identifying with the male gender roles that go with her costumes – very conventionally-codified roles, ranging from a Shepherd in a Pastoral, to Neptune in a Masque; in other words the Prince is a man assuming the female sexual identity of a character who (in the story) chooses a socially-constructed male gender. Cavendish, perhaps unwittingly, seems here to expand a very modern conception of gender as distinct from sexual identity, although in the context of the play this dilemma is of course only fleetingly explored: the Prince's sexual identity and gender do in fact coincide in the end, and the breach between the two was only an illusion, while Lady Happy's sexual identity itself remains stable all along. But the delay with which this information is finally delivered to the readers or spectators is remarkable, since they are made to believe until the very end that the strange "Princess" is in fact a "Prince". In none of Shakespeare's comedies is the disguise used in this manner, unbeknownst to the spectator or reader.

In *The Convent of Pleasure*, there are no signs of Cavendish ever actively thinking about the implications of having male actors playing female parts, or even for that matter of using an all-female cast in performance. It seems that by 1668 all-male casts were a thing of the past for someone like Cavendish who was born in 1623 and had been very young when all-male performances were still the order of the day. It seems that Cavendish read Shakespeare's plays mostly "for the plot", showing her interest in his characters' psychology, which seems to indicate that she thought they were convincing as mimetic, female characters – which would make her an advocate of the first critical attitude towards gender that I defined at the beginning of this article. This did not prevent her from being highly aware of the gender issues posed by his comedies, however, and from drawing them out in an extremely *risqué* way. Teasing out the possibilities and implications of cross-dressing, Cavendish brings to the fore the homoerotic subtexts that Shakespeare treated more playfully and more lightly. Perhaps we should see the Prince's status in the plot as emblematic of the situation of the Elizabethan male actor after all, this «Princely brave woman with a Masculine presence», a male body refusing to efface itself behind its female part.

Notes

1. The play was published in a volume entitled *Playes Never Before Printed* (London 1668).

2. J. Dusinberre, *Women and Boys Playing Shakespeare*, in D. Callaghan (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 2000, p. 251.

3. D. Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage*, Routledge, London-New York 2000, p. 15.

4. D. Mann, *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 60. See S. Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996), for instance.

5. This is a paradox that Octave Mannoni has described in psychoanalytical terms in *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène* (Editions du Seuil, Paris 1969).

6. Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women*, cit., p. 13.

7. M. Cavendish, *Sociable Letters*, ed. by J. Fitzmaurice, Broadview Press, Peterborough 2004, p. 178. For more about the influence of Shakespeare on Cavendish, see K. M. Romack, *Margaret Cavendish, Shakespearean Critic*, in Callaghan (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 21-41, and the more recent K. Romack, J. Fitzmaurice (eds.), *Cavendish and Shakespeare, Interconnections*, Ashgate, London 2006.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

9. II. 4. 183-184. *Measure for Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever, Routledge, London 1966.

10. K. Schwartz, *What You Will. Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Space*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2011, p. 178.

11. M. Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure and Other Plays*, ed. A. Shaver, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1999, p. 220. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

12. A. Bennett, *The Duchess Takes the Stage: An Evening of Margaret Cavendish's Plays in Performance. Margaret Cavendish Performance Project. Produced by Gweno Williams. Margaret Cavendish Society Conference, Chester College, Saturday, July 19, 2003*, in "Early Modern Literary Studies", Special Issue 14 (May, 2004): 15.1-10 (http://purl.oclc.org/emls/si-14/bennrevi.html).

13. When the Prince's presence is denounced at end of the play, Madam Mediator exclaims: «O Ladies, Ladies ! you're all betrayed, undone, undone; for there is a man disguised in the *Convent*, search and you'l find it» (p. 243). Judith Haber comments on the phallic "it", here but it can equally be interpreted as a signifier of ambivalence (J. Haber, *Desire and Dramatic Form in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 122). It also reads as a riddle addressed to the reader who has been deceived up till that point.