Margaret’s Beard
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In the final episode of Margaret Cavendish’s romance, Assaulted and Pursued Chastity (1656), the Queen of Amity falls in love with the romance’s heroine, Travellia, who is cross-dressed as a man. When the Queen learns that her new favorite is really a woman, she promises Travellia’s prospective husband, “I will yield her to you, upon that condition you carry her not out of my kingdom; for since I cannot marry her, and so make her my husband, I will keep her if I can, and so make her my friend.”1 The word “friend” was more loaded than it may now appear. It could mean “lover,”2 but even as a label for same-sex relationships, friendship could involve intense romantic yearning, bed-sharing, and, doubtless in some cases, sexual intimacy. While the episode from Cavendish’s romance can therefore take its place in the history of Western homoeroticism, what especially interests me is the role of the husband in this female relationship. What the Queen proposes is not so much a couple as a threesome: Travellia’s marriage will keep her by the Queen’s side. In this essay, I want to examine what this arrangement might have to say about the roles of marriage, masculinity, and secrecy in bonds between early modern women—both those that existed in real life and those that Cavendish portrayed in her fiction.

Of course, as in so many similar plots, the fact that the Queen conceived her love for Travellia when the latter was disguised as a page-boy allows the romance to depict one woman’s desire for another without significantly challenging a heterosexual framework. Travellia’s eventual revelation of her true sex could dissolve the threat of sexual disorder. But in the Queen’s eyes at least, the Prince takes over the function of Travellia’s discarded male clothing; to both enable and mask their erotic relationship. Specifically, the Prince seems to function as the women’s “beard.” A mod-
ern slang term, "beard" refers to a person who publicly poses as one half of a couple to facilitate his partner's illicit relationship with someone else. In queer culture, the word refers to someone who helps closet a gay relationship. The presence of a similar figure in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* raises the questions of whether such closeting was also a feature of early modern same-sex relationships, and what gender-specific functions closeting might serve when these relationships were between women.

Valerie Traub has argued that the period's fiction could explore and idealize female same-sex desire so long as those bonds did not interfere with women's duties to marry and bear children. But while this historical account might suggest that there was little reason for women to hide their strong affections for each other if they otherwise conformed to their prescribed gender roles, in fact there is some evidence that these feelings could not be expressed too overtly. One case study that closely mirrors the situation portrayed in *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* involves siblings Constance Fowler and Herbert Aston and Aston's fiancée, Katherine Thimelby. In a 1636 letter to her brother, Constance describes becoming acquainted with her future sister-in-law and confides, “I confess I have been most deadly in love with her as ever lover was.” Constance continues:

> Truly, I have a great deal of reason to labour hard in persuading you to esteem her, as she is the only wonder of this age. For in the success of your affections depends the happiness of my life; for I have nothing in this world that I can receive contentment in, if this prosper not as I wish... I think, nay, I am certain that the grief of it would kill me.

Ardent as this letter is, it is important to take its language in historical context. It is true that, writing of her relationship with Katherine, Constance tells her brother “there was never any more passionate affectionate lovers than she and I, and... you never knew two creatures more truly and deadly in love with each other than we are.” But Constance also signs the letter to Herbert, “Your dear affectionate lover.” Clearly in this period very similar expressions of affection and even longing could describe quite different sorts of relationships.

Yet the relationship between Constance and Katherine still sounds transgressive. This comes out when Constance describes her first meeting
with Katherine at a family gathering. “Such was our misery,” Constance reports, “that we could not have that time to converse more than by silent expressions . . . and therefore she durst not take notice of me, but as one she honoured being her choice’s sister. . . . But . . . she would sometimes give a look to me as if by chance her eye had so wandered, and then she would steal the prettiest words to me.”

Constance acknowledges that the feelings she and Katherine share exceed what is appropriate for future sisters-in-law. Communicating through silent expressions and stolen glances, the women appear to express a love that “dare not speak its name.” Such veiled interactions seem to have been characteristic of these women’s social set. A poem Katherine wrote to Constance’s close friend, Dorothy Shirley, is about a misread facial expression:

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Madem you say I am sad I ansure noe
unlesse it be because you say I am soe

For I am greved that my exterious show
Should contradict the joye I have from you.
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Cavendish’s fiction also portrays a social world in which certain expressions of affection between women appear inappropriate or transgressive. In her play, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), a character named “Madame Mediator” comments on seeing Lady Happy kissing her friend the Princess: “you know Womens Kisses are unnatural, and me-thought they kissed with more alacrity then Women use, a kind of Titillation, and more Vigorous” (5.2). Madame has just found out that she has “taken a man for a woman”—that the Princess is really a Prince in drag. So the apparently “unnatural” affection this character shared with Lady Happy is natural after all. But this is not where the gender confusions end. A heading tells us that this scene was “Written by my Lord Duke”—or Cavendish’s husband, William, Duke of Newcastle. Furthermore, this phrase only appears in certain editions of the text, where it is printed on a small slip of paper pasted between lines (figs. 1 and 2). As Jeffrey Masten points out, “without the slip, the reader would also have ‘taken a Man for a Woman’ (i.e., would have taken William’s writing for his wife’s).” I would add that the way the text reveals William Cavendish’s involvement implies
A Wassel is carried about and her Shepherd speaks, or Sings.

Written by my Lord...

Jolly Wassel now do bring with Apples drown’d in strother Syllibubs, and sing; I pull their Love-sick T.
SCENE II.

Enter Madam Mediator lamenting and crying with Handkerchief in her hand.

Written by my Lord Duke.

O Gentlemen, that I never had been born, we all undone and lost!

Advis. Why, what's the matter?


Advis. How?

M. Mediat. How, never such a Mistake; why have taken a Man for a Woman.

Advis. Why, a Man is for a Woman.

N. M. Mediat.
a “plot” paralleling that of the drama. For most of the play, the reader (if not necessarily the spectator—depending on how the role is cast) is led to believe that the “Princess” is a female character. We only learn that she is really a he in a soliloquy that is also prefaced with the phrase “Written by my Lord Duke.”12 Since these attributions only appear toward the end of the play, what we have is a double revelation: as the ostensibly female princess is revealed to be a prince, so the ostensibly female-authored text is revealed to have a male co-author. Also at these moments, marriage enters the scene. Lady Happy, who founded the Convent of Pleasure so that she and other women could avoid the trials of marriage without sacrificing pleasure, now finds herself in a courtship that must end in matrimony. And the author similarly reveals that the imaginary feminine world she has created is contingent upon her own relationship with her spouse. As in Assaulted and Pursued Chastity, a husband appears at the moment when the revelation of a cross-dressed character’s true identity seems to foreclose the possibility of female homoeroticism. Yet, also as in Cavendish’s romance, this “husband” seems oddly fabricated. Whereas in Assaulted and Pursued Chastity, he appears as a substitute for the masculine clothing Travellia once wore, in The Convent of Pleasure, William Cavendish’s presence is literally tacked onto the page. The words that are supposed to reveal the author’s true, male identity are themselves something added on top of what was already there. In Assaulted and Pursued Chastity, the husband’s presence also feels supplemental; when the Queen discovers Travellia’s true sex, “her colour came and went, moved by her mixed passions, anger and love; angry that she was deceived, yet still did love, as wishing she had been a man.”13 The final “she” here is ambiguous. Does it refer to Travellia or the Queen herself? And does it matter who is the man in this scenario as long as there is one? Enter the Prince.

Or, Enter the Duke. For this is exactly what Cavendish and her female lover do in what is unquestionably the most bizarre love triangle in her canon. I am speaking of the moment in her science-fiction narrative, A Description of a New World called the Blazing World (1666), where the Empress of the alternate universe, the Blazing World, summons Margaret Cavendish’s soul from our world. The Empress reasons that this should not make the Emperor jealous because Cavendish is “one of my own sex.”
“In truth,” replies the Empress’s spirit servant, “Husbands have reason to be jealous of Platonick Lovers for they are very dangerous, as being not onely very intimate and close, but subtil and insinuating. You say well, replied the Empress; wherefore I pray send me the Duchess of Newcastle’s Soul.”¹⁴ Once the Empress has had the opportunity to “embrace” Cavendish’s soul on numerous occasions, “their meeting did produce such an intimate friendship between them, that they became Platonick Lovers, although they were both Females.”¹⁵ Finally, these female lovers enter the body of Margaret’s husband,

And then the Duke had three Souls in one Body; and had there been but some such Souls more; the Duke would have been like the Grand-Signior in his Seraglio, onely it would have been a Platonick Seraglio.¹⁶

True to the Seraglio ambiance, the Empress’s soul soon grows enamored of the Duke’s, “which the Duchess’s soul perceiving, grew jealous at first, but then considering that no Adultery could be committed amongst Platonick Lovers, and that Platonism was Divine, as being derived from Divine Plato, cast forth of her mind that idea of Jealousie.”¹⁷

There is almost too much going on here. But notice that first the text describes “Platonick” love—even between women—as “dangerous” and justifiably provoking jealousy. But once the scene of the women’s romance is relocated inside the Duke’s body, so-called “Platonick” lovers turn out to be completely innocent. Perhaps this is because in this new situation the women become romantically available to the Duke in his most private of private seraglios. There may also be another reason why in Cavendish’s fictions the presence of the husband can defuse the threat of female homoeroticism. And for this we must consider what made male friendships appear socially acceptable. According to Alan Bray’s now widely accepted account, in the period male friends could openly display physical affection, live as roommates and even bedmates, and be buried together in the same grave, without raising eyebrows.¹⁸ Such relationships only appeared scandalous when they threatened social hierarchies—when, for example, a nobleman decided to make his servant/lover the heir to his fortune.¹⁹ If, instead, the male friends acted as disinterested equals, then their love
seemed an expression of virtue rather than a submission to vice. The arrangements between the Empress and Margaret and William Cavendish, or between Travellia, the Queen, and the Prince, may acknowledge what is submerged in such idealized accounts of masculine friendship: namely, that these bonds were considered virtuous to the extent that they protected and promoted established systems of male privilege. So when female characters attempt to establish similar ties, they require something extra—a “beard” to endow their relationships with the same legitimacy that already protected love between men.

We should also note that the strips of paper pasted into Cavendish’s book of plays cover over blank space. Normally, such paper emendations corrected printing errors, but in this edition these have been crossed out and hand corrected (see figs. 3 and 4). The added pieces of paper therefore call out for interpretation. Covering nothing, their intervention into the text resembles the Prince’s intervention into an all-female space. When his true identity is revealed, we discover not simply that Lady Happy’s desire for the Princess was not “unnatural,” but also that such unnatural desire is probably impossible. Lady Happy says as much when, earlier in the play, she soliloquizes:

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?

No, no, Nature is Nature, and still will be
The same she was from all Eternity. (4.1)

The implication is that emotional relationships between women, because they do not fulfill nature’s goals, must necessarily be innocent, blank like the white page beneath the printed words. This was a typical way to view female affection. In Sir Philip Sidney’s New Arcadia (1594), we find a scene in which two sisters caress each other in bed: “cherishing one another with dear though chaste embraces, with sweet though cold kisses, it might seem that love was come to play him there without dart, or that, weary of his own fires, he was there to refresh himself between their sweet breathing lips.” Of course, the phrases “dear though
chaste” and “sweet though cold” suggest their opposites and open up the scene to erotic interpretation. Similarly, the very fact that in Cavendish’s fictions female relationships need the cover of a husband figure makes these bonds appear as simultaneously nothing and something. And here we might note that, while in early modern English “nothing” was slang for the female genitals, “beard” was slang for pubic hair. Husbands in Cavendish’s texts are “beards” covering a space of female desire that is at once innocent and sexual. Indeed, the husband’s appearance within the text shows that there is something to cover over. While in The Convent of Pleasure Madame Mediator may be distressed that she has “taken a Man for a Woman,” the phrase can be read differently when we think of how, in Assaulted and Pursued Chastity, Travellia “takes” a man for the sake of her relationship with another woman.

Notes

1. Margaret Cavendish, The Blazing World and Other Writings, ed. Kate Lilley (New York: Penguin, 1992), 114. I wish to thank the participants in the Eighth Biennial Meeting of the International Margaret Cavendish Society in Corvallis, Oregon, June, 2009, for their valuable feedback on this essay. I owe a special thanks to James Fitzmaurice, Sara Mendelson, Brandie Sigfried, and Gweno Williams for their expertise and encouragement.

2. Some examples from Shakespeare illustrate this usage: when in Titus Andronicus Saturnine chooses to marry Tamora, he assures his former bride, “Lavinia, though you left me like a churl, / I found a friend” (1.1.486–87), and in The Winter’s Tale Hermione’s reference to another man as her “friend” (1.2.108) sparks her husband’s insane jealousy; The Riverside Shakespeare, 1st ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).


5. Ibid., 237; 238.

6. This is not to discount the possibly incestuous nature of the triangle Fowler wishes to create. But while the polyamorous arrangements I describe in this essay cannot be defined simply in terms of “same-sex desire,” I believe I am justified in focusing on their closeting aspects.

7. Crawford and Gowing, 237.


12. This is at p. 32, Act 4, scene 1. The phrase “Written by my Lord Duke” immediately precedes a song that is then followed by the Prince’s soliloquy. Although in this case the authorship of the Prince’s lines is unclear, the final appearance of the phrase comes immediately before Madame Mediator reveals the Prince’s identity to other characters—when, in other words, the ‘Princess’s’ true identity becomes public knowledge (p. 47).


14. Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, [95] 90, in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy. To Which is Added The Description of a New Blazing World* (London, 1666). (*Blazing World* is paginated separately.)

15. Ibid., 93 [Sig. B’].

16. Ibid., 111.

17. Ibid., 111.


19. An example of such behavior is the case of Mervyn Touchet, the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven, analyzed in Cynthia Herrup’s *A House in Gross Disorder: Sex, Law and the 2nd Earl of Castlehaven*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

20. Masten encourages us to read the insertion of these slips in the text as itself a performance (52–55). My analysis of this performance is of course indebted to Masten’s provocative essay.
