"But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could a Man?": Female Same-Sex Desire in Early Modern Lyric Poetry and Plays

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Introduction

"But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could a Man?" (Cavendish 118). This question lies at the heart of Margaret Cavendish' play *The Convent of Pleasure,* in which Lady Happy struggles with her feelings for a foreign Princess. Cavendish is not the only early modern writer to ask questions about female same-sex desire; indeed, the topic is a prevalent one, both in plays and poetry. This MA thesis examines how several early modern English poets and playwrights draw on and modify discourses about female-female desire.

I will read poems and plays in tandem with early modern discourses of medicine and friendship. Both discourses are arguably two of the more influential text types for early modern understandings of female same-sex desire (Traub 7). I shall discuss them extensively in Chapter One, explaining which views they propose on love between women. For the discourses on medicine, I shall read a variety of texts, from midwifery guidebooks to texts on the importance of female sexual pleasure for health and procreation. These texts generally condemn sexual relations between women, presenting them as transgressing against ideas of gender and as naturally sterile. Thus we find medical men and women writing about the so-called 'tribade', a transgressive woman who apes men by penetrating women, either with a dildo or an enlarged clitoris.

Discourses of friendship propose a different figure: that of the platonic female friend. The early modern model of friendship based itself on classical writers such as Cicero and Aristotle, who argued that friendship was the highest form of love. Both writers also argued that only men were capable of aspiring to this form of love. Although many writers at the start of the early modern period agreed with them, this view changed drastically during the seventeenth century. Not only did friendship between women become possible, it also lost its status as the highest form of love. I shall read both classical and early modern works on

friendship and explain how it came to be that "[b]efore the Restoration, friendship is men's business; afterwards, it's women's diversion" (Anderson 243).

Both discourses propose radically different views on female love. Furthermore, writers within each discourse often disagree with one another and do not present a unanimous verdict on the significance, danger, and prevalence of female-female attraction, desire, and love. This leaves room for writers of poetry and plays to experiment with their portrayals of love between women. In Chapter Two, I shall look at the poems "Sapho to Philaenis" (1633) by John Donne, "The Description of Cookham" (1611) by Aemilia Lanyer, and "To My Excellent Lucasia" (1654) by Katherine Philips. In Chapter Three, which focuses on plays, I will investigate *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), by the aforementioned Margaret Cavendish, and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595).

I have purposefully chosen poems and plays written by both women and men and from a period spanning over seventy years to show the breadth in portrayals of female-female love in early modern culture. The poems are a love poem and poems on friendship; it is usually within these genres that we find writers exploring the topic of female same-sex desire, and since they are a means of expressing the feelings of the writer or lyrical I, they make good points of study for anyone interested in same-sex love and friendship. For the plays I have chosen two comedies. Since early modern comedies often portray a (temporary) clash between individual characters and dominant social norms, for example in relation to sexuality, they allow writers to play with notions of gender and same-sex love and desire. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that early modern comedies are often full of (often radical portrayals of) same-sex attraction.

In analysing these works, we shall find that their poets and playwrights write far more nuanced portrayals of female same-sex desire and love than medical and amicitial discourses may lead us to expect, often making a case for the potency and validity of female-female love.

Chapter One – Historical Context: Medical and Friendship Discourses In Early modern England

Medical and amicitial discourses seem to propose radically different views on the topic of love and desire between women. On the one hand, medical texts put forth the monstrous figure of the tribade, a woman who penetrates other women with a dildo or her giant clitoris. In this way, she transgresses against the rules of sex and gender. Texts on friendship, on the other hand, paint the image of the passionate but ultimately chaste and platonic friend. Thus, on a surface level both discourses combined seem to create a binary within the concept of female homoerotic desire, in which a woman is either devoid of sex or consumed by it. Yet we shall see that the matter is more nuanced and complicated than it may at first appear.

1.1 Medical Texts

Medical discourses in early modern England claimed that sexual desire between women was unnatural. Early modern understandings of sex shaped this attitude. One of the most important aspects of sex in the early modern era is that, unlike in our modern society, early modern culture did not think of sex in identitarian terms. There was no such thing as a homosexual or a lesbian; sex was part of one's behaviour, not one's identity (Halperin 258).[1] Not only was sex not part of one's identity; it also was not organised according to a division between homo- and heterosexual desire, but within a patriarchal system of marriage (Traub 40). Sex within marriage was officially encouraged; sex outside of marriage was considered sinful and, in certain contexts (e.g. adultery), heavily punished (41).

[1] It is for this very reason I speak of female same-sex desire rather than lesbianism; the term is anachronistic and does not adequately describe the concept I wish to analyse.

But what exactly was considered sex, or, to call it by one of the possible non-anachronistic terms, venery?[2] According to Valerie Traub, (penile) penetration was "the only socially intelligible form of erotic congress (…) the only erotic practice that *mattered*" (52, emphasis in the original). Other forms of erotic activity, such as oral or manual stimulation, were therefore technically chaste (52). This is not to say that all early moderns thought that sex always entailed penetration; as Stockton and Bromley explain in their introduction to the book *Sex Before Sex: Figuring the Act in Early Modern England,* "[A] single, transhistorical definition of sex" does not exist (1).

Taking a detour into the realm of legal texts, we find the lack of this single, transhistorical definition of sex reflected in the 1533 Buggerie Act. This Act of Parliament made the crime of 'buggerie', or sodomy, a capital offence, regardless of consent (Jennings 1). In 1533, the word had a broader definition than it does nowadays. The Buggerie Act defined sodomy as anal penetration, but also as bestiality, rape, child molestation, and masturbation; a whole host of sexual acts that need not necessarily consist of penetration. Significantly, this Act made no mention of sexual acts between women; in English law, female-female sodomy did not exist (Traub 42). The reason for this omission is, according to Traub, due to the relationship between lovemaking and biological sex in the early modern period. Then, one's sexual role was completely intertwined with one's sex: men penetrate, and women are penetrated. Thus, two women could not be accused of sodomy, since they were thought to be incapable of penetrating (165), even though the act itself does not state that sodomy has to consist of penetration per se.[3] A woman could not sexually sate another; their

[2] According to the *OED,* the word 'venery' derives from the name of the Roman goddess of love, Venus, and meant "the practice or pursuit of sexual pleasure" or, more generally, "a source of great enjoyment" (*OED Online,* s.v. "venery, n.2", 1 and 2).
[3] Note the paradox here in early modern thinking: two women surely cannot penetrate each other since their ordinary function is to be penetrated, but two men somehow can penetrate each other even though their natural role is to penetrate, not be penetrated.

love was therefore also called *amor impossibilis*. Yet medical texts often contradicted the concept of *amor impossibilis.*

We may deduce that the only form of licit sex in this time period is penile penetration between husband and wife. In early modernity, sex was a bonding mechanism as well as a health requirement. Love was expected to occur after marriage rather than precede it (Traub 40). Husband and wife should have sex in order to bond (Traub 81). Furthermore, sex helped both men and women to stay healthy. Medicine in the early modern period based itself on humouralism. The theory of humouralism holds that the body consisted of four different "humours", or bodily fluids. These were either hot or cold, dry or moist. Medical writers thought that women usually had more cold and moist humours, and men humours that were hot and dry. These thoughts tied into the one-sex model, in which it was believed that women were imperfect, inverted versions of men because of a lack of heat (Traub 45). As the bishop of Emesa during the fourth century words it, a woman's genitals "are inside the body and not outside it", but in essence men and women are similar (Lacquer 4). It was heat alone that made them different; therefore, if enough heat was generated, a woman could turn into a man (Lacquer 7). In 1673, Nathaniel Wanley states that "It is no Lye or Fable that Females may be turned into Males", and then proceeds to lay down twenty-three such cases drawn from classical and contemporary sources to form the thirty-third chapter of his book *Wonders of the Little World* (52).

Additionally, humouralism worked with the idea that the body's humours must be in balance in order for the person to be healthy. In case of an excess of a particular humour, a person became ill. In order to heal them, the body must get rid of the excess. Orgasm – then called 'the emission of seed' for both men and women – was a way of purging the body of evil fluids (Traub 83). It is for this reason that medical writers prescribed marriage for women suffering from "green sickness" (anaemia) or suffocation of the womb: it would purge their

bodies of the evil humours that made them ill. If marriage was not possible, a midwife could manually stimulate her patient until orgasm occurred. Nicholas Fontanus describes a case in which such manual stimulation was helpful in his book *The Woman's Doctour* (1652):

> [T]he abundance of the spermatick humour was diminished by the hand of a skilfull Midwife, and a convenient ointment, which passage will also furnish us with this argument, that the use of *Venery* is exceeding wholesome, if the woman will confine her selfe to the lawes of moderation, so that she feele no wearisomnesse, nor weaknesse in her body, after those pleasing conflicts. (Traub 84)

Note how Fontanus concluded that sex ("Venery") must be healthy, and concludes this solely from the manually bringing about of an orgasm. This is a sign that defining sex as penetration alone did not accurately reflect real-life attitudes. In this excerpt, Fontanus echoes Galen, who recommended a genital massage to ease the symptoms of hysteria ("Sappho", Andreadis 17). Apart from treating anaemia, issues related to the womb, and hysteria, midwives also used to bring about orgasm to help women give birth. Thomas Raynalde has the following to say about this in 1554: "[Y]f necessitie require it, let not the Mydwyfe be afrayed ne ashamed to handle the places [i.e. privy parts], and to relaxe and loose the straightes (for so muche as shall lye in her) for that shal helpe wel to the more expedite and quicke labour" ("Sappho", Andreadis 17). According to Harriette Andreadis, the female orgasm was not seen as sexual in these contexts. This is supported by Galen's language: he called an orgasm a "hysterical paroxysm", i.e. convulsion of the womb, rather than "the emission of seed", which at the time was the ordinary way of denoting an orgasm (17). Fontanus' conclusion, however, sheds doubt on Andreadis' conclusion that these orgasms were not seen as sexual, since he concludes that manually stimulating a woman shows the benefits of sex. Therefore, it seems that an orgasm brought about for medical reasons was not necessarily seen as non-sexual, but rather that society was willing to turn a blind eye to these acts since they served a condonable purpose, namely the curing of patients.

Sex might help deepen the conjugal bond and improve health, but in the early modern period, its goal first and foremost was procreation. This helps us understand why Traub said it was the only important form of erotic activity (52) (since only through penile penetration of the vagina can a woman conceive) as well as the conditions for acceptability (children should be born within marriage for reasons of inheritance) (Traub 83). The general understanding of procreation in the early modern period was that both man and woman had to orgasm in order to create a child, hence why an orgasm was called the "emission of the seed" for both men and women (83). It is for this reason medical texts advised men to take the time to arouse their wives. According to the French surgeon Ambroise Paré, whose medical writings were translated into English in 1634 by Thomas Johnson, a man "must cherish, embrace, and tickle" his wife. During intercourse he should "[mix] more wanton kisses with wanton words and speeches, handling her secret parts and dugs, that she may take fire and bee enflamed to venery, for so at length the wombe will strive and waxe fervent with a desire of casting forth its owne seed" (593).

Had Paré published his treatise a few years later, he might not have written of a woman's "secret parts and dugs", but of "the love or sweetness of Venus", i.e. the clitoris. According to Valerie Traub, a rediscovery of the clitoris happened halfway through the sixteenth century (87). Realdo Colombo, an Italian professor of anatomy at the university of Padua, was the first to write of it in his *De re anatomica* (*On anatomy*), published in 1559. He stated that the clitoris (which he calls "the love or sweetness of Venus") is "the principal seat of women's enjoyment in intercourse, so that if you not only rub it with your penis, but even touch it with your little finger, the pleasure causes their seed to flow forth in all directions, swifter than the wind, even if they don't want it to" (Traub 88). Note how Colombo says a man need only touch the clitoris with his little finger to cause a woman's "seed to flow forth in all directions", i.e. to cause her to orgasm. Apparently, a woman does not need penetration

for sexual satisfaction. If she does not need penetration, then she does not necessarily need a man to sate her desires; a woman would serve just as well. This idea caused a sense of discomfort, because it implied that relationships between women were perhaps not chaste after all. It is within this anxiety about pleasuring women that the secret to the figure of the tribade lies.

A tribade (alternatively called 'rubster', 'fricatrice, or 'confricatrice') is a woman who practices tribadism. Literally defined, tribadism means finding sexual pleasure through rubbing ("Sappho", Andreadis 3). Tribades did a lot more than rub, however; they were said to penetrate other women (and sometimes even men), either through dildos or through their huge clitorises.[4] No matter how difficult the concept of sex is to define; penetration was definitely seen as a sexual act by early modern writers (4). In *Microcosmographia* (1615) by Helkiah Crooke, court physician to James I, we find the following about tribades, whom Crooke calls "wicked":

> [A]lthough for the most part it [the clitoris] hath but a small production hidden under the *Nymphes* and hard to be felt but with curiosity, yet sometimes it groweth to such a length that it hangeth without the cleft like a mans member, especially when it is fretted with the touch of the cloaths, and so strutteth and growth to a rigiditie as doth the yarde [penis] of a man. And this part it is which those wicked women doe abuse called *Tribades* (often mentioned by many authors, and in some states worthily punished) to their mutual and unnatural lusts. (238)

Yet he is not the first to write about tribades. Gabriele Falloppia, an Italian professor of anatomy who worked in Pisa and Padua and also wrote medical texts, mentions the concept in 1550 (though this work was not published until 1561) when writing about the clitoris:

> Avicenna makes mention of a certain member situated in the female genitalia which he calls *virga* or *albathara*. Albucasis calls this *tentigo,* which sometimes will increase to such a great size that women, while in

[4] According to Traub, tribades were originally described as wielding giant dildos. This image was gradually replaced by tribades using their clitorises for penetration; thus, focus shifted away from the instrument to the physical means of penetration (194).

> this condition, have sex with each other just as if they were men. The Greeks call this member *clitoris,* from which the obscene word *clitorize* is derived. (Traub 205)

We know the concept had entered public consciousness by the end of the sixteenth century, probably through a combination of medical texts and travel narratives; John Donne's friend Thomas Woodward, for example, used the word "tribadree" to describe the erotics of creativity in one of the verses he sent to Donne between 1592 and 1594:

> Have mercy on me and my sinfull Muse
> Which rub'd and tickled with thyne could not chuse
> But spend some of her pithe an yield to bee
> One in that chaste and mystique tribadree. ("Sappho", Andreadis 46)

The tribade caused discomfort, not in the least because it was unclear what caused a woman to be a tribade. Writers could not agree whether a tribade was a biological woman or perhaps an intersex person because they lacked a clear definition of intersexuality (Jennings 13). The tribade's enlarged genitals could have been a vagina on the cusp of transforming into a penis, which was possible within the one-sex model. During the seventeenth century, this explanation came to be replaced by the theory that the tribade had an enlarged clitoris, nowadays termed 'clitoral hypertrophy' ("Passions", Donoghue ch.1). But what caused the clitoris to grow? Crooke suggested that the clitoris became enlarged through heat caused by rubbing it with fingers or clothes (238). Other medical writers thought clitoral hypertrophy was not the result of 'abusing' it, but the cause; only women with enlarged clitorises would want to fret them. Jane Sharp, the writer of *The Midwives Book* (1671), which would be the leading work of midwifery for decades, was of this opinion: "[C]ommonly it [the clitoris] is but a small sprout, lying close hid under the Wings, and not easily felt, yet sometimes it grows so long that it hangs forth at the slit like a Yard, and will swell and stand stiff if it be provoked, and some lewd women have endeavoured to use it as men do theirs" (45). Similarly to Crooke, she condemns these women, calling them "lewd". The lack of certainty about the

causes of tribadism meant that medical professionals were not sure how to prevent women from becoming tribades. Add to this that no one knew where to draw the line between a normal and an enlarged clitoris, (according to Bartholin, a writer by the name of Platerus claimed a woman's clitoris could grow as "big as a Gooses neck" (77))[5] and that women were inherently thought to be lustful[6] and thus likely to abuse themselves (Traub 214-215), and every woman could be suspected of being or becoming a tribade.

But what, exactly, was terrible about being a tribade? The problem was twofold: firstly, a woman with enlarged genitals was no longer able to gratify men's sexual needs; secondly, she could usurp a man's place and render him unnecessary. Thomas Bartholin's English translation of his father's Latin anatomy has the following to say in relation to the first point: "[T]he more this part [the clitoris] encreases, the more does it hinder a man in his business. For in the time of Copulation it swells like a mans Yard, and being erected, provokes to Lust" (77). Even more threatening to men was that a tribade could satisfy other women's sexual desires as well as any man, and did so in a way usually typified as masculine; in doing so, she usurped a man's place. According to C. Grisé, penetrative sex between women was not seen as a sexual transgression, but as a transgression against gender norms (46). Indeed, by pleasuring women through penetration, the tribade rendered men unnecessary. This did not merely exacerbate already extant anxieties about men's abilities to pleasure women; within a patriarchal system in which women were defined by their relationships to men, anything that claimed men were superfluous had the power to destabilise this system. That this must have been the case seems to be supported by the few cases in

[5] Bartholin finds this description "praeternatural and monstruous", i.e. exaggerated. He has found other descriptions which claim the clitoris can to grow to about half the length of a finger, which he finds more convincing: "Tulpius hath a like Story of one that had it as long as half a mans finger, and as thick as a Boys Prick, which made her willing to have to do with Women in a Carnal way" (77).

[6] Humourism explained woman's inherent lustfulness. Women were cold and moist, and thus far removed from the ideal of hot and dry. Since sex generated heat, women constantly wanted intercourse because it brought them closer to the ideal state of being.

which women were actually prosecuted in England for their love for women: they usually involve a combination of penetration and crossdressing, another transgression against gender (Traub 194).[7]

It is certainly true that this taking on of a man's part led to negative responses; however, we must also keep in mind what the early moderns thought sex was and what its purposes were. Since it was for procreation, a woman who penetrated another not only transgressed against gender; but also against what sex should be for. Furthermore, sex between two women invariably happened outside of the confines of marriage. The tribade therefore corrupted not only the concept of gender, but also of sex, and as a result was condemned as wicked and lewd by various medical writers.

1.2 Discourses of Friendship

As previously discussed, medical (and, to some extent, legal) discourses brought to light an interesting paradox in early modern thinking about female same-sex desire: though the law considered sex between two women impossible (*amor impossibilis*), medicine claimed it was not only possible but feared it to be prevalent. In a similar vein, friendship discourses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also show a division. On the one hand, many texts claimed friendship between women was unlikely; on the other hand, many of the requirements for friendship were not confined to men alone, and offered possibilities for women's friendship. Indeed, during these centuries a shift took place within the thinking on friendship: initially the domain of men, it slowly but surely became the terrain of women.

The shift in friendship's meaning did not come about suddenly. As Lorna Hutson has argued, definitions of friendship were in constant flux in the sixteenth and seventeenth

[7] We must keep in mind that the 1533 Buggerie Act meant women could not be prosecuted for penetration of another woman alone, even if it was highly frowned upon and therefore often mentioned during trials in order to show that the accused was thoroughly perverted. Court cases relating to female same-sex desire had to include something that *was* punishable by law, such as crossdressing or fraud (Traub 194).

centuries. In the Middle Ages, friendship was a way to ensure loyalty between two men. Men consolidated their friendships through gift-giving and the exchange of women, the latter of which created kinship (3). Here we already find a problem for women: how can they aspire to this ideal of friendship if society places them in a position in which they cannot give gifts half as easily as men; indeed, in which they themselves are the gift? This system did not disappear in the Renaissance, but under the influence of classical texts, friendship's emphasis shifted away from gift-giving and towards abstract qualities (4). It was this shift that allowed women to aspire to the ideal of friendship, since they could possess abstract qualities just as men could. The most important classical texts to facilitate this shift were Cicero's *Laelius de amicitia* (*Laelius On Friendship*) and Aristotle's *Ethica nicomachea* (*Nicomachean Ethics*) (Anderson 247). Both Cicero and Aristotle explained what a perfect friendship (*amicitia perfecta* as opposed to simply *amicitia*) should be, albeit in slightly different ways.

According to Cicero, friendship was the highest form of love, and the most precious thing to have been granted mankind apart from wisdom. In his translation called *The booke of freendeship of Marcus Tullie Cicero* (1562), John Harrington translates Cicero's thoughts as follows: "[F]or frendshippe is nothyng els, but a perfect agreement with good will and true loue in al kind of good things and godlie. And I knowe not whether any better thing hath been geuen of GOD unto men, wisdome excepted" (14). However, if Cicero found friendship the best form of love, he did not mean every friendship; Cicero recognised that multiple forms of amity exist.

What, then, made the perfect friend? In his *Laelius de amicitia*, Cicero lists several key aspects. Dissimilitude is always bad, but nowhere more so than in friendship: "But wheras dissimulaton is euill in all thynges (for it keapeth a man from iudgyng the truth) yet most of all it is contrary to freendeship" (59). One key aspect of friendship is therefore similitude: the best friend should be another self. This twinned soul should not only be alike

in virtue, but also in status and income. Cicero argued for friendship for friendship's sake, going against many of his contemporaries, who argued for relationships on a *quid-pro-quo* basis. Cicero felt that true friendship did not have its basis in meeting another's material needs, since such a friendship could only ever be temporary; as soon as the needs were met, the friendship would dissolve. A friendship based on similarity, however, had its basis in nature, and as such would last forever: "[T]he beginning therof shal come of nature, rather then of neede (…) for if profite shoulde fasten frendship, then the same beyng changed should unlose it againe. But because nature cannot be chaunged, therefore true frendships be euerlasting" (24). This is not to say that a man could not help his friend with money if necessary (in fact, Cicero argued that helping a friend in material ways was an excellent way of showing the strength of the friendship), but the foundation of friendship should not be based on utility. If great disparities existed between two men in, say, social status, it would be hard to escape the idea that the inferior friend used the relationship for personal gain (Johnson and Suzuki 6). Since friendship's goal should be love and not the meeting of material needs, only the virtuous could attain the ideal of friendship. One of the most important virtues a good friend possessed should be civic duty; a good man, according to Cicero, was also a good patriot (8).

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* also influenced early modern ideas on friendship. Since Cicero was undoubtedly familiar with this work and drew inspiration from it for his own essay on friendship, it should come as no surprise that their definitions are highly similar. Like Cicero, Aristotle argued that friendship existed in multiple forms (some better than others), and like Cicero, he wrote about the civic duty and virtuous foundation of friendship. However, what Aristotle considered 'goodness' was not the same as Cicero's definition. Unlike Cicero, Aristotle's "definition of goodness focuse[d] less on civic and military virtue and more on adherence to a moderate code of conduct" (Johnson and Suzuki 10). This mode

of conduct was informed by virtues, which included but were not limited to "courage, temperance, justice" as well as prudence, patience, and modesty (Aristotle 44).

Cicero, Aristotle, and by extension most early modern friendship writers thought women incapable of obtaining the ideal of *amicitia perfecta*. Michel de Montaigne, for example, stated in *De l'Amitié* (1580) that

> women are in truth not normally capable of responding to such familiarity and mutual confidence as sustain that holy bond of friendship, nor do their souls seem firm enough to withstand the clasp of a knot so lasting and so tightly drawn. And indeed if it were not for that, if it were possible to fashion such a relationship, willing and free, in which not only the souls had this full enjoyment but in which the bodies too shared in the union (…) it is certain that the loving-friendship would be more full and more abundant. But there is no example yet of woman attaining to it and by the common agreement of the Ancient schools of philosophy she is excluded from it. (Traub 299)

De Montaigne was not the only one to think women could not attain the highest form of friendship; Sir Kenelm Digby, for example, in response to Katherine Philips' question if he thought women could be friends, said that, "[T]he main defect (…) is oftentimes on the woman's part, through the weakness of that sex, which is seldom, and almost but by miracle, capable of so divine a thing as an assured constant friendship, mingled with the fervent heat of love and affection". However, if a woman possessed a man's spirit, Digby supposed that perhaps she could be a good friend: "[U]nless a masculine and heroic soul can be found informing the body of a beautiful and fair woman, so to make the blessing of friendship full on every side by an entire and general communication". Sadly, however, he could not think of any such woman ("Sappho", Andreadis 68).

But why were these writers convinced women could not possibly be as good of a friend to each other as men could? It is not so much the case that women were seen as inherently incapable of being a good friend, but that men fashioned an ideal of friendship which women, through a combination of societal constraints and ideas on femininity, could

hardly ever obtain. Take, for example, the idea that the highest forms of friendship do not stem from practical utility. In principle, this aspect of friendship may not appear as if it excludes women; surely women could also have friendship for the sake of it? However, women "often did not have control over many material resources" (Anderson 248). Women were far more dependent on others to meet their needs. Their friendships would therefore be more likely to have a needs-based foundation, as Cicero explains:

> [Some say] that freendeshippe ought to bee desired for an healpe and staies sake, and not for good will and fauour to anie body. And therfore as euery manne hath little staie, and little succour, so he shoulde the more seeke after freendship. And for this cause (they saie) it is, that women seeke more the helpe of freendship then men, and the poore more then the riche, and the wretched more than the fortunate. (32-33)

Women did not seek out these lesser, need-based forms of friendship because they were inherently incapable of *amicitia perfecta,* but because their situations often did not offer them the luxury of not having to think of their material needs.

Not only did women have a harder time to obtain the perfect classical friendship, they were in fact actively discouraged from obtaining it. Marriage was considered the pinnacle of a woman's existence. According to classical writers, it was also a lesser form of friendship, because it was needs-based and not a friendship between twinned souls. In a patriarchal society, marriage was a hierarchical institute between a superior (the husband) and an inferior party (the wife). Put in an unnuanced way, a husband should provide physical necessities for his wife, whilst she should take care of his household and his children, as well as his sexual and emotional needs. The highest aim for a woman should be to be a good wife and mother, yet simultaneously women were told that the best they could do in life was not the best in general. The idea that the ideal friendship was between two men was slow to change (Traub 259).

Yet change it did. One of the factors that would bring about such change was the ideology of the "companionate marriage" (Stone 219). This ideology propagated the idea that a man and woman should be friends before and within marriage. God had intended husband and wife to be companions to each other. Furthermore, both had a duty to fulfil, namely to contribute to the family's wellbeing, though in different areas (Traub 259). The ideology of the companionate marriage would come to full bloom in the eighteenth century, but was already in development during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Stone 217). It would be this ideology that would lead John Milton to write his controversial and radical defences of divorce, arguing that a husband and wife who were incompatible should have the right to separate since their marriage opposed the will of God. God, after all, intended husband and wife to be each other's helpmeet, not each other's oppressor (Dobranski 12). By stressing the importance of compatibility within marriage, the companionate marriage ideology put the classical idea of marriage as a lesser form of friendship under pressure. Certainly it facilitated a "shift from one sexual binary (ideal homoerotic relations between self-possessed friends versus heteronormative marriage) to another (ideally companionate marriage versus stigmatized homosexuality)" (Loscocco 537).

Another important factor is that these discourses of friendship unintentionally offered women (and men) the very material they needed to challenge it. After all, the highest form of friendship was based on similitude, something women could argue stood open to them. Additionally, we must bear in mind that the writings about friendship did not always reflect lived reality, as Wendy Trevor has successfully argued in her article on male friendship in early modernity. There, she found that friendships that crossed class-lines (for example between master and servant) and therefore were not based solely on similitude and were needs-based certainly existed and were not necessarily experienced as lesser forms of

friendship. Furthermore, they may have been far more common than was previously thought (59-60).

Nevertheless, the main reason for the change in attitude towards female friendship was the discourse's emphasis on virtue. Though it was hard for women to realise the civic aspect of Cicero's virtue since they could not be soldiers and could not vote, and furthermore were subject to the political preferences of their fathers and husbands, women could still find ways to be good patriots. Furthermore, Aristotle's virtues were open to both men and women: "[I]ndeed, in early modern England, the virtues of patience and modesty were particularly associated with women" (Johnson and Suzuki 10). The virtue that would come to shape discourses of female friendships for centuries to come, however, was not patience or modesty; it was chastity.

As I explained in the previous subchapter on medical discourses, early modern medical and religious texts claimed women were inherently lustful due to their moist, cold natures. Lust was a woman's strongest weakness, therefore chastity her highest virtue. It is little wonder, then, that the Humanist educator Juan Luis Vives wrote the following in 1523 when instructing Christian women: "Fyrste let her vnderstande that chastyte is the principall vertue of a woman and countrepeyseth with all the reste: if she haue that /no man wyll loke for any other: & if she lacke that no man wyll regarde other" (45). Bearing in mind the early modern definition of sex, chastity did not mean what it does today: two women could engage in what we would consider sexual acts, and still consider themselves chaste, and be considered as such by others ("Sappho", Andreadis 18). Indeed, there was no lack of physical affection between friends in the early modern period; men expressed (and were expected to express) their strong emotional bond through physical intimacy (Bray 44). When the platonic female friend emerged within the discourses of friendship, she too would give vent to her feelings of love through kisses and caresses (Traub 231). It would be this method of showing

love that would render the emphasis on her chastity all the more necessary; as Traub argues, during the seventeenth century the figure of the tribade and the platonic friend started to overlap because every woman could become a tribade, and those innocent kisses could be hiding something more (231). The female friend's only way to distance herself from the figure of the tribade would be to propagate her chastity and stress her femininity. After all, if the tribade's defining characteristics were unbridled lust and the usurpation of a man's role, the best way not to be thought a tribade was to be platonic and highly feminine.

In this chapter I have analysed two contextual discourses, namely medical texts and texts on friendship. Though at first sight it appears as if they are opposites in their depiction of female same-sex desire, with medical texts arguing for the unnatural tribade and friendship texts propagating the chaste female friend, the two are actually intimately connected. Only through the existence of the tribade could chastity become vital to female friendship; only through the understanding that women should aspire to be chaste (but were not naturally thought to be so) can we understand the negative reactions the tribade inspired. Both discourses are furthermore informed by misogyny, with the tribade reflecting men's fear of not being able to sexually sate women and losing power to a woman, and the chaste female friend only coming into existence because the discourses of friendship offered little other possibility for women to claim they too could obtain *amicitia perfecta*. In the next two chapters, we shall see how various writers draw on these two discourses and modify them.

Chapter Two – Lyric Poetry

In this chapter, I will analyse how writers of lyric poetry draw upon the medical and amical discourses discussed in Chapter One. Since those discourses did not reach a unanimous verdict on the significance and prevalence of relationships between women, there was room for writers to experiment with the depiction of female same-sex desire. All three of the writers discussed in this chapter do something revolutionary in their poems: Lanyer argues against the idea that two women from different social ranks cannot attain the highest form of friendship; Philips appropriates and modifies male discourses on friendship in order to express her love for women; Donne writes an explicitly sexual love poem between two women in which he celebrates their desire.

2.1 "The Description of Cookham" by Aemilia Lanyer

Lanyer is the first woman who actively wrote poetry to praise other women (Beilin 178). In "The Description of Cookham", published in 1611 but probably written several years before, Lanyer praises her friend and former patron Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland. Drawing on the Scriptures and classical mythology, she argues for the validity of female-female friendship which, if the two friends are each other's spiritual equals, can survive even great disparities in rank.

"The Description of Cookham" appears in the collection *Salve Deus Ex Judaeorum.* This collection consists of three parts, with "the description of Cookham" forming the third part (Beilin 182). In her dedication, Lanyer claims she became motivated to write the work because of the disparagement of women at the hands of male writers (Beilin 180). With her poetry, she argues that women are generally virtuous, and that their feminine virtues are just as important as masculine virtues. With this goal in mind, it may come as no surprise that Lanyer dedicated the volume to nine different women (Beilin 183). Amy Greenstadt finds

another reason for this large number of dedications: she argues it must have been "a bid for patronage, one directed most pointedly at Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland, who seems to have granted Lanyer favo[u]r in the past. Both the long title poem and "The Description of Cooke-ham" are addressed to Clifford" (68). Here, then, we already find a potential problem with Lanyer's portrayal of friendship: according to friendship discourses, the highest form of friendship could not exist between those with great disparities in rank and social income, nor could it be needs-based. Since Lanyer seems to write about Clifford in an attempt to secure her patronage, no friendship writer would consider their friendship to be a case of *amicitia perfecta*. Yet from reading "The Description of Cookham", it becomes clear that Lanyer disagrees.

In "The Description of Cookham", Lanyer bids farewell to the estate of Cookham where Margaret Clifford lives, whom she credits with her religious conversion to Protestantism: "Farewell, sweet Cookham, where I first obtained/ Grace from that grace where perfect grace remained" (1-2). It was at Cookham Lanyer became inspired to become a poet: "And where the muses gave their full consent,/ I should have power the virtuous to content" (3-4). Clifford is responsible for these changes in Lanyer. Lanyer spends the majority of the poem describing how the estate responds to Clifford's presence, anthropomorphising trees and animals alike. The trees, for example, "[e]mbraced each other, seeming to be glad/ Turning themselves to beauteous canopies,/ To shade the bright sun from your brighter eyes" (24-26). The estate responds to Clifford because she is imbued with God's grace: "In these sweet woods how often did you walk,/ With Christ and his apostles there to talk" (81-82). Unfortunately for Lanyer, she and Clifford have been forced apart by their differences in social rank: "Where our great friends we cannot daily see,/ So great a difference is there in degree" (105-106). Clifford has left Cookham, leaving both the estate and Lanyer in deep despair: "[T]he house cast off each garment that might grace it,/ Putting on dust and cobwebs

to deface it" (201-202). Lanyer's only consolation is that she may immortalise Clifford in writing:

> This last farewell to Cookham here I give,
> When I am dead thy name in this may live,
> Wherein I have performed her noble hest
> Whose virtues lodge in my unworthy breast,
> And ever shall, so long as life remains,
> Tying my life to her by those rich chains. (205-210)

Many critics read Lanyer's description of Cookham as paradisal, with Lanyer arguing for the joys of an all-female society (Beskin 526-7). Though Lanyer bidding Clifford for patronage complicates this reading somewhat, I argue that Lanyer does, indeed, make a case for the importance and perhaps even superiority of female-female friendship. Two objects within her poem support such a reading: the oak and the nightingale.[8]

Of all the trees Lanyer describes, the oak is the most important, as supported by the fact that it takes up many lines: it is first introduced in line 53, described until line 66, then returns in lines 157-178. The oak is important in three ways: firstly, it contains a promise of empowerment for women through its link with religion; secondly, it is an instrument of affection; thirdly, it protects from male violence. The oak is a site where both the Countess and Lanyer may recognise each other as spiritual – and, by extension, social – equals; the oak allows one to contemplate the greatness of God, which is open to all ("The Description of Cookham" 71). Clifford often spends her time beneath the oak in religious meditation, and in seeing God's creatures, she finds His glory all around her:

> While you the time in meditation spent
> Of their Creator's power, which there you saw,
> In all his creatures held a perfect law;
> And in their beauties did you plain descry
> His beauty, wisdom, grace, love, majesty. (76-80)

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[8] I have taken the following paragraphs on "The Description of Cookham" from my essay "Bird and Tree: the Significance of the Oak and Nightingale in Aemilia Lanyer's "The Description of Cookham"", which I wrote in 2019 for the course "Shakespeare's Sister: Gender Troubles in the Early Modern Period". For this MA thesis, I have edited and expanded them.

This contemplation is not limited to the rich and elevated; in a bold move, Lanyer proposes religion as the great equaliser, arguing that loving God is open to everyone:

> Although we are but born of earth,
> We may behold the heavens, despising death;
> And loving heaven that is so far above,
> May in the end vouchsafe us entire love. (113-116)

Lanyer finds that loving heaven "[m]ay in the end vouchsafe us entire love", i.e. may in the end grant those who love heaven the best love of all. The tree, then, becomes intimately linked with religion, which in turn links it to equality. With the oak tree, Lanyer therefore argues against the classical idea that friendship cannot exist between people of different ranks. She and the Countess may come from different backgrounds, but religion places them on equal footing. They are each other's spiritual equals; therefore they are twinned souls.

Equal in piety Lanyer and Clifford may be, yet their differences in rank do have tangible consequences. Most importantly, it keeps the two friends apart:

> Unconstant Fortune, thou art most to blame,
> Who casts us down into so low a frame
> Where our great friends we cannot daily see
> So great a difference is there in degree. (103-106)

Furthermore, it also places Lanyer in a position of submission, having to ask Clifford for money, as evidenced by the fact that the poem is likely a bid for patronage. According to Beskin, several critics found that the multiple dedications of *Salve Deus* showed that Lanyer did not understand the importance of social rank, since "by dedicating the collection to a community composed of women, Lanyer (…) inadvertently (or inexpertly) cast her net too wide and potentially alienated some of her would-be patronesses" (535). The lines quoted above, however, show that Lanyer was acutely aware of the significance of rank and status.

According to Greendstadt, the oak is more than a symbol for religious equality. She argues that Lanyer uses the pathetic fallacy to explore "an eroticized power dynamic between

women that is mediated by artificial devices" (68), i.e. an erotic relationship that finds expression in objects outside of Lanyer and Clifford. The oak is such a device. It "can usefully be compared to a dildo" because of its phallic shape, its male pronouns, and because it can transmit gestures of affection: Clifford kisses the tree, and Lanyer in turn kisses that same spot to steal Clifford's kiss, thus deriving a sense of pleasure from Clifford mediated by the tree (76):

> To this fair tree, taking me by the hand,
> You did repeat the pleasures which had passed
> Seeming to grieve that they could no longer last
> And with a chaste, yet loving kiss took leave,
> Of which sweet kiss I did it soon bereave. (162-166)

Note how Lanyer states that Clifford repeats "the pleasures which had passed" between them; their friendship therefore must have found repeated expression in physical affection. If the tree truly functions as a dildo – which only works if we interpret 'dildo' in the broadest sense possible, i.e. an object used to transmit physical gestures of affection – this links the poem to tribadism (82). However, by stating that the kiss given to the tree is "chaste", Lanyer tries to mitigate any suspicions this evocation may cause. That Lanyer deems this necessary suggests her and Clifford's actions might be interpreted as unchaste. The tree, then, seems to be two things so far: an instrument of potential of religious equality as well as of pleasure.

In my opinion, the tree is yet a third thing: it also protects Lanyer and Clifford from male violence. This masculine oak shades Clifford from the harsh rays of the sun (denoted with the name Phoebus):

> How often did you visit this fair tree,
> Which seeming joyful in receiving thee,
> Would like a palm tree spread his arms abroad
> Desirous that you there should make abode
> Whose fair green leaves much like a comely veil
> Defended Phoebus when he would assail. (59-64)

Since Phoebus is another name for the Greek god Apollo, and since it is a tree that protects Clifford from his assailing – a verb which can either mean “to violently attack” or, perhaps more interesting, “to tempt”, which suggests that the tree also keeps Clifford safe from any male sexual temptation (*OED Online,* s.v. “assail, v.1”, 1 and 7) – Greenstadt argues that Lanyer is evoking the myth of Apollo and Daphne (83-84). In this myth, Apollo chases the nymph Daphne, whom he wants to rape. Daphne prays to her father, a river god, and begs him to intervene. To protect his daughter’s honour, her father transforms her into a tree. This is not the only myth imbued with violence against women which Lanyer incorporates into her poem, as will become clear once I discuss the importance of the nightingale. Thus, the oak also forms a safe haven for the women and offers them respite from the outside world.

The oak, then, is equaliser, instrument of affection, and protector. Yet despite all the potential the oak offers, we have also seen that the women are not truly together: they have been separated because of their ranks, and Lanyer’s bid for patronage points to financial as well as social inequality. What does this mean for the oak’s function as equaliser? It seems that equality has been realised to a certain degree at one point, namely when Lanyer and Clifford stayed together at Cookham. As soon as the women leave Cookham, differences in rank intrude and separate them once more. It is for this reason that Beilin compares the estate to Eden, and the women’s expulsion from it to the Fall (202). It is the intrusion of the outside world that tears the women apart; this is where the poem’s sense of melancholy derives from. Yet the poem is not doom-and-gloom: equality was once achieved, and what has once been achieved can be achieved once more, thus providing both women with a sense of hope. The ultimate significance of the oak therefore lies in its promise of equality (and, by extension, female empowerment) as well as in its ability to transfer affection and to offer protection.

The nightingale’s significance is similar to the oak’s in the sense that it, too, promises the potential of female empowerment without denying the harsh realities of the class-based

patriarchal society in which Clifford and Lanyer both live. While the oak mainly tied into Christian ideas of equality, the nightingale ties into classical mythology. Lanyer achieves this by using the name "Philomela" rather than the word 'nightingale': "And Philomela with her sundry lays/ Both you and that delightful place did praise" (31-32). In this way, Lanyer links the bird overtly to the classical myth of *Tereus, Procne and Philomela*. In this myth, Tereus, Procne's husband and Philomela's brother-in-law, rapes Philomela and cuts out her tongue to silence her, then hides her away in the woods. Philomela, however, refuses to be silenced; she weaves a tapestry which tells her story, and sends this to her sister. Through this work of art, Procne discovers the truth. She liberates her sister, and in revenge kills her son and bakes him into a dish she then serves to her husband. Her husband flies into a murderous rage when he discovers he has been eating his own child, and chases Procne and Philomela until the gods change them all into different birds, including a nightingale who sings her story forever after (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.412-673).

Why would Lanyer incorporate yet another horrific myth imbued with male violence into a poem praising Clifford? The key lies in Clifford's life. She "had a publicly tumultuous marriage" with a husband who was a spendthrift and an infidel, and she "lacked any legal rights to Cookeham": the manor was leased by her brother and formed a safe haven for Clifford and her daughter Anne when she and her husband lived apart, as well as after his death (Beskin 528). Like Philomela, then, Clifford had been the victim of male violence. Yet Philomela finds the way to deliverance through art, and manages to tell her story and avenge herself. This story, though gruesome, therefore also holds a promise of female empowerment through poetry, and may well have been a comfort to Clifford.

Though Clifford is invited to identify herself with the nightingale, we should read the nightingale as referring to Lanyer herself. Lanyer links herself to the nightingale in the following lines: "And Philomela with her sundry lays/ Both you and that delightful place did

praise" (31-32). Like Philomela, Lanyer uses art to tell a story; she literally sings Clifford's praises. Beskin suggests that, in linking herself to the nightingale, Lanyer also links herself to Cookham, which Lanyer anthropomorphises partly through birds: when Clifford is present, "[t]he little birds in chirping notes did sing", but when she is gone "[t]hose pretty birds that wonted were to sing/ Now neither sing, nor chirp, nor use their wing" (29 and 185-186). In the same way that Cookham declines without Clifford's presence, Lanyer needs Clifford to sustain her; more specifically, she needs Clifford's patronage (Beskin 526). Clifford is linked to the Phoenix, who is self-sufficient and therefore able to survive even without having Cookham (Beskin 540). If Lanyer is to keep writing, she needs Clifford's support; after all, the nightingale cannot sing when Clifford has left Cookham: "Fair Philomela leaves her mournful ditty,/ Drowned in deep sleep, yet can procure no pity" (189-190). Like the oak, the nightingale offers a form of female empowerment – a woman whom men tried to silence tells her story through art – whilst showing, too, that such empowerment does not always last.

What, then, is Lanyer's ultimate stance on female-female friendship?. As I hope to have shown in this analysis, she struggles with the classical concept of *amicitia perfecta.* On the one hand, she shows that two women can be friends, and find extreme joy in their friendship, even refuge from a violent, patriarchal world. Even more radically, they can be twinned souls despite differences in their rank and financial status. On the other hand, there seems to be some truth in *amicitia perfecta*'s requirement that two friends should be of equal rank. Though Lanyer does not fully agree with this, she also acknowledges that differences in social status cause problems for their friendship: it keeps them apart and causes an unequal power dynamic between the two of them, with Lanyer having to ask Clifford to financially sustain her. It is only at Cookham, where such differences do not matter, that the two can be safe in their love for each other. Ultimately, then, Lanyer claims that women are not

inherently incapable of being great friends, and that, even though differences in status do make it much harder, under specific circumstances, female-female friendship can flourish.

2.2 “To My Excellent Lucasia, On Our Friendship” by Katherine Philips

In her poem “To My Excellent Lucasia” (1654), Katherine Philips does not engage with any discourses of tribadism, but she does radically reimagine the classical concept of *amicitia perfecta* whilst simultaneously going against the ideology of companionate marriage. In doing so, she not only argues for the validity of female-female friendship, but even claims such friendships trump all other relationships, including marital ones.

Until the late eighteenth century, Katherine Philips was one of the most highly-praised female writers, with many men calling her “an exemplar of female chastity” that other women should aspire to (“Sappho”, Andreadis 125). She was lauded for her cult of friendship poems, in which she revised masculine friendship ideals and applied them to the friendship between women (Traub 295). “To My Excellent Lucasia” is such a friendship poem. In it, Philips declares that she was not truly alive until she met Lucasia, the name she gave to her friend Anne Owen (“Sapphic-Platonics”, Andreadis 44). She compares herself to a corpse (“Carcass”) and a machine (“as a Watch”):

> This Carcass breath’d, and walk’d, and slept,
> So that the World believ’d
> There was a Soul the Motions kept,
> But they were all deceiv’d.
> For as a Watch by Art is wound
> To Motion, such was mine;
> But never had *Orinda* found
> A Soul ‘till she found thine. (5-12)

Their friendship is so powerful that it bests all other relationships, especially those between a husband (“Bridegroom”) and wife:

> No Bridegroom’s nor Crown-conqu’ror’s Mirth
> To mine compar’d can be:

> They have but pieces of this Earth,
> I've all the World in thee. (17-20)

In the final lines of the poem, Philips mitigates any suspicions about her feelings for Lucasia by stressing these are wholly innocent, i.e. chaste: "As innocent as our Design" (23).

Although Philips certainly reiterates certain aspects of the classical concept of friendship as explored in Chapter One, she also changes it in two subversive ways: firstly, she imagines friendship between women; secondly, she reworks the concept of twinned souls. "To My Excellent Lucasia" is imbued with classical ideas on friendship: the best friend is the most important person in Philips' life, as evidenced by the lines "[f]or thou art all that I can prize,/ My Joy, my Life, my Rest" (15-16). Furthermore, the two women are both virtuous ("innocent" and, in Lucasia's case, life-giving) and so alike Philips finds she actually *is* Lucasia: "I am not thine, but Thee" (4). Based on this poem, the friendship seems to be platonic; though heavily invested in describing the soul, it does not truly touch upon the body, and as such does not engage with any of the discourses of tribadism. All of this is in keeping with classical discourses of friendship. However, Philips claiming all these aspects of friendship traditionally attributed to men for herself and Lucasia is subversive, since women were not thought to be capable of friendship, nor were they generally considered virtuous (Beskin 177).

Philips also incorporates the concept of twinned souls and takes it to a radical extreme. The idea of twinned souls has its roots in the idea of an independent self that sees itself reflected in another. Philips, however, dismisses the notion that she needs "an independent, self-sovereign 'prerequisite self'" before she can be a friend (Kuzner 125). Friendship is not reflection but identification, and identification on such a strong level that Philips claims she did not have a soul until she met Lucasia, and not just any soul, but Lucasia's: "So that the World believ'd/ There was a Soul the Motions kept,/ But They were all deceiv'd" (6-8), and "But never had *Orinda* found/ A Soul 'till she found thine" (11-12). To have a soul, she must

lose all sense of self (Kuzner 126). Indeed, Philips states she is literally her friend: “I am not thine, but Thee” (4).

Philips not only reworks the idea of *amicitia perfecta*, but also rejects the concept of companionate marriage. Philips clearly claims that, for her, friendship is more important than any other relationship: she states that Lucasia is “My Joy, my Life, my Rest” (16) and “No Bridegroom’s nor Crown-conqu’ror’s Mirth/ To mine compar’d can be” (17-18). It might seem that, in claiming that friendship trumps all else, Philips is simply reiterating classical models of friendship, which would be the opposite of subversive. However, we must keep in mind that the highest form of friendship attainable for women within these classical discourses is that between a husband and wife, even though that is not the highest form of friendship in general. Philips’ claim that she can do better than the love between her and her husband is radical in and of itself. It also poses a threat to heterosexual marriage (Kuzner 126).

Philips’ overt rejection of companionate marriage is subversive for another reason: when Philips wrote her poetry, the concept of companionate marriage posed a direct threat to female-female friendship. While it helped clear the way for new ideas on friendship between men and women, Traub explains that this ideology eventually harmed notions of friendship between women (305). According to Traub, Philips wrote during a paradigm shift in the understanding of female-female friendship and desire. Before this shift, a diverse group – including writers of medical texts but also those who wrote on the topics of marriage, friendship, and religion – thought that women would naturally leave their female friendships behind once they got married. After this shift, this was no longer thought to be such a natural process, and girls would have to be actively encouraged. After all, if the companionate marriage ideology finds that friendship naturally progresses to marriage and thus to romantic and sexual love, then intense and passionate friendships between girls suddenly become

suspicious (305). Philips using her poem to write of the intense friendship she has with another woman after she is married, and claiming that her feelings for Lucasia are stronger than those she feels for her husband, is therefore deeply subversive.

In conclusion, in “To My Excellent Lucasia” Philips modifies early modern discourses of *amicitia perfecta* and companionate marriage. She claims that friendship is open to women, and that it is the highest form of love, even defeating that of a husband and wife. She also rejects the idea of a separate self within such a relationship: she and Lucasia are not similar, but the same. In doing so, Philips invents a radical model for female-female friendship.

2.3 “Sapho to Philaenis” by John Donne

John Donne’s “Sapho to Philaenis”, first published in 1633 but circulated in manuscript form during Donne’s lifetime, has been called the first lesbian poem to exist in English (Carey 271). Of the three poems discussed in this chapter, it is certainly the most explicitly sexual, even though it draws on friendship discourses as well. It has been a highly controversial poem, with critics such as Elizabeth Harvey arguing that the poem depicts an idealised, paradisiacal world for women who love women, a world that excludes men (117), whereas other critics find that the poem portrays a narcissistic, sterile sort of love and that Donne tries to subjugate Sapho “to patriarchy or at least to the poet who has appropriated her voice” (Blank 362). Certainly “Sapho to Philaenis”, with its allusions to tribadism and appropriation of friendship discourses for the romantic and sexual relationship between two women, defies easy classification, as we are about to see.

The titular Sapho was a writer of lyrical poetry from the Greek island of Lesbos. After her death, she was well-known as a poet, but it was not until the discovery of Ovid’s *Heroides* in the fifteenth century that she became known as a woman who desired other women (Grisé 42). In this poem, Sapho talks of her love for women but declares it is a phase now in the past:

she is consumed by love and desire for a man named Phaon, the ferryman on whom Venus had bestowed unearthly beauty (Harvey 119). Phaon "beds her and dumps her", after which Sapho, mad from a broken heart, commits suicide by throwing herself off a cliff ("Inseparable", Donoghue 107). Ovid's work strongly suggested that the real Sapho must have had sexual and romantic interest for women, even though Ovid tries to mitigate readers' discomfort by having her renounce these feelings (Grisé 42). Andreadis found that early modern writers – who would be familiar with Sapho, since she was the only model of female poetic excellence that women could aspire to until Katherine Philips wrote her revolutionary friendship poems ("Sappho" 38) – would treat Sapho in one of three ways:

1. As a mythologised figure from the Sappho and Phaon tale who is suicidal after her lover abandoned her, as seen in Ovid's *Heroides 15*;
2. As the oldest example of good poetry written by a woman, without any mention of her love for women;
3. "[A]n early exemplar of 'unnatural' or monstrous sexuality" ("Sappho", Andreadis 28).

In contrast to Sapho, we know little about Philaenis. We know she was from the island of Leucas and that she wrote an explicit guidebook on several sexual positions and practices (Harvey 123), because three texts tell us so, namely *The Greek Anthology* and two epigrams by Martial. In these epigrams, Philaenis defends herself from the accusation that she penetrates both boys and girls in the manner of a husband. This accusation, of course, firmly links her to tribadism ("Sappho", Andreadis 44). We do not know if Philaenis was a real person; it may have been a pseudonym. As Harvey argues, it does not really matter whether she existed, because there are four important similarities between her and Sapho that link the two of them together. Firstly, they were writers of erotic fiction; secondly, because of this, they were considered licentious; thirdly, because of this licentiousness, their authorship has

been questioned. The most important similarity between them, however, is their same-sex desire: an excerpt of the satirical *Amores* (its authorship questioned, though by many supposed to be by Lucian) argues that women should be allowed to love other women, should be allowed to "emulate Philaenis" and "disgrace themselves with Sapphic amours" (Harvey 124). Donne may have been familiar with this text (Harvey 124). A fifth link, and one that Harvey seems unaware of, is that it was in Leucas, the birthplace of Philaenis, that Sapho killed herself in Ovid's poem ("Inseparable", Donoghue 107). By choosing Sapho and Philaenis as his subject matter, Donne therefore chose to work with two historical characters who were explicitly linked to female sexual desire and to tribadism.

The poem's links to antiquity do not end with its main characters. With "Sapho to Philaenis", John Donne reworks Ovid's *Heroides 15,* making some radical changes both to the content as well as the form (by shortening it, he makes the poem resemble Ovid's *Amores,* thus reinforcing the notion that the poem is a love poem) (Correll 493). In this poem, Sapho declares that she misses Philaenis, and that she cannot write as a result: "Have my teares quench'd my old *Poetique* fire;/ Why quench'd they not as well, that of *desire*?" (5-6). Sapho is "rob'd of *Picture, Heart,* and *Sense*" (12), but despite this, and despite Philaenis being indescribable since she is perfect ("*Verse* that drawes *Natures* works, from *Natures* law,/ Thee, her best worke, to her worke cannot draw" (3-4)), she makes a valiant attempt, initially comparing Philaenis to the gods: "Thou are so faire,/ As *gods,* when *gods* to thee I doe compare,/ Are grac'd thereby" (15-17). Comparing Philaenis to the gods does not do her justice, since she surpasses them. Sapho comes to the conclusion that nothing can compare to Philaenis apart from Philaenis herself:

> Thou are not soft, and cleare, and strait, and faire,
> As *Down,* as *Stars, Cedars,* and *Lillies* are,
> But thy right hand, and cheek, and eye, only
> Are like thy other hand, and cheek, and eye. (21-25)

Sapho then gives multiple reasons for why Philaenis should return to her. The first reason is that Philaenis is currently dallying with boys, but such pleasure can never compare to the pleasure that the two of them could have together. After all, boys will become men:

> Plaies some soft boy with thee, o there wants yet
> A mutuall feeling which should sweeten it.
> His chinne, a thorny hairy unevennesse
> Doth threaten, and some daily change possesse. (31-35)

Another reason is the risk of pregnancy. By contrast, two women who love each other cannot have such a problem, and yet they can still experience all possible pleasure:

> Men leave behind them that which their sin shows
> And are, as theeves trac'd, which rob when it snows.
> But of our dalliance no more signes there are,
> Then *fishes* leave in streames, or *Birds* in aire.
> And between us all sweetnesse may be had;
> All, all that *Nature* yields, or *Art* can adde. (39-44)

The "*Art* can adde" here may allude to the use of a dildo: all the pleasure that is naturally theirs, supplemented by all those pleasures that they may have through 'artful', i.e. artificial, means. Even if we do not count the inherent link Sapho and Philaenis have to tribadism, the poem clearly evokes tribadism in these lines. Sapho has another reason to strengthen her argument that Philaenis should love her: the two of them are so similar that it is logical for them to love each other:

> My two lips, eyes, thighs, differ from thy two,
> But so, as thine from one another doe;
> And, oh, no more; the likenesse being such,
> Why should they not alike in all parts touch? (45-48)

The poem ends with Sapho begging Philaenis to come to her.

As mentioned before, there are several critics who do not find this poem positive in its depiction of female-female love. Their main arguments are threefold: firstly, John Donne wrote his poem for his all-male coterie; secondly, he is appropriating a woman's voice (Bates 220); thirdly, the poem presents female-female desire as deeply narcissistic, sterile, and

reductive (Harvey 131, Bates 227). Yet, in response to this first criticism, just because Donne is writing for a select audience does not mean that his poem necessarily reflects their ideas and ideologies. In fact, at several points the poem in all probability actively undermines his friends' expectations, e.g. when Sapho finds that men are redundant for sexual pleasure.

As for the second point of criticism: it is true Donne writes from the point of view of a woman.[9] Thus, it might be helpful to apply a double reading to the poem, "once as Sapho's and once as Donne's poem", since "the former – radical, alternative, revolutionary as it may be – cannot be accessed, let alone appreciated and understood, unless it is set alongside the latter that frames and contains it" (Bates 221). This will shed light on the following problem: is Donne able to speak for a woman? Unlike the critics of this poem, I argue that Donne is acutely aware of the problems that arise from ventriloquizing a woman, especially one who is in love with another woman: a large part of the poem thematises Sapho's (and, if we apply the double reading, Donne's) inability to accurately describe Philaenis as well as Sapho's feelings for Philaenis. How can a woman write about her love for a woman if the only language she has is riddled with conventions made by men to speak of their love for women, a language in which she is not supposed to have a voice? This problem is made explicit in the following lines: "*Verse* that drawes *Natures* works, from *Natures* law,/ Thee, her best worke, to her worke cannot draw" (3-4)). Sapho cannot describe Philaenis. Every attempt fails, until she concludes Philaenis may only be compared to herself. If we read the poem in light of the latter frame, i.e. read it as Donne's poem, we might ask how a male poet could ever have anything to say about this linguistic struggle. Donne addresses this problem in the poem's opening

[9] The idea of writing about a person who is different from you in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. being problematic can be found in (often non-academic) modern-day discourses on cultural appropriation. A recent example would be the controversy around the book *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummings, in which a white American woman was blamed of appropriating the experiences of Mexican immigrants. For more information, see newspaper articles such as *The Guardian's* "Oprah admits to 'not looking for Latinx writers' as American Dirt controversy continues" from the 5th of March 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/05/oprah-american-dirt-row-book-club-jeanine-cummins.

lines: “Where is that holy fire, which *Verse* is said/ To have? Is that inchanting force decai’d?” (1-2). Even though some critics might find it distasteful that Donne uses Sapho’s voice, we may at least acknowledge that he is aware of and sensitive to the issues that arise when a man utilises a woman’s voice.

The third point is one that comes up often: the poem depicts Sapho as narcissistic. Harvey mentions the narcissism, as do Blank, Traub, and Donoghue (127; 365; 339; “Passions”, ch.1). Donoghue, especially, finds that Donne reduces female same-sex desire to a sickly form of self-love, calling the poem “entirely narcissistic” (“Passions” ch.1). These critics are not wrong to find narcissism in this poem: Sapho asserts that she and Philaenis look alike, and since she has previously found that Philaenis’ beauty defies description, she seems either confused or vain. Furthermore, this idea of similitude and Philaenis’ absence leads Sapho to caress herself instead, imagining it is Philaenis she is touching:

> My two lips, eyes, thighs, differ from thy two,
> But so, as thine from one another doe;
> And, oh, no more: the likenesse being such,
> Why should they not alike in all parts touch?
> Why should they brest to brest, or thighs to thighs?
> Likeness begets such strange selfe flatterie,
> That touching my selfe, all seems done to thee. (45-52)

Donne even evokes Narcissus by having his Sapho gaze in a mirror and indulging in what she sees, thus drawing even more inspiration from antiquity (Harvey 127). However, unlike the mythical Narcissus, who never realises that he loves his own reflection, Sapho is under no such illusions. She knows she is touching herself, and it is precisely when she tries to kiss her reflection that she can no longer pretend. Caressing herself is a type of madness and a poor substitute for the real thing:

> Me, in my glasse, I call thee: But alas,
> When I would kisse, teares dimme mine *eyes,* and *glasse.*
> O cure this loving madnesse, and restore
> Me to mee, thee, my *halfe,* my *all,* my *more.* (55-58)

Since Sapho argued that Philaenis' beauty defies description, and since Sapho also claimed that they are extremely alike (therefore strongly implying she herself is beautiful, too), the poem certainly is narcissistic. Yet Donne is drawing from more than classical myths alone. Not only does he rework Ovid's homophobic poem by explicitly making Sapho a woman who cares only for women (though she dallied with Phaon for a while, he can never compare to her sweet Philaenis: "Such was my *Phao* awhile, but shall be never,/ As thou, wast, art, and, oh, maist be ever" (25-26)), he also modifies classical and contemporary discourses of friendship, something no scholar seems to have commented on so far. As seen in Chapter One, writers on friendship found that the platonic ideal of *amicitia perfecta* could only be obtained by two men who were twinned souls. Here, we see Donne radically reworking this idea by attributing it to two women who are not platonic at all. The two are so alike that they shall find most pleasure in the other: "[A]nd betweene us all sweetnesse may be had;/ All, all that *Nature* yields, or *Art* can adde" (43-44). Furthermore, they are not merely twinned souls, their bodies are twinned, too: "My two lips, eyes, thighs, differ from thy two,/ But so, as thine from one another doe" (45-46). Their love has been called sterile (Harvey 131), because it leaves no trace, i.e. it is not reproductive. As such, it falls outside of the heterosexual, patriarchal model and far outside of what medical writers argue sex is for. This is not to say that the poem completely escapes this heterosexual model; within the poem it seems that Philaenis is under its influence, since she is dallying with men. If we apply the double reading, Donne actively brings the heterosexual model into the poem in two places. The first occurs in line 52: "That touching my selfe, all seems done to thee" (52), with the "done" being a pun on his own name. The second instance is found in line 58, when he asks Philaenis to restore "[m]e to mee, thee, my *halfe,* my *all,* my *more*", with "more" being another wordplay, this time on the name of his wife, Anne More. Thus, Donne craftily hides a heterosexual relationship in a poem which makes a case for the validity of non-heterosexual relationships. Still, as

Andreadis argues, rather than damning these women for indulging themselves (as would be conventional), he seems to celebrate the idea of pleasure for its own sake ("Sappho" 48).

How, then, to evaluate this poem? As said before, it defies easy classification. Donne wrote it for a male coterie and used a woman's voice, both of which complicate the reading of this poem; it cannot be purely a paradisal portrayal of female same-sex love if it was (potentially) written to titillate a male audience, and we may again question how qualified Donne is to speak for these women. He also hid a heterosexual relationship within the poem. However, we must also keep in mind all of the following. First of all, Donne eschewed the three extant models for writing about Sapho: though she laments her lover's absence, she is not suicidal (and the lover is no man); she is a struggling poet whose sexual preferences are not obscured; her love and, by extension, she herself are not portrayed as monstrous. Instead, Donne draws upon classical sources, which he then modifies, omitting the homophobia and misogyny. In this way, he fashions a positive portrayal of a woman and her love, using the idea of twinned souls, a concept which at the time was attributed solely to men. Finally, he alludes to tribadism by mentioning the pleasures Sapho and Philaenis may experience through artful additions, without condemning this. We may therefore conclude that his poem portrays female same-sex friendship and desire positively.

Chapter Three – Plays

In this chapter, I will analyse female same-sex desire and love in the plays *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare and Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* by drawing upon the discourses discussed in Chapter One. Shakespeare eroticises friendship between women, but although he makes a case for their potency, he also implies that they are temporal. Cavendish argues for the legitimacy of female-female desire and love by also writing a deeply eroticised female-female friendship, albeit a temporary one.

3.1 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare

Drawing upon friendship discourses and eroticising these discourses, Shakespeare presents female-female desire in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) as valid and female-female friendship as potent, whilst also suggesting that these bonds are temporary and will be replaced by romantical and sexual relations with men.

In this play, Female-female desire finds its most prominent expression in Titania's love and devotion for her Indian votaress. This votaress did not survive the birth of her son; for love of her, Titania now takes care of the boy. Since Oberon also wants the child, Titania's relationship with the votaress leads to a domestic dispute. Oberon decides to put an enchantment on Titania; she will fall in love with the first creature she sees. In this way, Oberon shall take the child from her whilst simultaneously humiliating her as punishment for not giving in to his wishes. Traub words it as follows: "[Titania's] affront motivates Oberon's attempt to incapacitate Titania's body, to humiliate her erotically, to capture the boy, and secure him for martial, exclusively masculine, purposes" (68). The spell works, and Titania falls in love with a man dressed as an ass. Whilst under this spell, Titania gives Oberon the boy: "I [Oberon] then did ask of her her changeling child,/ Which straight she gave me" (4.1.

50-51). After Oberon has secured the boy, he releases Titania from her spell, and it seems that order has been restored once more.

Yet Titania's relinquishing of the child by the end of the play does not mean that the relationship between Titania and her votaress was weak; quite the opposite, in fact. It "has survived marriage, the bearing of children, and death, [and] remains so compelling that Titania risks the wrath of Oberon by refusing to relinquish the child" (Traub 68). Certainly Titania expresses a deep, sincere affection for her beloved votaress in the following speech given to Oberon after he asks her to give him the boy:

> TITANIA: Set your heart at rest:
> The fairy land buys not the child of me.
> His mother was a votress of my order,
> And in the spicèd Indian air by night
> Full often hath she gossiped by my side,
> And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands,
> Marking th'embarkèd traders on the flood,
> When we have laughed to see the sails conceive
> And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind,
> Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait
> Following – her womb then rich with my young squire –
> Would imitate, and sail upon the land,
> To fetch me trifles, and return again
> As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.
> But she, being mortal, of that boy did die:
> And for her sake do I rear up her boy,
> And for her sake I will not part with him. (2.1. 123-139)

The women were close, gossiping and laughing together, the votaress fetching "trifles" for Titania. This might not live up to the standards of friendship set by authors of friendship texts – note how these two women are dissimilar rather than similar, since they hail from different continents and are not even the same species – but certainly one that was enjoyable to both women. Their dynamic is expressed in terms of colonialism, which indicates an imbalance in power; this is considered undesirable by friendship writers. The Indian votaress is compared to a ship that brings treasures; she would "sail upon the land,/ To fetch me trifles, and return

again,/ As from a voyage, rich with merchandise" (2.1. 134-136). It is useful to point out that the merchandise the votaress carries is not simply the trifles she gives to Titania, but also her unborn son: "[H]er womb then rich with my young squire –/ [she] Would imitate [th'èmbarked traders on the flood]" (2.1. 133-134). This could potentially be problematic, with the woman seen as merely a vessel for something far more important, namely a child. Does Titania love the votaress merely because she gave birth to the boy? Not according to Alicia Andrzejewski, who argues that the twice-repeated phrase "for her sake" stresses that Titania loves the boy only insofar as that he is the child of the votaress. This phrase emphasises "the importance of the Indian votaress as distinct from her child", something which many critics have failed to notice (105). The child is not so much a love-object in and of itself as a conduit for Titania's affection for the votaress. By taking the child from its father and raising it in her train, it seems that Titania seeks to prolong the affection she experienced with the Indian votaress during her pregnancy, which Andrzejewski characterised as a period of female-female intimacy and pleasure (105).

Titania, then, creates a world of female love that excludes men, even if this world does not last. She is not the only character who temporarily inhabits/inhabited such a world: both Hermia and Helena seem to have done so when they were children. The relationship between the two girls is no longer what it used to be when the events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* come to pass. Hermia has decided to elope with her beloved Lysander so she need not marry Demetrius. Demetrius, who hears of the plan because of Helena, decides to chase after the pair to stop them. This in turn causes Helena to chase after the three of them, because she is infatuated with Demetrius. Demetrius cares nothing for Helena and tries to get rid of her, but Helena plainly tells him that the more he rebukes her, the more she loves him: "I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius,/ The more you beat me, I will fawn on you./ Use me but as your spaniel" (2.1. 207-209). Oberon, who overheard this speech, is moved by Helena's plight and

disgusted with Demetrius' behaviour. He orders the fairy Puck to make Demetrius fall in love with Helena:

> OBERON: A sweet Athenian lady is in love
> With a disdainful youth: anoint his eyes,
> But do it when the next thing he espies
> May be the lady. (2.1. 265-268)

Puck, however, mistakes Lysander for Demetrius, and enchants him to fall in love with Helena instead. To remedy this mistake, he also enchants Demetrius, so that both men now chase after Helena. Rather than being overjoyed, Helena thinks Hermia has set the men up to play a cruel joke on her, and in a moving speech asks Hermia how they have come to treat each other so when they used to be close as sisters:

> HELENA: Is all the counsel that we two have shared
> The sister's vows, the hours that we have spent,
> When we have chid the hasty-footed time
> For parting us – O, is all forgot?
> All schoolday's friendship, childhood innocence?
> We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
> Have with our needles created both one flower,
> Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
> Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
> As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds,
> Had been incorporate. So we grew together
> Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
> But yet a union in partition,
> Two lovely berries moulded on one stem,
> So with two seeming bodies but one heart,
> Two of us the first, like coats in heraldry,
> Due but to one and crowned with one crest.
> And will you rent our ancient love asunder,
> To join with men in scorning your poor friend? (3.2. 199-217)

Anna Riel Bartolet interprets this speech using historical facts about needlework, which, in Shakespeare's time, was seen as a deeply feminine craft (160). Just as the boy is a conduit for Titania's love for her votaress, so needlework is a conduit for the love Helena bears Hermia. Certainly needlework seems to have been a pleasurable activity for them.

Furthermore, the girls were so well-attuned to each other that they could work on the same flower, the two of them singing "one song, both in one key,/ As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds,/ Had been incorporate" (3.2. 207-209). Here, Shakespeare clearly draws upon the idea of twinned souls as found in the idea of *amicitia perfecta,* radically claiming that it is not only open to women, but even to little girls. Furthermore, he seems to imbue Helena and Hermia with almost superhuman abilities, and, indeed, seems to render them "two artificial gods" (204): in real life, working with a partner on one sampler is difficult enough, let alone embroidering the same flower (Bertolet 162).

That their friendship has erotic and romantic elements becomes clear in the comparisons Helena draws up between them: they are like "[t]wo lovely berries moulded on one stem" (3.2. 212), like "a double cherry, seeming parted,/ But yet a union in partition" (3.2. 210-211). They are twining together, and in doing so seem to become one. Furthermore, Helena also echoes the language of marriage in this speech ("Inseparable", Donoghue 74). The famous line "those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" now becomes an accusing "[a]nd will you rent our ancient love asunder" (3.2. 216). Also note that it is this line that holds the key to what Helena is accusing Hermia of. According to Donoghue, she is not accusing Hermia of "taking her man", but "of something rather more subtle: letting men into the secret garden of girls' love. The irony is that it is Helena herself who, by falling so hard for Demetrius and becoming possessed by the demons of jealousy, could be said to have 'rent our ancient love asunder'" ("Inseparable" 74). Whatever the girls had, it no longer seems to have the same potency as it did then.

Indeed, it seems that temporality is the main threat to female-female desire and friendship in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* After all, Oberon ends his marital strife with Titania by erotically humiliating her and taking the boy from her, thus resolving the chaos

which seemed to have been caused by a woman disobeying a man[10] and simultaneously taking away Titania's conduit of love for her votaress. Furthermore, Hermia and Helena are both married to their man of choice (Demetrius remains under the enchantment that makes him love Hermia), with neither of the girls speaking another line to each other ("Inseparable", Donoghue 74). Shakespeare attempts to negate the threat of female same-sex desire in other ways, too: apart from the marriages at the end, he also locates the play in a mythical past and foreign country, places the same-sex desire and friendship within this play in the past, and makes one of the key figures a fairy and therefore not human. Though Shakespeare may not have consciously intended to negate the female-female desire his play conjures – many of his plays take place in a different country and in the past, and early modern comedies traditionally end with marriages – the effect of these choices is at the least a softening of the threat that female same-sex desire poses, a threat the play cannot negate altogether. After all, although the marriages of Helena and Hermia suggest that female-female desire naturally terminates when romantic/sexual relationships with men commence, there is always Titania, who shows us the direct opposite: her relationship with the votaress flourished even though both were married.

3.2 *The Convent of Pleasure* by Margaret Cavendish

At a first glance, it may seem that Margaret Cavendish at the end of her play *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) negates the female same-sex desire she has evoked throughout the play: the Princess with whom Lady Happy has fallen in love conveniently turns out to be a man, enabling the two to marry. Yet several elements complicate such a reading, namely the

[10] We must keep in mind that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy, and that early modern comedies work as follows: an individual clashes with dominant social norms, which leads to comic situations, until by the end order is restored, usually through marriage. That the story is largely set in motion by Titania's refusal to give over the Indian boy therefore means that Shakespeare at least envisioned Titania's love for the child as clashing with dominant social norms.

way in which the relationship between Lady Happy and the Princess is deeply eroticised; Lady Happy's response when she discovers the Princess is actually a Prince; and Cavendish's refusal to inform her audience of the Princess' true sex beforehand.[11]

The Convent of Pleasure begins with Lady Happy deciding to live a life without the influences of men. After all, she argues, "Men are the only Troublers of Women (…) [they] make the Female sex their slaves" (101). Since Cavendish was aristocratic and also secure in her marriage with a husband who approved of her literary work, she was free to defend such a radical stance ("Sappho", Andreadis 85). Rather than becoming a man's slave, Lady Happy will retreat from the world to a convent together with several noble ladies and their maidservants. The word 'convent' implies virginity, and according to Theodora A. Jankowski "[t]he concept of virginity implies two things: firstly, that one is biologically a virgin, i.e. the hymen remains intact, and secondly, that of ascetism. It is clear that Lady Happy, though she vows virginity, does not at all mean to upkeep the second implication" (234). Lady Happy explicitly states that she wants to live a happy life full of pleasures, since surely the gods must have intended life to be pleasurable: "Can any Rational Creature think or believe, the gods take delight in the Creature's uneasie life? (…) [T]he gods are bountiful, and give all, that's good, and bid us freely please our selves in that which is best for us" (99-100). Thus, Jankowski argues, the implication is that Lady Happy "will still indulge in erotic activity, just not in penetration" (234). And so Lady Happy founds the convent of pleasure, free of men but full of delight.

Quite soon, however, the idyll of life away from men is disrupted by the arrival of a foreign Princess. From the moment Lady Happy and the Princess meet and decide to be friends, Cavendish eroticises their friendship, expressing it in romantic terms. In this way, she

[11] I have taken the following paragraphs on *The Convent of Pleasure* from my essay ""What is to love, or the mistress of love, unpossible?": The Significance of the Ovidian Transformation Ending in Margaret Cavendish' *The Convent of Pleasure* and John Lyly's *Galatea*", which I wrote in 2019 for the course "Shakespeare's Sister: Gender Troubles in the Early Modern Period". For this MA thesis, I have edited and expanded them.

prepares the audience for what is yet to come – Lady Happy falling in love with the Princess – and makes this turn of events believable. Most importantly, she also shows that this relationship may well be, at its core, a romantic attachment masquerading as a friendship. The relationship is certainly coded as erotic from the start:

> L. HAPPY. I should be ungrateful, should I not be not only your Friend, but humble Servant.
> PRIN. I desire you would be my Mistress, and I your Servant; and upon this agreement of friendship I desire you will grant me one Request.
> L. HAPPY. Any thing that is in my power to grant.
> PRIN. Why then, I observing in your several Recreations, some of your ladies do accoustre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts; I desire you will give me leave to be sometimes so accoustred and act the part of your loving Servant.
> L. HAPPY. I shall never desire to have any other loving Servant then your Self. (111)

The terms ‘servant’ and ‘mistress’ are often found in Petrarchan sonnets, which have as their main theme the unrequited love between a despairing worshipper, the ‘servant’, and the object of his desire, his ‘mistress’ (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, s.v. “Petrarchan”). Both John Donne and William Shakespeare wrote love poems using these terms. In “Sonnet 130”, for example, Shakespeare calls the object of his desire his “mistress” (1), and Donne, too, uses it as a way to address the “Madam” he loves and desires in “To his Mistress Going to Bed” (1). Through the usage of these terms and the usage of male dress for the Princess, Lady Happy and the Princess are emulating conventions usually found between lovers rather than those of friendship.

Furthermore, rather than drawing upon the idea that two best friends should be as alike as possible, Lady Happy and her Princess derive pleasure from pretending to be different. Yet the idea of twinned souls is certainly present. When the Princess asks, “Can any Love be more vertuous, innocent and harmless then ours?”, and Lady Happy says she hopes not, the Princess proposes that they pleasure each other in the way of lovers: “Then let us please our selves, as harmless Lovers use to do”, which is “to discourse, imbrace and kiss, so mingle

souls together" (118). This mingling of souls works best if those souls are alike. Also note how the two now call themselves lovers rather than friends. This explains why Cavendish stresses that their embraces and kisses are innocent and harmless; once again, this emphasis is only necessary if the audience is likely to construe them as the opposite of innocent and harmless.

That their kisses and embraces are perhaps not entirely harmless quickly becomes clear when Lady Happy professes to herself that she is in love with her Princess. This is problematic, because Lady Happy finds it unnatural, and she is nothing if not a servant to and an advocate of Nature. Nature cannot be changed: "Nature is Nature, and still will be/the same she was from all Eternity" (118). Furthermore, Nature demands that women marry men, or, as one of the men states: "[I]f she [Lady Happy] be a Votress to Nature, she must be a Mistress to Men" (104). The play questions the validity of this statement. In fact, one of its main themes is the definition of nature, which is shown to be a matter of debate. This is made amply clear in Lady Happy's thoughts on the (sexual) definition of nature: her opinion changes throughout the play. She may argue that nature will be forever fixed, "will be/ the same she was from all Eternity" (118), but on the same page she also questions this statement when she exclaims, "But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could a Man?" (118).

Whatever her stance on the matter, fact is that Lady Happy is unable to suppress her feelings. She tells the Princess, "I can neither deny you my Love nor Person", to which the Princess responds amorously and sexually: "We shall agree, for we true Love inherit, Join as one Body and Soul, or Heav'nly Spirit", again drawing upon the amicitial discourse of twinned souls and using it for erotic purposes (122). Furthermore, being joined as one in body is clearly sexual, and might imply penetration, thus undermining Jankowski's argument that Lady Happy shall not engage in this particular sexual act. Though Cavendish does not make it

explicit whether penetration shall occur, she does imply it will by having Lady Happy respond with fear to this proposal. Like the medical writers, Lady Happy finds such sexual acts between two women monstrous. She begs the gods to strike her dead rather than disgrace herself in such a sexually transgressive manner:

> O Nature, o you gods above,
> Suffer me not to fall in Love;
> O strike me dead here in this place
> Rather then fall into disgrace. (124)

Still, the fact that she feels compelled to call upon divine forces shows the audience just how likely it is that Lady Happy shall submit to her Princess, and, by extension, how deep her desire for this submission is.

Luckily for Lady Happy, an alternative to dying presents itself when it is revealed that the Princess is actually a Prince, thus legitimising their love and enabling them to marry. Traub finds that the ending "reaffirm[s] the necessity of marital alliance as the price of a harmonious dramatic conclusion" (177), meaning that the ending is conventional; after all, comedies usually end with marriages. This ending must also be held responsible for the stance some critics hold that the attraction Lady Happy experiences is actually disguised inter-sex desire. Oddvar Holmesland, for example, argues that there are only hints of same-sex attraction, and those may not even be truly same-sex in nature: "There are also hints of lesbian fantasies, or what may be heterosexual attractions mistaken for lesbian" (112). Emma Donoghue, however, argues something else. She calls endings such as that of *The Convent of Pleasure,* in which one of two female characters who are in love with each other 'becomes' a boy, either through divine intervention or because they actually were a boy all along, "Ovidian transformation ending[s]" ("Inseparable" 55). Here, Donoghue references the myth of Iphis and Ianthe from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which the girl Iphis is transformed into a boy so that she may marry her beloved Ianthe (9.666-797). Ovidian transformation endings, Donoghue argues, are not a simple return to convention, nor do they deny the love these

women feel for each other. Instead, they turn "an officially impossible relationship into a marital one", therefore into an ending that was palatable to early modern audiences (55).

Several elements support Donoghue's view. One such element is the lack of Lady Happy's response to the sex-reveal of her Princess: as soon as it becomes known the Princess is a Prince, Lady Happy only speaks a few more lines, none of them dealing with her lover's sex. Certainly we would expect her to express some sort of emotion about this turn of events, since she was conflicted about her feelings for another woman before, wishing to be struck dead rather than act on her desires. This absence of a response, then, is significant because it opens up the possibility that Lady Happy is not, in fact, happy with her lover being a man (and, as such, an enslaver of women), and might have preferred the Prince to have remained a Princess. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that the Princess actually being a Prince does not cancel Lady Happy's same-sex love. Indeed, Lady Happy fell in love with the Prince believing him to be a woman. She struggled intensely with these feelings, but they would not be denied. This renders problematic the claim that these feelings are "heterosexual attractions mistaken for lesbian". Instead, I have to fully agree with Andreadis when she argues that the portrayal of female same-sex desire in *The Convent of Pleasure* is complicated, but "it is nevertheless fully elaborated and completely experienced as a love passion (…) that is, it is acknowledged as experientially legitimate" ("Sappho" 90-91). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Lady Happy's heterosexual union with the Prince is never experienced "as a love passion", meaning it is not granted the same experimental legitimacy as the same-sex relationship. Thus, it seems that Cavendish finds the female-female relationship in this play more legitimate and more real than the male-female one.

Another argument to frustrate the reading of Lady Happy's desires being mistakenly same-sex is that the audience is as much in the dark about the true sex of the Princess as the other characters in the play. As Donoghue argues, "By keeping the disguise a secret from the

audience/readers (…) Margaret Cavendish effectively creates a play about passion between women" ("Inseparable" 55). In the list of the *Dramatis Personae* – almost always placed at the beginning of the play, but at the end in *The Convent of Pleasure* – Lady Happy's new husband is listed as *The Princess,* not *The Prince* (134). This strongly suggests that Cavendish thought of the Princess as a woman by the end of the play still. At the least it expresses an unease on Cavendish' side for her conventional ending (Traub 180). This refusal to let the audience in on the true sex of the Princess is also decidedly unconventional; other cross-dressing plays such as *Galatea* and *Twelfth Night* do inform their audiences so that much of the comedy may be derived from the cross-dressing. In withholding the fact that the Princess is actually a Prince, Cavendish allows the audience to experience the same feelings as Lady Happy, namely same-sex desire.

Whether Cavendish meant the audience to experience such feelings is not entirely clear. It would in large part depend on whether a man or a woman would be cast to play the Princess, both of which were possible by the time Cavendish wrote *The Convent of Pleasure:* after 1660, women were allowed on the stage (Marsden 1). The play, however, was never officially performed. Though it was published in a collection called *Plays Never Before Printed,* and though the text itself proclaims it is a comedy, it may be that *The Convent of Pleasure* is actually a closet drama. Closet dramas are not meant to be performed on stage. Rather, the intended audience for such a play would be a solitary reader, or alternatively a small group of readers who read out different parts in turn (*Britannica Academic,* s.v. "Closet Drama"). Either way, we do not know whether a man or woman would be asked to play the Princess; the text gives us no clue as to what Cavendish herself would have preferred. It is a lack (this time of clear staging directions rather than a response by Lady Happy) which creates, or at least leaves room for, female same-sex desire. Of course, the audience may find feelings of desire between two women absurd or distasteful, but at least the possibility that

they may share Lady Happy's agony is there. This allows the audience to take Lady Happy's feelings seriously, showing us that Cavendish took them seriously, too.

What, then, do we ultimately make of this play's portrayal of same-sex love? Cavendish deeply eroticises the relationship between Lady Happy and the Princess, expressing their feelings in romantic terms and letting them kiss and embrace each other. Their usage of the idea of twinned souls is not amicitial, but erotic in nature. However, just before the play truly engages in tribadism, it is revealed that the Princess is actually a man, thus legitimising the love between him and Lady Happy. That this does not negate Lady Happy's same-sex desire is made clear by the lack of happiness she expresses at this turn of events, and by having kept audiences in the dark of the Princess' true sex. Ultimately, Cavendish shows the power and legitimacy of female same-sex desire.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have read three poems and two plays in tandem with two types of contextual discourses, namely medical discourses and discourses of friendship, in order to analyse the depiction of female-female desire and love within these poems and plays. In Chapter One, I have analysed these discourses, using a variety of medical texts and handbooks on how to be a good friend. Medical discourses write of the monstrous figure of the tribade, a woman who penetrates other women to sate her unbridled lust. The tribade was transgressive, in that she engaged in sex only for pleasure's sake, rather than for reproductive purposes. Discourses of friendship construct the figure of close friends, whose passionate yet platonic bond is based on similitude. Though these friendship texts usually find that *amicitia perfecta,* the ultimate form of friendship, can only occur between men, some influential texts do not fully exclude women from their notions of ideal friendship. Though it may seem that these discourses propose a binary between the sex-obsessed tribade and the sexless female friend, neither discourse is unanimous in its depiction of female same-sex love, which allows poets and playwrights room for experimentation when writing their female characters. All of them draw upon friendship discourses, and some of them also upon discourses of tribadism.

In Chapter Two, I have analysed the way writers portrayed relationships between women in three different poems. In Aemilia Lanyer's "The Description of Cookham", Lanyer draws upon both discourses in order to portray her relationship with Margaret Clifford. Tribadism is evoked in her description of the oak tree, which functions, amongst other things, as an instrument of pleasure to both women. In order to mitigate any suspicions this evocation may cause, Lanyer stresses that this pleasure is chaste. She is more radical in her modification of the classical concept of *amicitia perfecta*, arguing that women can partake in it. Furthermore, unlike authors on friendship, she finds that differences in status or wealth do not mean she and Clifford cannot be twinned souls; what truly matters is whether they are each

other's spiritual equals. Still, Lanyer acknowledges that disparities in rank can complicate friendship; in her case, it keeps her from seeing her friend Clifford whilst simultaneously making her financially dependent on her. It is only at the titular Cookham that these disparities cease to matter.

Unlike Lanyer, Katherine Philips does not engage with medical discourses. Similar to Lanyer, though, in "To My Excellent Lucasia", we find another radical reworking of *amicitia perfecta.* In this classical model, friendship is considered the highest form of love, but only if it occurs between two men; women, by contrast, can only ever aspire to a lesser form of love, namely the love found within marriage. During Philips' time, this idea had already come under fire because of the companionate marriage ideology, which found that the highest form of love for both men and women should be marital love. Philips goes against both ideas by suggesting that the best form of love for a woman is friendship with another woman. She also rejects the idea of a separate self, which is vital for the notion of twinned souls; only if two separate souls exist can they be twinned. Contrarily, Philips finds that she and her beloved friend are not only similar, but the same.

Of all the writers discussed in this thesis, John Donne draws most heavily upon medical discourses and their figure of the tribade. Though several elements prevent us from reading his poem "Sapho to Philaenis" as a purely paradisal portrayal of female same-sex love, Donne does clearly portray the lovers in a favourable light. Unlike other authors, who stress the innocence and chastity of the kisses and caresses shared between two women, thus allaying any fears allusions to tribadism may evoke, Donne is explicit about the fact that Sapho and Philaenis have sex, in all probability with dildos. However, rather than condemning these women for having sex purely for pleasure's sake, Donne celebrates them, arguing that their lovemaking is superior to that between man and woman. Donne also uses

friendship discourses: he uses the idea of twinned souls, attributing it to two women, by presenting Sapho and Philaenis as highly similar in both body and soul.

Chapter Three continued my textual analysis by turning to the representation of female same-sex desire in two early modern plays. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare we find two models of female-female love and desire. The first is that between the fairy queen Titania and her Indian votaress: Shakespeare shows us an eroticised friendship based more on dissimilitude than similitude, thus going against the classical model of twinned souls as dictated by *amicitia perfecta.* Furthermore, this friendship seems to be more important than marriage: Titania risks her husband's wrath by keeping the votaress' son, a conduit for her love. Simultaneously, Shakespeare also shows us a model of female-female friendship that does fall in line with *amicitia perfecta*: Helena and Hermia were so similar that they could embroider the same flower together. Sadly, by the end of the play, both friendships buckle under the pressure of male-female relationships, and come to an end. This does not mean that Shakespeare denies the potency of female same-sex love and desire altogether; rather, he suggests that they are temporal.

By contrast, Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* proposes that female-female relationships are preferable to male-female relationships. Her main character, Lady Happy, locks herself away in a convent with other women so she need not submit to a man. There, she falls in love with a foreign Princess. Though the two call their relationship 'friendship', Cavendish eroticises their relationship from the start; the two women talk like lovers and play lovers' games. Cavendish plays with the idea of twinned souls in her portrayal of the two: though the two women clearly find it erotic to highlight their differences (the Princess proposes to dress like a man), they also talk of mixing souls together. Additionally, they engage in physical erotic activity. Here, Cavendish draws upon discourses of tribadism; the two women shall join together in body, i.e. they shall make love, possibly with

penetration. Lady Happy responds to this idea like the writer of a medical text, namely with horror. A solution to her problem presents itself quickly: the Princess is actually a Prince, and so the two can marry and indulge in whatever sexual behaviour they wish. However, rather than truly ‘solving’ the ‘problem’ of female-female desire, Cavendish implies that Lady Happy is not pleased about her lover being a man, thus making a case for the validity and potency of female-female love.

Ultimately, these texts present us with a different picture of female-same sex desire than the medical and amicitial discourses: rather than condemning or denying the existence of female-female desire, love, and friendship, they argue for their strength and sincerity, and do so in a variety of ways. These poems and plays show us that there is not one early modern idea of female same-sex desire, but a variety of them.

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