



Clap, Margaret (fl. 1720s)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Very little is known about Margaret Clap's life, except for the period in which she operated one of the more popular "molly houses" in London. It was raided and closed down in 1726. Her house provided *mollies*, a term for gay men at the time, a place to meet each other, create community, and pursue sexual relationships with each other.

Even though Rictor Norton characterizes Clap somewhat flippantly as the "first 'fag hag' to be documented in British history," his reference conveys a certain truth. She seems to have enjoyed the company of the mollies who frequented her house and tried to protect them when they came before the court on sodomy charges.

Clap ran her molly house out of her own private residence. She let rooms to a number of gay men and on certain nights provided her customers with drink from a neighboring tavern. It is unclear when Clap opened her house to mollies, but by the fall of 1724 it had become one of the most popular venues for them to gather.

Although it is likely that some figures closely associated with Clap's house were prostitutes, like Thomas Newton and Ned Courtney, Norton argues that it is unlikely that Clap ran her house as a brothel. She seems to have earned her income from her tenants, the alcohol she sold, and the occasional gift from her guests.

Clap and her guests appear to have been equally fond of and loyal to each other. The men referred to her as "Mother Clap," and one man rented a room from her for two years. Another tried to bail her out of jail when she was later arrested for entertaining sodomites. At another molly's trial she lied in an attempt to get the charges against him dropped.

In February 1726, agents from the Societies for the Reformation of Manners raided Clap's house and arrested her and more than forty others. Fervently religious, the organization hoped to rid London of its sodomites, prostitutes, and Sabbath-breakers.

Since December 1725, Samuel Stevens, an agent for the Societies, had been coming to Clap's house on Sunday evenings to gather information on the mollies. At the trial in July 1726, he testified that he "found between 40 and 50 men making love to one another, as they called it. Sometimes they would sit in one another's laps, kissing in lewd manner and using their hands indecently. Then they would get up, dance and make curtsies, and mimic the voices of women . . . Then they would hug, and play, and toy, and go out by couples into another room on the same floor to be married, as they called it."

On July 23, 1726, Margaret Clap was convicted of "keeping a Disorderly House in Chick-lane for the Entertainment of Sodomites." The judge sentenced her to stand in the pillory, pay a fine of twenty marks, and spend two years in jail.

A week later, *The London Journal* reported that the crowd that gathered around the pillory treated her so

severely that she fell off it and fainted twice. From there, she was taken to prison, after which she disappears from the historical record. Given prison conditions at the time, it is possible she died in Newgate.

In spite of the scant information on Clap's life, it is clear that she helped foster the new homosexual subculture that emerged in London in the early years of the eighteenth century. Even though she escaped hanging, a typical punishment for convicted sodomites, her support of men who practiced same-sex sexual activities brought her harsh punishment and possibly resulted in her death.

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